

A Christmas Carl

A Ravenous Romance TM M/M Original Publication

Ryan Field

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Ravenous RomanceTM 100 Cummings Center Suite 123A Beverly, MA 01915

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This book is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Chapter One

While Carl Smite was wrapping bundles of loose change on Christmas Eve, a cell phone in the back room of his antique store rang. His body jerked forward and he almost dropped ten dollars in quarters on the floor. He was sitting on a gilded Louis IV chair behind a French Empire desk with detailed inlays and bronze ormolu trim. There were price tags with large numbers in bold red print on both pieces of furniture. Everything in Carl's antique store was for sale, including the nineteenth-century cup and saucer he used to drink his morning coffee.

When Carl's employee answered the phone and said, "I'll be there after eight tonight," his voice went up with a light, pleasant hum. And when he said, "I'll see if I can get there sooner, but my boss is keeping the store open until eight tonight," his easy, friendly voice didn't drop or waver.

Carl frowned and wondered why pitiful Able Anderson was always so damn cheerful. He folded the ends of the paper coin wrapper shut, then lifted his head and shouted, "Able, hang up that damn phone and come in here, *now*." He'd just wrapped twenty-three dollars worth of loose change and he didn't want it lying around the store.

There was a shuffling sound in the back room, then a few whispers Carl couldn't make out. Carl heard him click the phone shut and toss it on a counter. A minute later, Able came into the showroom with a half smile on his face. "What can I do for you, Mr. Smite?" His soft blond hair framed his forehead in thick, straight shocks. He was wearing

loose faded jeans that fell low on his slim waist, and a puffy down jacket made out of black shiny fabric. He smiled at Carl and rubbed his palms together to keep them warm.

Carl placed the last roll of quarters into a bank deposit bag and said, "Why were you on the phone again, Able? I've told you time and again that I won't tolerate an employee of mine making personal phone calls during business hours. I'm paying you good money to do an honest day's work. And I expect you to do your job while you're on my time."

Normally, Carl would have fired someone else on the spot for doing this. But Able was an excellent furniture restorer and upholsterer, he didn't mind working for low wages, and he had a large, floppy penis that moved around in his jeans when he walked fast.

Able took a deep breath and rubbed his palms together again. Carl hadn't raised the thermostat that day and the store was freezing. He smiled and put his hands into his pants pockets. "I'm sorry, Mr. Smite. I was only on the phone for a minute. I was telling a friend of mine, the woman who owns the tearoom across the street, I'd be down at the homeless shelter to help hand out Christmas Eve dinners tonight. And I'm helping out tomorrow on Christmas too. My friend was wondering if I could get off early to get down there by six. They need all the help they can get, and I doubt anyone is going to come into the store at this hour on Christmas Eve."

Carl frowned and shook his head. Able Anderson was so dirt poor he was almost homeless himself, and here he was talking about handing out free food at a homeless shelter. "No," Carl said, "you can't get off early tonight. I might need you to move

something heavy. You never know who will come into a retail shop for last-minute gift.

One year on Christmas Eve, I sold a crystal chandelier to a very famous actress."

This had never actually happened. But Carl liked to think there was a chance it could.

"But it's snowing," Able said. "And all the other stores around us are already closed. And I'm sure you have plans tonight, Mr. Smite. If you don't have plans, you could always come with me to the homeless shelter and help out. We'd be glad to have you, and afterwards maybe we can go out and have a Christmas drink somewhere."

"I'm sure you'd expect *me* to pay for these Christmas drinks," Carl said. Then he rubbed his strong jaw and laughed. Carl suspected Able was trying to flatter and seduce him. He flirted with him all the time. But Carl wasn't about to let some young, penniless loafer take advantage of his wealth.

Carl had found success at an early age. Now he was in his mid-thirties, about ten years older than Able. Carl had thick brown hair, a naturally muscular body, and hard, round buttocks. But he didn't care about his good looks. He wasn't interested in finding a lover. The only time he used his looks to his advantage was to sell an expensive antique to a wealthy client. He knew how to make women swoon and older gay men giddy.

Able shrugged his shoulders. "Then I'll buy *you* a drink, Mr. Smite. I've been working here for about a year now and we hardly even know each other."

Carl lifted an eyebrow and stared at him. Then he shook his head and said, "I'm going home tonight, just like it's any other night. And I'm not wasting my time handing out free food to a bunch of losers. No one ever gave *me* a free dinner. No one ever gave *me* anything for free. I've worked hard for everything I have. We would all be homeless,

getting free dinners and handouts, if we didn't work. Then what kind of a world would this be? I'm over it."

Able rocked on the balls of his feet and shrugged his shoulders. "You look good today, Mr. Smite. Is that a new pair of pants?" When he smiled, there were two perfect dimples on his rugged face.

"Don't change the subject on me, Able," Carl said. "I've worn these slacks many times and you know it. You should know by now that just because you're better looking than the average man, silly flirtatious remarks won't work with me. I've used them all before myself, and you can't con me." Carl was wearing tan slacks, a white dress shirt, and a weather-beaten black wool sport jacket with threadbare elbows. There was a long beige scarf around his neck to keep him warm. He wore this outfit, and a few others like it, all the time. He preferred a classic look that lasted, and didn't believe in wasting money on expensive trendy clothes.

Able laughed. "Did you get a haircut?" he asked. Then he spread his muscular legs wider; his right hand moved around in his pants pocket.

Carl pressed his lips together and folded his arms across his chest. He knew Able was groping his penis on purpose, hoping Carl would become distracted and forget about why he'd called him into the showroom. Able was always doing annoying things like this; there was always a sex-starved expression on his face. He'd touch Carl's arm and breathe on his neck when Carl least expected it. He'd press his large, thick fingers into Carl's shoulder and leave them there a moment too long. When the weather was warm, he'd wear skimpy shirts to show off his chest muscles, and worn jeans that fell so low on his young waist that Carl could see the waistband of his underwear. Sometimes he was even

bold enough to place his palm on the small of Carl's back and guide him through the store.

But Carl always stepped away from him. He'd pull back fast and take control of the situation. He was much too sensible to be distracted by anyone's good looks.

Carl owned one of the most successful, important antique stores in the city and his only concern was money. The fact that he hadn't made any money that day infuriated him. People didn't buy important, expensive antiques as Christmas gifts. They bought cheap junk in discount department stores. Holidays made Carl clench his fists; they always interfered with normal business. So Carl pointed to the deposit bag filled with change and said, "I didn't call you in here to talk about the homeless or getting drinks. I need you to make a deposit this afternoon." It made him feel calm and warm inside to know that at least something was going into the bank that day.

Able's eyes opened wide; he blinked a few times. "Seriously," he said. "It's four o'clock in the afternoon on Christmas Eve, Mr. Smite. The banks are all closed. And the snow is really starting to accumulate out there. We're supposed to be getting at least nine inches." When he said nine inches, he gave Carl a naughty look and smiled. Then he pushed his dick forward and tugged the shaft a few times on purpose.

When Carl saw the outline of Able's long penis protrude through the fabric of his worn jeans, he took a quick breath and said, "You can go across town to the main branch of the bank, and put the money in the drop-off box." Then he handed Able a long, thin key to the bank deposit box and said, "Don't waste time either. When you come back, I want that chair you've been working on in the back room to be completely finished by the time we close tonight."

Able pulled his hand out of his pocket and took the key from Carl. He put the key into his pants pocket and pulled a pair of black gloves out of his coat pocket. Before he put on the gloves, he pulled a ten-dollar bill out of his back pocket and placed it on Carl's desk.

Carl looked down at the money and said, "What is this for?"

Able put on his gloves and reached for the deposit bag. "I ordered a sandwich from the deli down the street. I haven't eaten anything all day and I'm not going to have time to eat anything before I get to the shelter, so I ordered something. Ten dollars will be enough."

Carl pointed to a rumpled brown bag on his desk and said, "I brought my own lunch today, a cheese sandwich on white bread and an apple. You'll never have any money if you keep squandering it away on sandwiches from delis, Able. After all, you don't find ten dollars in the street every day."

Able pressed his lips together and took a deep breath through his nose. He said in a lower, controlled voice, "I usually skip lunch, Mr. Smite, to save money. I never order out. But I figured I'd splurge today because it's Christmas Eve." Then he turned away from Carl and crossed toward the front door. On the way out he asked, "Is there anything I can get for you?"

Carl shook his head and said, "Just get back here as quickly as you can so you can finish that chair before the day is over. I'll be looking at the clock while you're gone. If you don't finish the chair by eight, I'm keeping the store open until you do. And I don't care what time that is."

"Yes, Mr. Smite," Able said. "I'll be right back and I promise I'll have the chair finished by eight." Then he pushed the door open and a small bell on a Christmas wreath jingled.

A few minutes later, the front door opened and the bell jingled again. Carl looked up from his desk and forced a smile. He'd been reading the financial pages from yesterday's newspaper. (Carl never bought a current paper. He just waited until the owner of the shop next door to him tossed his in the street trash cans every night.) His first thought was that a customer had entered the store. He wanted to sell at least one item that day. He was hoping it was someone older who would be attracted to him.

A thin young man wearing a flimsy denim jacket stepped into the shop. He walked with a limp. He wasn't wearing gloves or a scarf. His brown hair had been shaved short and he wasn't wearing a hat. There was snow on his shoulders, two small sliver hoops in each ear, and his angular face was red with windburn. He crossed to the back of the store and placed a brown bag on Carl's desk. Then he looked Carl directly in the eye and said, "That will be nine dollars, sir." His voice was deep and nasal. He turned his head and coughed into his elbow.

Carl's eyebrows went up and he stepped back. He didn't want to catch a cold from some stupid, grungy delivery boy.

The young guy cleared his throat and said, "I'm not contagious. This is just the end of a month-long cold."

Carl pulled a taped receipt off the bag, then removed the bag from the desk so it wouldn't ruin the expensive burl veneer. He placed the bag on the floor and stared down

at the receipt. When he confirmed that it was nine dollars, he handed the young man the ten-dollar bill Able had left him.

The young man stared at him for a moment without speaking. His face was smooth and handsome, his chin strong and square. He couldn't have been more than fourteen or fifteen years old. He tilted his head and said, "Thanks," and put the ten-dollar bill into his back pocket.

As the boy walked back toward the front door, rubbing his wet nose and limping,

Carl stood up from his chair and shouted, "Hold on there. I didn't get my change."

The young guy stopped short in front of a Bombay chest that had a ten-thousand-dollar price tag and turned back to face Carl. "You want change?"

Carl furrowed his eyebrows and said, "If the bill was nine dollars, you owe me one dollar back. Don't you know how to count change? I wouldn't be at all surprised if you didn't, from what I'm seeing with people your age these days." He walked to where the guy was standing, looked down at him, and frowned.

The young guy squared his shoulders and lifted his head. He looked into Carl's dark brown eyes with his own dark brown eyes and pulled one dollar bill out of his pocket. He handed it to Carl and said, "I know how to count, Mister. I just thought you were giving me a tip, is all."

Carl hesitated. There was something about the expression on the guy's face that made his stomach jump. It wasn't sexual and Carl would never have been interested in anyone so young. Carl was cheap, his heart was the size of an English pea, and he couldn't care less about Christmas. But he wasn't attracted to minors and he never would have harmed a child. This reaction was more like he'd seen this guy somewhere before.

There was something familiar about him, a connection of some kind that Carl couldn't pigeonhole.

But that didn't stop Carl from taking the dollar bill. He ripped it out of the guy's hand and said, "Why should you get a tip for doing your job? Don't they pay you where you work? No one tips me for selling an antique. It's my job." The dollar bill felt soft and wet, as if it had been in his pocket for a very long time.

The young guy took a deep breath and shook his head. "Don't worry about it, man," he said. "I guess you need that dollar a lot more than I do." Then he turned his back on Carl, opened the front door, and shouted, "Merry Christmas, buddy."

"Keep your 'Merry Christmas' to yourself," Carl shouted back. "I'm over it, you little smart ass."

When the door was shut and the boy was gone, Carl shoved the dollar bill into his back pocket and walked back to his desk. A half hour later, Able returned from the bank and asked if his order form the deli had arrived. His shoulders were coated with snow, his thick blond hair was soaked, and his face was red. Carl lifted the brown bag from the floor and handed it to him. "It was nine dollars even," he said, shaking his head.

Able took the bag and said, "Damn. If I'd known it was nine I would have left a few extra bucks to tip the delivery guy."

Carl was about to reach for the dollar bill in his pocket. But he stopped when Able asked, "Did you give him a few extra bucks? I'll pay you back."

Carl's hand dropped to his lap and he frowned. "Of course I didn't give him any of my money. I didn't order the food."

"Well," Able said. "At least he received a dollar tip. It's better than nothing. I would have given him more because it's Christmas Eve and all."

Carl reached for a polishing cloth on his desk and stood up. "I'm going to polish that eighteenth-century game table. You'd better get back to work on that chair so it's finished before the day is over. And I don't want to hear anything more about Christmas, or homeless people, or giving large tips to nasty, germ-carrying delivery boys. I've had enough. I'm over it." Then he stormed past Able with the polishing cloth in his left hand. With his right hand, he patted the dollar bill in his back pocket three times. If anyone had walked into the shop and seen him smile, they would have thought he'd just sold a fifty-thousand-dollar bronze statue.

Chapter Two

A few minutes before eight o'clock, Able carried a large, ornately carved chair into the showroom. He'd finished the restoration and he was ready to leave for the homeless shelter. He placed it beside Carl's desk and said, "Here it is, Mr. Smite. I worked hard on this one, and it wasn't easy. I just hope you don't put this in the front window. The other merchants might not like it."

Carl raised his eyebrows and twisted his lips deliberately. He stood from his desk and smoothed down his slacks. When he leaned over to examine the chair, he pressed his index finger to his lips and said, "I've already made a space for the chair in the front display window. Go put it there right now." Then he tied a white tag around the arm of the chair with a thin piece of white string. In bold red numbers, the tag read twenty thousand dollars.

Able frowned. "The other merchants won't like this. You'll get phone calls and nasty notes," he said. "The last time you put that baby Giraffe skin in the window, that nice woman who owns the tearoom across the street almost lost her mind. She's a huge animal rights activist. And everyone else in this neighborhood agrees with her about animal skins. It's just not done in Greenwich Village. People are too concerned about animal welfare and the environment."

Carl ran his palm across the back of the chair; he smiled at the twenty-thousand-dollar price tag and his penis moved in his pants. The chair had been upholstered in real zebra skin, with the dead zebra's mane at the bottom of the seat, up front, trailing down to

the floor. "I don't care about the other bleeding-heart, animal-loving merchants in Greenwich Village," he said. "This chair is more than one hundred and fifty years old, and the zebra skin is even older. It's not as if I went out and shot a zebra yesterday at the Bronx Zoo. Now go put it in the front window under the spotlight and stop worrying about the environmental loons of Greenwich Village."

Able shrugged his shoulders and lifted the chair. As he crossed toward the front window display, he repeated, "They aren't going to like this at all, Mr. Smite."

"I'm over it," Carl said. "I don't give a damn what *they* like. Besides, that little moron across the street will be out of business soon enough anyway. You can't make money selling little bags of tea in this city. You need the big bucks, and the people who have them."

Carl followed him to the front of the store. He folded his arms across his chest and watched Able arrange the chair in the window. Able placed it directly beneath the spotlight on an angle so that everyone who passed by could see the dead zebra's mane. "The serious collectors want these old animal skins," Carl said. "These are people who love guns, who love to hunt, and who appreciate history. I'm going to sell that chair within a month for full price, while that silly moron across the street will be lucky if she sells twenty thousand dollars' worth of herbs and teas in her entire lifetime."

When the chair was in the window and they walked back to the desk, Carl turned his back to Able and reached for his coat and gloves. While he was putting his coat on, Able came up from behind and grabbed his arm. Carl stopped moving and turned to face him. His heart started to race; his stomach jumped. He looked into Able's eyes and said, "What are you doing?" Then he pulled his arm away from Able's hand.

Able raised his hands and smiled. "Don't get nervous. I'm only helping you with your coat, Mr. Smite. I'm not going to steal it." Then he patted the small of Carl's back, practically grabbing Carl's ass.

Carl put his arm through the sleeve and pulled the coat up. He squared his shoulders. "I can put my own coat on, thank you. I don't need help getting dressed." Then he lowered his head and fastened the buttons.

While Carl buttoned his coat, Able mumbled something. Carl wasn't sure what he said, but it sounded like, "I'd like to help you get *undressed*, Mr. Smite." Carl ignored him. He was attracted to Able, but he was too smart to mix business with pleasure.

Besides, the longer he kept Able at bay, the more willing Able would be to do whatever he asked.

When Carl looked up again, Able reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small box. He handed the box to Carl and said, "Merry Christmas, Mr. Smite."

Carl stared at the box in Able's hand and frowned. "What's this?" He hadn't expected any gifts. The last time he'd received a Christmas gift from anyone had been the worst night of his life. After that, all Christmas gifts reminded him of that night.

Able shrugged. "I bought you something small for Christmas, is all. It's nothing important or expensive, but I thought you'd like it."

Carl rolled his eyes and said, "I didn't get anything for you, and I don't want anything from you. You can either keep the gift yourself, or give it to someone else. I don't celebrate Christmas. I'm over it." Then he reached for a pair of cracked leather gloves with frayed seams and slipped them over his hands. "I'll see you bright and early

the day after tomorrow." He hated closing the store for a full day. But even he knew that opening on Christmas Day would have been a mistake.

Able lowered his arms slowly and put the small package back into his pocket. "I guess I'll be going then," he said. "Are you sure you wouldn't like to come down with me and help out tonight? They guy who runs the shelter is really great. I think you'd like him. He's very active in gay civil rights and he donates a lot of his time and money. He just moved to New York from San Francisco a month ago."

Carl rolled his eyes; he knew the type. The guy at the shelter probably walked around in tight red shorts and heavy black boots, carrying a rainbow flag. Though Carl had accepted his strong attraction to other men at an early age, he thought gay civil rights was a complete waste of time and energy. Carl never talked about being gay. He wasn't for or against any LGBT issues. The only thing he'd ever cared about was making money, because money gave him power. "I'm sure the man is a virtual saint," Carl said, condescending. "But I think I'll pass."

Able shrugged his shoulders and turned toward the door. "Have a good night, Mr. Smite."

While Carl watched him amble out of the shop, he grumbled, "I'll have the same night I always have." Then he pulled his keys out of his desk drawer and slammed the drawer shut.

When Able was gone, Carl turned off all the interior lights and checked to make sure the wall safe was securely locked. Then he went to the front door and pulled his scarf up around his face. There was so much snow the door wouldn't open all the way. On his way outside, his arm brushed against a small Christmas wreath hanging on the

front door. He'd only hung it there because he knew customers liked seeing tacky, ridiculous decorations. When the bells on the wreath jingled, he shoved it hard with his elbow and whispered, "Fuck Christmas. I'm so fucking over it," and slammed the door shut with such force a lamp on a table next to the door wobbled back and forth.

He locked the door and turned to face the front window. When he saw the antique chair with the zebra upholstery beneath the single spotlight, he smiled and rubbed his chest. He wasn't smiling because Able had done such a fine job with the restoration. He was smiling because he knew he'd get the full price for it. He'd only paid a hundred dollars for it at an estate sale. It had belonged to an old woman in Brooklyn. The woman's idiot daughter had been selling off her mother's possessions. The stupid daughter had no idea what the chair was worth, and Carl didn't bother to tell her. The day he'd gone to the estate sale and seen that chair in the middle of a huge pile of old-lady junk, he'd pulled a one-hundred-dollar bill from his pocket and handed it to the woman's daughter. Then the daughter carried the chair all the way down to his van in the street, thanking him down three flights of steps for taking it off her hands. If she'd had even the slightest clue as to what that chair had been worth, she would have made him pay at least a thousand dollars. When the chair was in the van, he'd smiled all the way back to his store.

Carl double-checked the front door to make sure it was locked. Then he looked up at the brand-new sign over the door. It was long and thin, with a shiny black background and gilded letters. It read, "Carl Smite, LTD." Carl had just had it hung a day earlier. The previous sign had read, "Keller & Smite Antiques." Marty Keller had been Carl's business partner. Carl met Marty right after college at an antiques show. At the time,

Marty was seventy and he was looking for someone to take over the business. When Marty saw that Carl was hungry to make money, he hired him as a full-time employee and taught him everything he knew. He showed him how to take advantage of unsuspecting widows, how to make a reproduction table look like a real antique, and how to fix chipped porcelain so it looked as if it had never been damaged. He taught Carl every sneaky, underhanded trick of the antiques business. And Carl was only too willing to learn.

Eventually, Marty made Carl a partner and put his name over the door. Marty was almost completely blind by then and he needed Carl to keep things running. Carl knew Marty needed him; Marty didn't have any family or friends. The only person who would put up with him was Carl. When Marty died, Carl inherited Marty's entire estate, including the business. Marty only asked Carl for one thing on his death bed: he pointed his crooked finger and ordered Carl to always leave his name over the front door. Carl smiled and promised him he would.

Carl stared at the new sign and pressed his lips together. It looked good; it had been worth all the money he'd paid the artist. He would have done it sooner, but he hated spending money on unnecessary things. He knew Marty Keller would have ripped the sign down and kicked it into the middle of the street, but Marty was dead now in a cold grave out on Long Island, and it didn't matter what Marty thought. Besides, Carl had earned everything he'd inherited from Marty. He'd spent years catering to Marty's needs; he'd overlooked every pejorative Marty had ever tossed in his direction. Marty Keller had been one of the nastiest men Carl had ever known. And now Marty was dead and Carl had it all.

Carl smiled at the sign, then crossed to a door only a few feet from the store's entrance. Carl opened it and stepped into a cold, dark hallway that had a long, narrow flight of steps. The floors were black and white tile, with cracks and chips. The white walls had yellowed with age. It smelled of damp towels and wet socks. Carl had inherited the entire building from Marty Keller. He lived above the shop in Marty's old living space, with a separate entrance to his living quarters.

His soles tapped against the hollow wooden steps. When he reached the top, he flipped on a light switch. A small pewter lamp on a round table gave a soft glow to Carl's sparsely furnished living room. After Marty died, Carl hadn't bothered to change a thing. There was a gray velvet Chippendale sofa beneath the front window, a threadbare oriental carpet with frayed edges, and a brown leather wing chair with arms so worn the white stuffing was showing. The cabbage rose wallpaper with a sage green background was peeling in the corners. The hardwood floors had grown dull and warped with time. In one corner of the room there was an old console television with knobs and dials.

He removed his coat and crossed to the back of the house toward the kitchen. He switched on a fluorescent light and opened the refrigerator door slowly. It dated back to the 1950s; the art deco chrome handle on the door had snapped off years ago. If he hadn't opened it slowly, he could have sliced his finger open on a jagged edge of the broken handle.

When the refrigerator door was open, a light didn't go on. The interior bulb had burned out five years earlier and he hadn't bothered to replace it. Carl knew what was in the refrigerator anyway; he didn't need a light to prove it. He pulled out a cardboard container of leftover Chinese takeout from the day before and poured the contents into a

chipped and dented white enamel pot. Then he placed the pot on the front right burner and pressed the on button. It was one of those old electric stoves, which was unusual because most people had gas in New York. There were four other burners, but only one worked. The oven still worked, but it made strange sizzling noises so he didn't use it very often.

After he heated the food, he pulled a bent fork out of the sink and placed the warm pot on top of a Formica table. The table wobbled a few times; he made a mental note to find some new cardboard to shove under the broken leg. He sat down on a red vinyl chair that had a long rip down the middle of the seat and ate right from the pot. He didn't see the point to wasting water on a dish *and* a pot. When he was finished, he stood from the table, rinsed the pot out in the sink, and placed it on a towel to dry.

Then he turned off the lights in the kitchen and the living room and walked back to his bedroom. He flipped on the bedroom switch and one small lamp with a forty-watt bulb went on beside his bed. The bedroom wallpaper was beige and brown stripes and probably as old as his living room paper. The water stain on the faded ceiling looked like the state of Texas. There was a four-poster bed, two square nightstands, and a thick down comforter. On the opposite side of the bed, there was a tall dresser with a small portable TV resting on the scratched surface. Though everything was old and chipped and ruined, it was also neat and orderly and clean.

Carl switched on the TV and adjusted the rabbit ear antennas to PBS. He didn't have cable television: why should he pay for something when he could get it for free?

This was the regular night for his favorite show, *Antiques Roadshow*. He'd been looking forward to crawling into bed all day, pulling the covers up to his chin, and watching his

favorite antique dealers. He liked the shows where idiots thought they'd found something majestic in grandma's attic and it turned out to be worthless. And he loved the shows where someone found something that some idiot thought was worthless and it turned out to be priceless.

But while he was removing his sport jacket, he noticed his show didn't come on. Instead, there was some kind of Christmas show, with annoying little children dressed in choir robes singing an awful religious Christmas song. Carl checked to make sure he'd turned to the right channel. When he saw he hadn't made a mistake and that they'd preempted his show that night for a Christmas special, he banged his fist hard on the dresser and switched off the TV. He shouted, "Fucking Christmas. I'm so fucking *over* it."

He removed his shirt, then his shoes and socks. He hung the shirt on a hook behind the door so he could wear it again and rolled his socks up and stuffed them into his shoes. He had an old washing machine but only used it once a month. He couldn't understand why people thought it was such a criminal offense to wear the same socks, or the same shirt, two or three days in a row. He didn't sweat in his clothes, he didn't do any hard physical work, and he showered every day. It made no sense to over-wash clothes. The less he washed them, the longer they lasted.

When he pulled off his pants, Able's dollar bill fell out of his back pocket. Carl picked it up, turned it around a few times, and smiled. This was the fastest buck he'd made in a long time. He put the dollar on top of the dresser and hung the pants on a hook

next to the shirt. He was completely naked now; he didn't believe in wasting money on underwear.

He closed the bedroom door and rubbed his hands together. The heat was only set to go on when the temperature reached sixty degrees, and it felt warmer in his room with the door closed. Normally, on a cold snowy night like this, Carl would have gone to bed naked and slipped beneath the covers. But since his TV show wasn't on that night, he decided to do a light workout in his room. Carl thought gyms were a waste of time and money. Jogging and push-ups were free. And his lean, hard body was proof that people didn't have to go to gyms to have good bodies. So he did ten sets of twenty push-ups between his bed and the windowsill. Then he did an intense cardio workout with an old clothes line by jumping rope for twenty-five minutes. By the time he was finished, his bulging chest muscles and his tight stomach muscles were glistening with perspiration. His dark pubic hairs were damp and matted. The bedroom even seemed warmer.

So he jumped into a hot shower and started counting. He didn't believe in wasting water or soap. You could get just as clean in two minutes as you could in twenty. He lathered his body to the count of sixty with basic white soap, then he rinsed it off for another count of sixty. Thirty counts after that, he was standing on the cold black and white tiles drying his body off with a black towel. He hadn't even created enough steam to fog the mirror. He looked at his body and smiled. Though he was in his mid-thirties, he still had the body of a man in his twenties. It was a shame he couldn't legally take off his clothes in the shop to sell a piece of furniture or an antique.

The thought of selling an expensive chair while naked caused his penis to grow.

He took a deep breath and rubbed it a few times with the black towel. This erection

wasn't about getting naked or exhibitionism. It was about making money and selling antiques. He thought about large piles of cash and his scrotum tightened. He became totally erect when he imagined an older gay man handing over a platinum credit card for a five-thousand-dollar rock crystal wall sconce. When he thought about strong, handsome Able Anderson rubbing one-hundred-dollar bills all over his naked ass, he leaned back and spread his legs.

Then he dropped the black towel on the floor and reached for his erection. He backed into the white tiled wall and spread his legs even wider. He stood on his tiptoes and arched his back, imagining Able tossing crisp one-hundred-dollar bills at his naked body. Each time he imagined a bill hitting his naked ass, his dick jumped. When he pictured Able rubbing wads of cash into his naked flesh, his chest heaved and his heart beat increased. A few minutes later, he rubbed a load out that was so intense it flew over the sink and splashed against the bathroom mirror.

When the bathroom was clean and the mirror had been wiped dry, he crawled into bed with a book he'd borrowed from the public library. The book was about a famous modern furniture designer, George Nakashima. Carl had been watching the trend toward contemporary pieces from the twentieth century. They were growing in popularity and he wanted to start working a few of these mid-century antiques into his shop.

He read until his eyelids grew heavy, then he yawned and switched off the light. The room darkened and the street lights illuminated his windows; the only sound he heard was wind blowing icy snow against the glass. He rested his head on his pillow and smiled. Normally, there would have been traffic and movement outside. The one good thing about a snowstorm on Christmas Eve was that it kept annoying, happy people off

the streets. When he closed his eyes, he knew he wouldn't have any trouble sleeping that night.

Chapter Three

Carl drifted into a deep, sound sleep for a few hours. But when the clock on the mantel in his living room struck twelve, he bolted awake and rubbed his eyes. His lips were quivering and his arms were trembling; he realized there were no covers on the bed. He looked down at his naked body for a second, then looked up at the window closest to his dresser. It was wide open and the white curtains were blowing into the room. There were a few inches of snow on the windowsill and a few puddles of melted snow on the wooden floor.

He jumped out of bed and jogged to the window, trying to avoid the puddles of water. When he slammed the window shut, he stepped back and stared at the glass for a moment. He knew he hadn't left it open. He never opened the windows in the wintertime, because he didn't like turning up the furnace. He scratched his dick and shook his head.

As he was about to turn and get back into bed, he heard loud clinks and thrashes coming from the other side of the room. His body jerked, his heart began to pound, and his eyes opened wide.

He wasn't alone.

He grabbed the bed post and turned fast. When he focused on a stream of light hitting his bedroom door, his arms and legs tingled with goose flesh.

While Carl's jaw dropped. A dark, familiar image covered with shackles and chains tossed its head back and bellowed with laughter. "What's the matter, Carl? Don't

you recognize your old friend and business partner?" The laughter echoed through the room.

Carl stared for a moment, unable to move his arms or legs. The image was transparent, but vivid enough to see a face and body. It looked exactly like his old partner, Marty Keller. But Marty was dead. This had to be a dream. Carl let go of the bed post and shook his head a few times. Then he rubbed his eyes and slapped his cheeks. But the image didn't disappear. "I must be dreaming," Carl whispered.

"You're not dreaming, my friend," Marty said. "It's me, Marty."

Carl blinked. It sounded like Marty's voice, with that deep, raspy tone he'd acquired from all those years of smoking strong, non-filtered cigarettes. And the face and body were identical to Marty's. The short bulbous nose always red from drinking too much cheap wine, the beady, close-set eyes, and the bald head with a few long strands of white hair could not have belonged to anyone but Marty. The image was even wearing the dark brown tweed jacket Marty had been buried in. It was the same jacket Marty had worn every day of his life. The only noticeable difference that Carl could see was his skin color. Marty's skin had always been red and flushed, as if he out of breath from running a long race. But the image standing in front of Carl was pale gray, with dark lines around the mouth and heavy black circles beneath the eyes.

Carl didn't believe in ghosts, so he squared his shoulders and turned toward the bed. His imagination was running away with him. He'd been working too hard; he needed to sleep.

Marty leaned forward and laughed. When he lifted his arms to his face, the chains attached to his wrists clanked together. "I'm not going to disappear just because you don't want to see me," he said. "I've come to warn you about something, Carl."

Carl stopped moving. He turned and faced the bedroom door. "I don't believe in ghosts," he said. "This is all a bad dream. I'm going back to bed now and I'm going to get a good night's sleep and forget all about this." He wasn't sure if he was talking to Marty's ghost or to himself.

Marty pointed a crooked finger in his direction and said, "I noticed the sign over the front door, Carl. I see you've taken my name down and replaced it with your own. I guess deathbed requests don't matter to you." Now his voice was wrecked, sullen.

Carl clenched his fists and took a step forward. He glared at Marty's ghost and shouted, "This is my place now. I wanted my own name on the door."

The ghost lifted his arms, opened his mouth, and roared. The chains on his arms and legs clacked together and a powerful gust of cold wind passed through Carl's entire body. It raised Carl's hair and blew the dollar bill he'd taken from Able off the top of the dresser.

Carl lifted his arms in surrender and took a step backwards. He waved his hands, palm up and said, "I'll change the sign. I'll put the old one back up tomorrow. I have it in the basement. I didn't throw it away, Marty. Just leave me alone." He had no intention of changing the sign. But he figured that if he said he'd change it, the ghost would leave him alone.

Marty lowered his arms and laughed. "Don't be obtuse, Carl. You're not a stupid man, and neither am I. I'm not here about signs and I don't care about business, money, or anything involving antiques."

"Then why are you here?" Carl asked. "And why are you bound with chains and shackles?"

"Ah well," Marty said, taking a few steps toward Carl. "I'm here to warn you, so you don't wind up like me. These chains and shackles are my existence now."

"I don't understand," Carl said.

Marty lifted an eyebrow and sighed. His voice became softer and kinder. "I didn't live an authentic life, Carl. I cheated people all the time. I made money on so many poor, unfortunate people, I lost track. I never gave to charity, I never offered help to anyone, and I overlooked everything and everyone who ever cared about me. I'm wearing these chains and shackles because I deserve to be wearing them. I'm doomed, Carl. I'm doomed to wander the universe this way for eternity. And if you don't change, this is exactly what will happen to you."

Carl tilted his head to the side and said, "You weren't that bad, Marty. You helped me get a start in life. You left me everything you owned when you died. You taught me everything you knew. You were a good businessman, and you made a lot of money. Why should you be punished for making money?"

Marty lifted his arms again and roared, this time with more strength. All of the windows in the room opened wide and the curtains blew into the dark, snowy night. "You're not getting it, Carl. I didn't teach you anything because I was a good person. I didn't care about you. I needed you because I was getting old, and I used you. I treated

you as if you were worthless. But more than that, I made you exactly as hideous as I was.

Do you really want to know why I took you on in the first place?"

Carl shrugged his shoulders. "I thought you hired me because you saw promise in me. When you hired me, that's what you said."

Marty rubbed his ample stomach and laughed. "Don't be an idiot, Carl. I hired you because you had a nice ass. In the beginning, it was the only reason. If you'd been fat and ugly, I never would have looked twice at you."

Carl's eyes opened wide; this was shocking news. "I thought you were straight, Marty. You were even married once." Carl had always assumed Marty was a lonely old widower too set in his ways to marry again. He figured that after Marty's wife had died, Marty had become bitter and disillusioned and he'd devoted the rest of his life to his business.

"Quite the opposite," Marty said. "No, Carl, I knew all my life that I was gay. But instead of living an authentic life and having the guts to be who I was, I hid my sexuality from everyone, including my wife. We slept in separate bedrooms. I used to leave her alone and go out cruising for men in adult book stores, porn theaters, and bathhouses. I lived a double life, because I was too stupid and selfish to be honest about who I really was. And, in turn, I ruined her life, too. She never knew about me, and she went to her grave thinking it was her fault that I never touched her or treated her like a woman."

Carl took a deep breath. "I never suspected anything," he said. But some things made sense to him now. Whenever there was an openly gay man around, Marty looked at the man with disgust in his eyes. And Marty was never shy about sharing his opinions

when it came to equal rights and LGBT issues. More than once, he made it clear to Carl that he thought gays were freaks of nature. Carl had never commented to Marty one way or the other about his own sexuality. Marty was his boss, and money was more important to Carl than politics or civil rights issues.

"I hired you for two reasons," Marty said. "First, because you had a great ass, and then because you reminded me of myself when I was young. I knew I could mold you."

Carl lowered his eyes and frowned. "But I never hid who I was," he said. "I never talked about being gay and I've never worn my sexuality on my shirt sleeve, but I've never denied it either. Most people know I'm gay and I don't care. So I'm not like you at all."

Marty laughed. "Oh, yes, you are. You just don't see it. Look at the way you treat your own employee, Able. It's no different than the way I treated you. Actually, in a way you're even worse than I was."

"How?"

"Because times are different now," Marty said. "When I was younger people didn't accept men like us. Everyone thought we were nothing more than queers and freaks and fags. But nowadays it's different. You don't hear those words often, and when you do they aren't meant as insults. People your age are out working hard to change things. The world is a different place, yet you couldn't care less. The only thing you care about is making money and saving money."

Carl frowned. "This is bullshit. I'm over it. There's nothing wrong with money."

Marty pointed at him and said, "There's no time to argue. Tonight you are going to be visited by three different ghosts. Starting at one o'clock, they will arrive on the hour.

And they are going to take you on journeys to places that may or may not open your eyes. You're getting a second chance, Carl. What you choose to do with it is entirely up to you."

Carl closed his eyes tightly. "Now I know I must be dreaming. Am I going to get a visit from the tooth fairy, too? Maybe Santa will stop by and we can have cake?" Or maybe Carl was dreaming all this because of the new sign in front of the shop. His subconscious mind might be playing tricks on him because deep down he felt guilty about changing the sign.

"I'm leaving now," Marty said. "Good luck, Carl. You're going to need it."

When Carl opened his mouth to speak, Marty's ghost vanished before his eyes.

Carl blinked a few times and rubbed his elbows. All the windows were still open and the room was freezing. He closed the windows fast and jumped into bed. When he reached for the covers, he pulled them all the way up over his head.

Chapter Four

At one o'clock in the morning, Carl felt a cold breeze pass through his bedroom. He opened his eyes and sat up. He heard a deep, hoarse groan echoing from the other side of the room. His whole body jerked and he turned to the right to see what it was.

When his eyes focused, he saw a tall, dark figure standing in the middle of his bedroom. The figure was wearing a long, black cloak, with a hood so deep and so heavy its face was completely hidden from sight. Carl pressed one hand against his stomach and one over his mouth.

"Who are you?" Carl shouted. "Why are you in my home? I have no money here.

And as you can see, I'm a poor man." There was a fireproof strong-box with ten thousand dollars in cash under his bed. He kept it hidden there, beneath a few loose floorboards, for emergencies. But he wasn't about to let anyone steal it from him.

When the dark figure didn't answer him, he reached for his cell phone on the dresser and said, "If you don't leave, I'll call 911." His cell phone was on the nightstand. He was hoping he'd remembered to charge the battery. He didn't have a land line in the house. One phone was good enough for Carl Smite.

The dark figure made another bizarre noise that sounded like a rusty hinge, then lifted its right arm. A large hand covered with a black glove reached out toward Carl. The figure moaned this time and said, "I am the first ghost you were told about, the Ghost of Christmas Past. Come with me."

Carl jumped out of bed and braced his back against the wall. The voice was deep, but not loud. It sent a chill through Carl's naked body and his nipples tightened. "Get out of my house, you fucking creep. I'm over it." Then he opened his cell phone and started to dial 911. He remembered his visit with Marty, but he didn't believe it had been real. He thought it had been a dream.

While he dialed, the dark figure floated toward him. It didn't take normal steps; it glided across the room. Carl's mouth fell open and he dropped the phone on the floor. "What the fuck *are* you?" he asked.

"I told you. I'm the Ghost of Christmas Past," the figure moaned. "I've come to take you on a short journey. Touch my glove."

Carl looked down at his naked body. "I can't go anywhere like this. I'm not wearing clothes. Are you crazy? Get the fuck out of my house. I don't believe in ghosts, you fucking loon. The dream with Marty wasn't real. This isn't real."

The Ghost lifted both arms. The windows opened wide and the bed frame vibrated. The bathroom door and the bedroom door began to swing back and forth all by themselves. While the curtains blew forward and snow blew into the room, the small light on the nightstand flickered on and off. When the television went on, the Ghost shouted, "Come with me. Touch my hand."

Carl stood there, staring at the moving doors. His knees felt weak and his lips started to tremble. The ghost moved closer and shoved the black glove into his face. Carl slowly lifted his right hand. His fingers moved toward the black glove. "If I touch your hand, will you leave me alone?"

"Just touch it," the Ghost moaned. "You don't have a choice."

Carl took a shallow breath and pressed the tips of his fingers to the black leather glove. In less than a moment, he was standing beside a familiar brick building. The Ghost was on his left. They were both outside and there was snow on the ground. Carl spread his arms apart and looked down at his body. He was still naked and he wasn't even slightly cold. He turned to the Ghost and said, "How can this be? I'm stark naked and I'm standing in the snow and it feels like June."

The Ghost was staring into a window that had been decorated with pine swags and red Christmas bows. It didn't answer Carl.

"Where are we?" Carl shouted. "This is insane."

When the Ghost didn't answer, Carl checked out the surroundings. The brick building with white trim looked like a place he remembered well from his childhood, Briarwood Manor. He'd grown up there. Carl's father had died when Carl was young, and his mother had taken a job at Briarwood Manor as head housekeeper for the wealthy Briarwood family. Carl and his mother had lived in a small guest cottage behind the main house.

"What are we doing at Briarwood?" Carl asked. "I haven't been here in years, and there's a very good reason for that. I vowed I'd never return."

The Ghost moaned, "Touch my glove and follow me."

Carl figured he didn't have much of a choice. A second after he touched his hand, they were standing in the drawing room of the main house at Briarwood Manor. The entire room was illuminated in soft light. Candles burned on the grand piano, a fire roared in the fireplace, and a huge, ornate Christmas tree glowed in a tall bay window. There were piles of perfectly wrapped gifts beneath the tree. People Carl hadn't seen in more

than fifteen years were singing at the piano. They were old friends, yet here they were still young and innocent.

Carl rubbed his jaw and said, "I remember this night. It was the last Christmas Eve party I ever went to at Briarwood Manor." He knew it was the last Christmas Eve party he'd attended, because each year Mrs. Briarwood chose a different theme for her Christmas trees. On that particular year, she'd decided to have the tree decorated in all gold with small white doves. At the time, he'd thought it was the best tree she'd ever designed. The small yellow lights bounced off the gold ornaments. The little white doves toned things down and added a sense of balance to the tree.

When an old female friend walked past Carl, he lowered his hands and covered his private parts. She was carrying a drink and smiling at someone on the other side of the room. He looked at the Ghost and said, "This is ludicrous. I'm standing here stark naked and she didn't even bat an eye."

"They can't see you," the Ghost moaned. Then the Ghost lifted its right arm and pointed to the other side of the room.

When Carl looked up, he saw a younger version of himself. The younger Carl was holding a drink and talking to Victor Briarwood, Mr. and Mrs. Briarwood's only child and the heir to the Briarwood fortune. Victor was wearing a black suit that night, with a white shirt open at the collar. His dark brown hair was parted on the side and thick, straight chunks fell across his forehead. The younger version of Carl was wearing a dark blue suit and a light blue shirt. He was smiling and laughing so hard his head fell back over and over. Victor was smiling, too. And he was staring between Carl's eyes and lips with his large brown eyes.

Carl glared at the ghost. "They can't see or hear me?"

The ghost nodded, and then groaned, "No."

Carl pressed his palm to his throat and crossed the room in his bare feet. He stood in the middle of the party without being noticed by anyone, and stared at the younger image of his body. His young face was so smooth and his eyes were so much brighter. He hadn't smiled that way in years.

He remembered this party well. He'd been a freshman in college that fall and this had been the first time he'd been back to Briarwood since Labor Day. And it had also been the first time he'd seen his best friend, Victor Briarwood, since the holiday. Carl's mother had passed away a year earlier and Carl had won a scholarship to a state college. Victor had gone to Harvard and they hadn't seen each other in months.

Carl looked at the Ghost and said, "Victor and I grew up here together. We were inseparable. When my mother died, his family allowed me to live in the guest cottage and finish high school until I went away to college. They treated me just like family. I haven't thought about them in years. I have thought about Victor often, but we lost touch."

Then he frowned and looked around the room. He shook his head and said, "Look at them all, laughing and joking and wasting their time at a Christmas party. A bunch of fools. I'm glad I don't have to deal with this sort of thing anymore. I'm so over it."

The Ghost nodded, then pointed to the young images of Carl and Victor. The pianist started playing a familiar old Christmas song and Victor looked into young Carl's eyes. If anyone else had been paying attention, they would have seen how much these two young men loved each other. Young Carl whispered something into Victor's ear and Victor smiled. Then Victor looked around the room. When he saw that no one was

watching, he lowered his hand and placed it quietly on young Carl's ass. He squeezed his ass a few times and made a motion to leave the room by tipping his head to the right.

Young Carl's eyes dropped and he followed Victor to a garden door next to the Christmas tree.

Carl and the Ghost watched both young men leave the party. No one else saw them slip out the garden door. Carl shook his head and frowned. He remembered feeling apprehensive that night. Victor had been extremely horny and he couldn't wait to be alone with Carl. There were so many people; it wasn't easy to disappear. But Carl could never say no to Victor Briarwood. Victor was the only man he'd ever known who could make him do anything. Carl was glad those days were over. He'd been such an emotional, romantic fool back then. He'd had to learn everything the hard way, especially that the illusion of true love didn't exist.

The Ghost lifted its arm and said, "Touch my glove."

Carl took one more look at the Christmas party and said, "For once, I'll be more than happy to touch your creepy old hand. I've had about enough of this Christmas shit as I can take. Let's go." Then he squared his shoulders and rested his fingers on top of the black glove.

When Carl opened his eyes again, they were outside in the snow. At first, Carl couldn't figure out where they were. He and the Ghost were standing next to a brick wall. It was dark; the trees and shrubs were thick. He heard the sound of laughter coming from the left and he turned fast. He looked at the Ghost and said, "I think I know where we are. These were the garages in Briarwood Manor."

Carl followed the sound of the laughter. He rounded a corner and crossed toward the last garage door. It was open and there was a vintage Cadillac convertible parked inside. He sighed and said, "There's old Mr. Briarwood's favorite car. He used to love to take it out on sunny days in the summer. He was the original owner. Fifteen years ago, that car had to be at least thirty years old."

The Ghost nodded and pointed to the inside of the dark garage.

Carl hesitated for a moment, then stepped into the garage. The top of the car was down and young Carl and Victor were sitting in the back seat. Victor put his arm around young Carl and handed him a small package wrapped in gold foil and red ribbon. He smiled and said, "I bought this for you. I hope you like it." Then he kissed young Carl on the lips and said, "Merry Christmas, baby. I love you."

Young Carl handed Victor a package and said, "And this is for you. I couldn't afford anything expensive. But I wanted to get you something that you'd use and that would make you think about me all the time."

Older Carl looked at the Ghost of Christmas Past and frowned. "How could I have ever been so young and so stupid? I wish I could walk up and smack my younger self in the back of the head."

When young Carl opened the small box, he pulled out a gold ring that was shaped like a wedding band and said, "I love it, Victor. It's perfect."

Victor smiled and took the ring from young Carl. Then he reached for young Carl's right hand and slipped the gold band onto his ring finger. He kissed young Carl's finger and said, "It's a perfect fit. Everything about this Christmas has been perfect. Even

the song we just heard on the piano. I'm officially making that our own Christmas love song."

Young Carl threw his arms around Victor's shoulders and said, "I'm never going to take this ring off. I'll wear it forever." Then he kissed Victor on the lips and said, "Now I feel terrible. You bought me an expensive ring, and I couldn't afford to get you anything even half as nice."

Victor sat back and reached for the package. He tore the wrapping paper and said, "I'm sure I'll love it," he said. He opened the flat box and pulled out an extra long black scarf. He ran his large, thick fingers across the wool and smiled. "I love it," he said. "And I think I know how you can make this gift even better."

Young Carl was staring at the gold ring on his finger. He looked up with bright eyes and asked, "How?"

Victor leaned forward and licked his neck. "You can take off all your clothes now and put the scarf around your pretty neck for me. I'd like to see you totally naked, with nothing else but this scarf around your neck."

Young Carl took a quick breath and said, "I'm not sure, Victor. I want to, but I'm afraid someone will come in and find us. The house is filled with people. We could get caught."

Older Carl stepped closer to the car and shouted, "Don't do it. This is a mistake.

Please don't do it. You'll both regret it for the rest of your lives."

The Ghost of Christmas Past moaned and said, "They can't hear you. You don't exist to them."

Victor slipped his hand under young Carl's leg and said, "We're safe. No one ever comes in here at night. Besides, they're all too drunk to even walk this far back without falling over. We're fine."

Young Carl smiled and kissed Victor on the lips. "Close your eyes," he said. "And when you open them, I'll only be wearing the scarf."

While young Carl removed his clothes, Victor kept his eyes shut. He reached forward to grab young Carl's naked legs a few times, but young Carl pushed his hand back each time. When he was naked and the scarf was around his neck, he said, "Now sit back in the middle of the seat and spread your legs apart. We're going to embrace coitus." Then he laughed so hard he almost fell sideways. Carl and Victor had read a bad gay novel once that poorly described a lovemaking scene with two men having what had been described as "embracing coitus." It had been written by a self-indulgent writer with very little experience when it came to gay love. Ever since then, they joked about the phrase.

Older Carl covered a smile with his palm. One of the things he'd always loved the most about being with Victor was how often they'd laughed. Though they were opposites in many ways, they'd always shared the same sense of humor.

Victor adjusted his body to the middle of the back seat and laughed. He smiled and said, "I love embracing *coitus* with you." Then his hips went forward; he spread his legs wide, and rested his head on the back of the seat.

Young Carl placed his palms on Victor's wide shoulders and lifted his left leg over Victor's body. Then he climbed onto Victor's lap and wrapped his hands around Victor's neck. "You can open your eyes now," young Carl said.

When Victor opened his eyes and saw him sitting on his lap wearing nothing but a long black scarf around his neck, he placed his large hands on young Carl's ass and smiled. He ran his hands up and down young Carl's naked back; his eyes examined every inch of young Carl's naked body. He looked down at young Carl's legs and said, "You're so smooth tonight."

Young Carl arched his back and spread his legs a little wider. "I shaved my entire body for you today. I had a feeling you'd like it."

Victor patted his ass and said, "I love it. And I love you for going out of your way to do something that nice for me. You always do nice things for me."

Young Carl ran his hand down the side of Victor's face and said, "Now it's your turn. Take off those pants and let me see those strong football player legs."

Carl sighed and said to the Ghost, "I always did have a thing for football players.

Whenever I saw Victor in his football uniform, my heart stopped beating. This wasn't our first time together. We had been lovers for more than a year already. This was just the first time we'd been together in a while."

When Victor was naked, he smacked the head of his penis on young Carl's cheek and laughed. Then he put his arms around young Carl's shoulders and forced him down. Young Carl's back rested on the seat and his legs went up and opened wide. His right leg dangled over the top of the back seat, and his left leg dangled over the front seat.

Victor reached beneath the front seat and pulled out a small tube of lubricant. He rubbed the lube all over his erection and asked, "Are you ready for me? We haven't done this since Labor Day weekend."

Young Carl placed his palms on Victor's shoulders and said, "I have to ask you one thing. I haven't been with anyone else. You're the only guy I've ever been with. But I know you have strong needs and you might have been with someone else at school. I wouldn't get upset, I really wouldn't. I love you too much to let a quick trick ruin what we have together. But I need to know if we should be using condoms."

Older Carl looked at the Ghost and raised his eyebrows. "I meant that, too. I wouldn't have been upset if he'd told me he'd been with other guys. I wouldn't have minded using a condom." Carl had never been the jealous type. If anything, Victor had always been jealous of him cheating while he'd been away at school.

Victor smiled and kissed his forehead. "There's no one else," he said. "You're the only guy I've ever been with. We don't need condoms tonight. But I'm glad you asked. I was afraid to bring it up and ruin the moment. I'm glad you haven't been with anyone else. I like that. The thought of another guy getting into your pants makes me want to kick a wall down with my bare hands."

"There is no one else," young Carl said.

Older Carl rubbed his jaw and said to the Ghost, "And there hasn't been anyone else since then."

By that time, Victor was so eager to get inside young Carl's body he was taking deep, heavy breaths. When he finally did go in, and his precarious young penis rubbed against young Carl's tight, soft interior, he bit his bottom lip and said, "I have been dreaming about this for weeks. Ah well..."

Young Carl's eyes were closed and his mouth was half open. "So have I, Victor. I love you so much."

Then Victor started bucking his hips. The car rocked and young Carl's head banged into the side of the car. Victor's football player body was strong and he bucked so hard there were loud slaps against young Carl's ass. But young Carl never complained. He took all Victor was willing to give with an even smile on his face. A second before they were both ready to climax, Victor leaned forward and kissed him. He shoved his tongue into young Carl's mouth and his penis exploded inside young Carl's body. Young Carl held Victor's shoulder with his left hand and jerked his own penis to the finish with his right.

While Victor was still deep in his body, rocking in and out with gentle thrusts, young Carl whispered, "I love you."

Older Carl closed his eyes and cleared his throat. This was difficult to watch.

He'd almost forgotten how young and innocent and ridiculous he'd been back then.

Victor was about to reply. But when he opened his mouth to speak, there was a loud slam on the trunk. Victor looked to his left and froze. His penis was still deep inside young Carl and young Carl's arms were still around his neck. Victor's father was standing above them in the shadows. It was too dark to actually see their naked bodies or too see that Victor's penis was still inside young Carl. But it wasn't dark enough to hide the general concept of what they were doing in the back seat of that old Cadillac.

Young Carl couldn't see anything but Victor's chest muscles. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Victor didn't answer. He was still looking at his father's shocked face; his head hadn't moved.

Mr. Briarwood cleared his throat and said, "Get dressed and go up to your room. Carl Smite isn't welcome here anymore. I want him out of this house and off this property forever." Then he turned his back on Victor and started walking back toward the house. He stopped for a moment and said, "I never want to discuss this night again. Is that understood?"

Victor nodded. "Yes, father."

Carl removed the scarf, stepped back from the car and walked out of the garage. The Ghost followed him. "I'll never forget that night," Carl said. "I thought I'd always be welcome at Briarwood Manor. But when Mr. Briarwood caught us that night, he made it clear I was not welcome in his house and he never wanted to see my face again. May he burn in hell. I knew Victor was crushed. I didn't want to see him get hurt. So I got dressed and walked ten miles that night to stay with a good friend. Victor wanted to drive me. But I insisted on walking. I knew his father was waiting for him in the house."

The Ghost didn't answer. He lifted his arm and said, "Touch my hand. We don't have time to waste."

Carl lifted his arm and hesitated. In the distance, he heard the sound of an old-fashioned Christmas song coming from the main house. It was the same song he'd heard the night he'd walked away from Briarwood Manor for good, with his head down, his hands in his pockets, and tears streaming from the corners of his eyes.

Chapter Five

After they left Briarwood Manor, the Ghost took Carl to a small studio apartment Carl hadn't seen in years. They stood in a makeshift kitchen area that had a small, boxy refrigerator, a two-burner hot plate, and a dented toaster oven with rust stains. On top of a battered metal cabinet near the sink, there was a tiny artificial Christmas tree. Crushed tinsel drooped in curls; a few chipped ornaments with bent hooks dangled from plastic branches. At the top, a tiny angel with a broken wing and a painful expression tipped sideways.

The younger version of Carl was sitting on a green vinyl sofa, wearing a black sweatsuit. There was a petite young woman sitting next to him. Her straight, dark hair was parted on the side and fell to the nape of her neck in a pageboy. On both sides of the part, there were two thick curls that looked like sausages. Even for that time period, the hairstyle was out of date. She was wearing a red sweater that had green Christmas trees on the upper half, and a pair of jeans so tight they looked painful.

The older Carl looked at the ghost and said, "She was my best friend back then. Her name was Donna Fratelli. We were in Glee Club together. She didn't get along with her mother and moved out as soon as she graduated from high school. They can't see me, can they?" He was still naked, but he didn't feel awkward about it anymore.

The Ghost said, "No."

"That Christmas, Donna was working full time in an office and going to school part time at night to study something. I don't remember exactly what, though," Carl said.

Carl took a few steps forward and leaned over Donna's shoulder. Donna and young Carl were eating TV dinners and drinking wine that Christmas Day. She'd been one of his closest friends all through high school. They'd studied together, partied together and gone to the prom together. They went to all the school football games, where they'd both sat in the bleachers and cheered for Victor. And when Carl's mother died, Donna had been there to console him and help him get through the roughest times. But there had never been anything sexual between them. At the time neither Carl nor Donna knew it, but Donna had been his first and only fag hag.

Young Carl poured himself another glass of wine and said, "I'm just going to go back to school tomorrow. I had all kinds of plans with Victor for this week, but after last night I doubt we'll be seeing each other anymore." He frowned and swallowed the entire glass of wine.

Older Carl raised his eyebrows and listened. He remembered this conversation well. He'd told Donna he and Victor had had a vicious argument over a card game. But he didn't tell her Mr. Briarwood had caught them fucking in the back seat of his old Cadillac. No one knew how Carl and Victor felt about each other. Everyone thought they were best friends, just like brothers. Carl couldn't have told Donna the truth that night. It would have meant coming out of the closet for him, and outing Victor at the same time. And he still wasn't ready to openly admit who he was.

Donna poured young Carl another glass of wine and rested her palm on his knee. "You guys will work it out," she said. "And there's no reason for you to go all the way back to school and sit in an empty door room all alone. You can stay here as long as you want."

He drank the next full glass of wine and fell back against the vinyl sofa. His eyes were glazed and his hair was messy because he'd been running his fingers through it all evening. He yawned and said, "I appreciate it, Donna. I just don't know if I can stay here. I want to get away from Victor and everything that reminds me of him."

Older Carl remembered how he'd felt that day. His stomach turned and his muscles ached. Everything seemed foggy, as if he had been standing in the middle of a cloud and he didn't know how to find his way out. He remembered waiting for Victor to call and say something. Victor had to know he'd be with Donna. The longer he'd waited, the more his head throbbed.

Donna poured young Carl another glass of wine and ran her hand up his leg. She rested her hand on his upper thigh and handed him the glass. "Drink this. You'll feel better."

Young Carl leaned forward and drank the entire glass in a few swallows. When he tried to place the empty glass on the coffee table, he missed and the glass fell onto the brown shag carpet. He fell back on the sofa and said, "I think I've had too much to drink. Hell, I don't even know how many I've had." His voice slurred and he hesitated between words.

Donna picked the empty glass off the floor and placed it on the table without removing her hand from his leg. The hand on his leg went higher and she grabbed his crotch. She massaged his penis with light, gentle strokes and said, "We've been friends for a long time, Carl. I have very strong feelings for you. I think we'd be good together as a couple."

Older Carl stepped back and raised an eyebrow. By the time Donna started playing with young Carl's penis, young Carl was too drunk to know what was happening. Older Carl had always wondered about what had happened between them that night. But he'd never been sure and he'd never bothered to ask—some things were better off unspoken. If he'd been sober that night, he would have handled this differently.

While Donna continued to grope his penis, young Carl closed his eyes and spread his legs wider. She slipped her hand down the waistband of his sweatpants and wrapped her warm fingers around the shaft. A moment later, young Carl pulled down his pants. He had a full erection; she began stroking it very slowly.

Older Carl shook turned to the Ghost and said, "I want to leave. I don't want to see this." He knew this wasn't the first time a confused young gay man had had sex with a woman. But he didn't want to watch something he wished he could have prevented.

The Ghost pointed to the sofa and shook the black glove up and down.

When Carl looked down at them again, Donna was pulling young Carl's pants off. She yanked them off his legs and shoved them under the coffee table. Then she stood up and pulled off his sweatshirt. Her fingertips brushed against his underarms and he laughed. "That tickles," he said. He was so drunk and his voice was so slurred it was hard to understand what he'd said.

When young Carl was naked except for a pair of white sweat socks, Donna removed all of her clothes. Then she sat on his lap and straddled his erection. He'd drifted off to sleep by then, so she tapped his face a few times to try to wake him up. There was no kissing or foreplay. She knew what she wanted and young Carl did not try to stop her. His penis slipped into her body so fast his head went back and his jaw dropped. Donna

placed her palms on young Carl's naked chest and rode his erection until he made a face and grunted. His legs wiggled, his toes curled back, and his body jerked.

After they both climaxed, he rested his head on the sofa and he closed his eyes. While he was still deep inside her body, he drifted into a heavy sleep. She rolled her hips in slow circles and rubbed his muscular chest. Before she climbed down from his lap, she kissed him on the cheek and said, "Merry Christmas, my love. You may or may not remember, but I'll never forget this night."

Carl crossed back to the other side of the small apartment and said to the Ghost, "I remember her grabbing my penis. It felt good. But I was never sure about whether or not we had sex that night. I certainly didn't know she had feelings for me. The woman was in love with me, and I never knew. Can we please leave now? I've seen enough."

The Ghost lifted the black glove and nodded. Carl closed his eyes and touched it.

But when Carl opened his eyes again, he was still in the same apartment. Only now it was daylight. He looked at the Ghost and shouted, "I thought we were leaving. I want to go back home now."

The Ghost moaned and pointed to the sofa.

Young Carl was sleeping. He was naked and there was a white cover over the bottom half of his legs. Donna was in the kitchen area making coffee. While she was measuring teaspoons of coffee into the filter of an old chrome coffeepot, there was a soft knock on the front door.

Young Carl opened his eyes and sat up. He looked down at his naked body and rubbed his forehead. Then he pulled the covers up to his waist fast and said, "Why am I naked? Are you expecting anyone? My head is killing me."

Donna put down the coffee and smiled. She shrugged her shoulders and said, "You're naked because you got drunk last night. And I have no idea who that could be." Her voice was light and cheerful, and she was showered and dressed. She smiled so wide, her gums showed.

There was a louder knock and Victor's deep voice shouted, "Carl, are you there? I have to talk to you, and I don't have much time. I saw your car outside."

Young Carl's eyes opened wide. He pointed at Donna and said, "Don't open the door yet. I want to get dressed. Where are my clothes?"

"I folded them this morning," she said, and pointed to a small chair with chipped white paint.

Young Carl scrambled to his feet with the cover wrapped around his waist. His body wobbled and he almost stumbled over the coffee table.

While he was putting on his sweatpants, Victor knocked again. "C'mon, Carl. I know you're upset. But I have to talk to you. It's important."

Young Carl reached for his sweatshirt and shouted, "I'll be right there."

Donna lifted the coffee can and placed it up on a shelf. She plugged the coffeepot into the wall and smiled. "You see," she said. "I knew you guys wouldn't stay mad at each other for long. You're like brothers. You did all that worrying for nothing."

Young Carl ignored her. He pulled the sweatshirt over his body and crossed to the door. When he opened it, he stared at Victor for a moment without speaking. Victor was wearing faded jeans and a thick, white cable knit sweater. The long black scarf Carl had given him for Christmas was around his neck.

Older Carl watched the two young men stare at each other in the doorway. He remembered how difficult it had been not to lift his arms and wrap them around Victor's strong shoulders. The only thing he wanted to do was fall into the arms of the man he'd been in love with all his life. He'd had to clench his fists and press his lips together hard to remain in control. He knew he couldn't let Donna to see him hug Victor in that way. He didn't want her to suspect they were lovers.

He also remembered feeling so awkward that morning. His hair was disheveled, his mouth was dry, and his eyes were swollen and red.

But the way he looked didn't seem to matter to Victor. He smiled and said, "Can we talk somewhere in private? It's very important. I'm on my way to the airport right now."

Donna was standing behind young Carl by then. She took a shallow breath and said, "Come on in, Victor. I'll go out to the store. I'm out of cream anyway."

Young Carl touched her shoulder and said, "Thanks. I appreciate it."

When she was gone, Victor put his arms around Carl and said, "I'm leaving today. My father is sending me to Europe." Then he reached behind Carl's back and placed his strong hand on Carl's ass. He squeezed Carl's flesh a few times and took a shallow breath.

Young Carl stepped back and stared at him. "Europe?"

Victor sighed. He leaned forward and bit Carl's earlobe. His breathing increased and his other hand grabbed Carl's ass. "He won't even speak to me," Victor said. "This morning he told me he had arranged for me to study in England. He made all the necessary phone calls and ordered a one-way ticket on a flight to London leaving in less than two hours. My bags were packed and waiting in the front hall."

"And you're going?" Carl leaned forward and put his arms around Victor's wide shoulders. His penis was growing; his heart was beating faster. While Victor continued to play with his ass, he arched his back and rested his head on Victor's chest.

Victor shrugged. "I don't have a choice," he said. "Either I go to England today, or he's going to cut me off completely and throw me out of the house. I don't know what else to do."

Older Carl looked at the Ghost of Christmas Past and frowned. He remembered thinking Victor could have fought his father. Carl had loved Victor so much he would have fought anyone who had tried to keep them apart. He would have given anything he owned to be with him. But then again, at the time, Carl didn't have much to sacrifice. The only thing he could sacrifice for Victor was his happiness. Victor had always had everything he'd ever wanted. It would have been selfish and cruel to ask him to give up his entire life, and his family, for a poor slob who went to a state college on a scholarship.

But young Carl didn't get mad at him. He smiled and said, "I'm glad you told me you're leaving. I would have been devastated if you hadn't." Then he placed his hands on Carl's shoulders and said, "We could live without money. Money isn't the most important thing in the world. As long as we have each other, we don't need much money."

Older Carl pressed his palm to his chest and shouted, "Stupid, naïve fool. Yeah, right. You think you can live on *love* in this world? I can't believe words as stupid as those ever came from my mouth."

Victor breezed over his comment about not needing money. He put his arms around him and kissed him on the mouth. When he was finished kissing, he put both

hands down the back of young Carl's pants and said, "This won't keep us apart. I love you more than anyone or anything. We'll be together."

"What time does your plane leave?"

Victor looked at his watch. "I should go now."

"Wait," Carl said, reaching down to unzip Victor's jeans. "I want to give you something to think about while you're over in England."

"We don't have much time," Victor said. Young Carl's right hand was already inside his pants and Victor wasn't pulling away.

He pulled Victor's erection out of his jeans and said, "This won't take long."

Then he pulled down his own pants and kneeled on the floor.

Older Carl watched them both and smiled. He remembered that the best part about having sex with Victor was that Victor always climaxed for him with little effort.

Victor closed his eyes and spread his legs. When his solid dick was in front of young Carl's face, young Carl opened his mouth and sucked the entire shaft to the back of his throat. His lips protruded and his cheeks indented. He pressed his tongue flat against the thick vein on the bottom of Victor's shaft and started to move his head back and forth. He sucked hard; his head moved fast. While he was sucking Victor off, he grabbed his own penis and started jerking it.

He grabbed young Carl's head, placing both palms over his ears and pressing hard, bucking his hips at the same time. He rammed his penis into young Carl's mouth the same way he'd banged it into his body the night before. His pubic hairs brushed against young Carl's nose; his large balls smacked into young Carl's wet chin.

Older Carl watched; he remembered that blow job well. It had only taken a few minutes to get Victor off. Carl had felt the head of Victor's penis swell; he'd tasted Victor's tangy pre-come. While he watched them, he folded his arms across his chest and pursed his lips.

When Victor finally grunted and said, "I'm close," young Carl started jerking his own penis with more intensity. And when Victor finally exploded, his climax was so powerful that young Carl's head jerked. Older Carl knew younger Carl felt his come splash against the back of his throat. Older Carl remembered how Victor's come had tickled the inside of his mouth and how he'd had to gulp it down fast so he wouldn't cough or gag. He'd never tasted come as sweet as Victor's, and that was the last time he would ever taste it.

While young Carl was still sucking the last sweet drops of Victor's love, he came a second later. He erupted all over Donna's threadbare carpet, with his cheeks still indented and his tongue still pressed against the bottom of Victor's shaft.

Then Victor stepped back and his dick slipped out of young Carl's mouth. Victor looked down at him and smiled. He ran his hand through young Carl's hair and said, "Your lips are all puffy and red. You look like you just finished sucking my dick. And there's come dripping from the corner of your mouth." His eyebrows went up and down fast. "I like that."

Young Carl looked into his soft eyes and smiled, then stuck out his tongue and slowly licked the corner of his mouth clean. "Is that better?" he asked.

Victor lifted his shrinking penis and rubbed the head across young Carl's puffy lips. "You look beautiful just like that, on your knees in front of me. I love you so much." Then he shoved his dick back into his jeans, adjusted his balls, and pulled his zipper up.

Young Carl stood and pulled up his pants. Victor straightened his long legs and smoothed the front of his sweater. Victor was about to hug him, but the door opened wide and Donna walked into the apartment with a small brown bag in her hand. She smiled at them both and said, "I'm so glad you guys made up." Then she patted Victor on the arm and said, "I don't think I would have been able to deal with Carl if you hadn't."

Victor ignored her. He looked into young Carl's eyes and said. "Are you okay?"

"I'm good," Carl said. "You'd better get moving. You'll miss your flight." He
was lying. He was ready to crumble into a million different pieces.

Older Carl remembered this well. His stomach had been in knots, his legs had been ready to buckle, and his heart had been beating so fast he wasn't sure he'd be able to catch his breath. But he didn't want Victor to think he was weak and desperate. He'd known he couldn't change Victor's mind and he'd wanted Victor to remember a good experience instead of a bad, self-indulgent scene in a cheesy college apartment.

Victor smiled and gave him a hug. He whispered, "I love you," into his ear. "Be strong. I'll be in touch soon. I promise."

When he was gone, young Carl took a deep breath. He clenched his fists and stood very still in the middle of the room. Donna placed the cream on the counter and tiled her head to the side. "What's wrong?" she asked. "You don't look good."

Tears streamed down his face; his legs started to quiver. She crossed to where he was standing and reached for his arm. "Come over and sit down," she said. "What happened between you two? You're a mess."

When he sat down on the sofa, he fell into her arms and sobbed with such violent jerks the entire sofa trembled. And when he stopped sobbing, he told her everything. He told her he was in love with Victor; he told her he was gay. He didn't go into details, but he told her about Victor's father catching them together and how he'd threatened to cut Victor off without a dime if Victor didn't go to Europe. Then he told her his life was over.

Older Carl stood over them and watched Donna's expression very carefully. When all this had happened, he'd been too emotional to notice her reaction. She held young Carl in her arms and caressed the back of his head. She told him it was all right, and that everything would work out for the best. Though she was in love with him, she didn't judge him for being gay, and she didn't question his love for Victor. And while younger Carl sobbed on her shoulder, gentle tears rolled down her face.

Carl turned to the Ghost and clenched his fists. "This is outright cruel," he said. "I want to leave. I'm over it. I want to go home, get into my bed, and shout Merry fucking Christmas to me." Before this night, he had no idea Donna had been in love with him. He'd been too in love with Victor to notice.

The Ghost of Christmas Past lifted the black glove and said, "We have more to do to and not much time."

Chapter Six

When Carl opened his eyes, he and the Ghost were standing near the corner of 95th Street and Riverside Drive. It was broad daylight, the sidewalk was slushy with wet snow, and Carl was still naked.

An older woman wearing a dark coat stepped out of an apartment building and said to her doorman, "I'll be gone for a few days. Have a good holiday, Ralph." Then she handed him an envelope and smiled. There was a small gold Christmas tree pin on her lapel.

Carl and the Ghost were only a few feet from the woman. "They still can't see me?" Carl asked the Ghost.

The Ghost nodded no.

Carl looked around to see if anything looked familiar. He rarely ever went to the Upper West Side, and when he did it was usually for an auction or estate sale. If the woman hadn't wished the doorman a happy holiday, Carl wouldn't have known it was Christmastime. There were no wreaths on the doors; there were no lit Christmas trees in the windows. He looked at the Ghost and shrugged his shoulders. "Why are we here? I don't know anyone on the Upper West Side. At least I don't think I do."

The Ghost turned and pointed toward Riverside Drive.

Carl looked beyond the heavy traffic flowing across Riverside Drive and saw a young woman walking a baby carriage in Riverside Park at the 95th Street entrance. At first, he didn't recognize the woman. But when he looked closer and saw her face, he

realized it was Donna Fratelli. Carl rubbed his jaw and said, "Why would Donna be here?

Did she move to New York?"

He had no idea as to what had become of Donna. The day after Victor Briarwood left for Europe, Carl packed his bags and left his hometown for good. He went back to college and slowly severed ties with everyone he'd ever known, including Donna. He did this on purpose; he didn't want anything to remind him of Victor. Carl and Donna corresponded for the first few weeks, with cards and letters. But when Carl didn't receive anything from Victor after the first month, he stopped eating, he grew reclusive, and all he wanted to do was sleep. He would have contacted Victor, but he had no way of knowing where he was. And he couldn't contact Victor's father.

When he finally started to feel better, he decided to put this dark part of his life behind him and focus on the future. Though he didn't wear a rainbow flag on his lapel, he didn't anymore hide the fact that he was gay. After the night he'd admitted his sexuality to Donna, he'd felt stronger. He looked people in the eye and defied them to screw around. He hooked up with guys for sex without feeling guilty. But the minute a man started to get serious, he drifted away from him. Carl even switched his major in college from business to art history. He focused on school and started collecting things. He bought pottery, collectible porcelain, and crystal objects at tag sales. Then he sold them for triple the price he'd paid at flea markets.

While he was learning how to buy and sell antiques, he discovered something interesting. Money made him smile. It never let him down, it wasn't difficult to obtain, and he could always depend on it. And that's where he focused all his energy.

After those first few weeks of correspondence with Donna, he stopped opening her letters. He stared at them for a few minutes, felt his stomach tighten, and then he threw them away, unread. And he never responded to her; he cut off all contact with his past and disappeared. Weeks without communication turned into months, and Donna's letters grew father apart, until they stopped coming altogether. In a year's time, he realized it was pointless to hold on to the past. He knew deep down that Victor was never going to contact him again, and he figured Donna was better off without someone like him complicating her life. He'd always just assumed she'd meet a man, get married, and start a family.

Carl left the Ghost on 95th Street and crossed Riverside Drive. He didn't have to worry about traffic; he ran across the street and right through the passing cars. When he reached the other side, Donna was standing on the sidewalk waiting for the traffic light to change. Her hair was still cut in the same pageboy style, her jeans were still too tight, and she was wearing a red wool jacket with a large round Christmas tree pin on the collar. The only thing different about her was the baby carriage.

The baby in the carriage started to cry. Donna leaned forward and said, "We'll be home in a minute, Carl. I promise, sweetie. Mommy knows you're hungry." Then she smoothed out the baby blanket and jiggled a set of keys over the baby's head.

When Carl looked up, the Ghost was standing next to him. Carl glared at the ghost and said, "Donna has a baby? And the baby's name is Carl?"

Then the baby's screams became louder. He clenched his small fists and started to kick. When Donna saw that the baby had kicked his cover sideways, she reached down and pulled the cover from his body to reposition it correctly so he wouldn't get a chill.

While she was shaking the cover, Carl looked into the carriage. He pressed his palm to his mouth and gasped. Donna's baby only had one leg.

Donna placed the small cover over the baby and said, "Now just calm down, Carl. I swear, sometimes you're just like your father was. You get all worked up over nothing and you don't know how to calm down." Then she leaned forward and kissed him on the nose. She smiled and said, "But you are the sweetest little thing I've ever seen."

"Is that my child?" Carl shouted to the Ghost, pointing at the baby carriage. He knew Donna couldn't hear him. Then he started counting the months. If he and Donna had conceived a child on Christmas Day, and this was one year later, then that child would be just about the same age as the baby in the carriage. And she'd named him Carl, too. Carl lifted his fists and shook them. "Tell me right now. Is this my child?"

While he was shaking his fists at the ghost, the traffic light changed and Donna crossed into the street. Carl turned to follow them. He wanted to know where she lived; he wanted to see the baby again. But when Donna reached the middle of the street, an older man carrying shopping bags filled with wrapped Christmas gifts grabbed the baby carriage. It all happened fast; Christmas packages flew up in the air and landed all over Riverside Drive. The man pulled the baby carriage away from Donna and ran toward the sidewalk as fast as he could. Before Donna even had a chance to scream for help, a speeding taxi cab, swerving and weaving from one side of the road to the other, smacked into her body.

Carl stood there watching all this, with his arms stretched out and his mouth wide open. Carl saw the taxi hit Donna from the side and there was nothing he could do; he watched her small body go up in the air and land sideways on the street. When the right

side of her head hit the pavement, her neck snapped, her tongue fell out of her mouth, and a thin line of blood trickled out of her left ear. Her eyes were open, as if she were still staring at the baby carriage on the other side of the street.

Then Carl looked across the street. The older man must have seen the taxi coming. He had just saved the baby's life and now he was standing on the corner rocking the baby carriage with one hand and holding his palm to his chest with the other.

The Ghost of Christmas Past lifted the black glove and said, "It's time to leave."

Carl gave him a look. "I can't leave now. What about Donna? What will happen to the baby? He's my son." He stepped back and extended both arms. He lifted his hand and shouted. "I'm not leaving them."

"It's time to leave," the Ghost repeated. Then the black glove went up and touched the side of Carl's face.

A moment later, Carl and the Ghost were standing in a dark parking lot. There was snow on the ground and Carl could hear the sound of traffic moving in the distance. He looked around to see if anything was familiar. On his left, there was a flat brick building surrounded by tall street lights. The inside of the building was a lit up and there was huge fake Christmas wreath on a large glass door. On his right, there was a long line of tractor-trailers and a few parked cars. He blinked a few times and took a deep breath. He recognized this place. It was a secluded highway rest stop not far from where he'd gone to college. After Victor left for Europe, Carl went to the rest stop for anonymous sex. The first time he went there was the Christmas after Victor's father caught them in the back seat of the car.

"What on Earth are we doing here?" Carl asked the Ghost. His voice was low and weak. He was still wondering about Donna and the baby named Carl.

The ghost pointed to a small car parked behind a large tractor-trailer. A young man in a black leather coat and heavy black boots got out of the car and slowly walked a few feet to a trash can in front of the truck's cab. The young man stood in front of the trash can, he sitated for a minute, then tossed a piece of paper into the can.

Carl took a few steps forward so he could get a better look at the young man.

When he was only a few feet away, he noticed the young man wasn't wearing pants. The black leather coat was belted at the waist and it stopped short at the tops of his legs. Carl looked at the young man's face and realized he was gazing at a younger version of his own face again. Then he remembered going to the truck stop that night, hoping to find a lover who could help get him through the most difficult Christmas of his life. He'd only worn black boots and a black leather coat. Beneath that coat, he was totally naked.

"I want to leave," Carl said. "I don't want to watch this." Normally, this wouldn't have bothered him. Carl had always practiced safe sex, he was an adult, and he'd never played games with the men he'd been with. Anonymous safe sex had comforted him in his darkest hours. But now that he knew about Donna and his son, watching all this made his stomach churn. Suddenly, the context of the entire scene had changed from casual, naughty fun to creepy and pathetic dysfunction. Carl felt sick to his stomach, and his knees were weak. While Donna had been lying in a morgue somewhere, and his son was in the custody of complete strangers, he'd been out cruising rest stops to have anonymous sex with truck drivers on Christmas Day.

Carl clenched his fists and shouted, "She should have told me she was going to have a baby. She should have driven to my school and told me everything. I'm not a mind reader. I had no idea." He also knew he should have answered her letters. Breaking all contact with her had been the worst mistake of his life. Donna had always been a proud, independent woman, and she never would have begged him for anything.

The Ghost pointed to the younger version of Carl. Young Carl stood in front of the truck and unfastened his belt. He opened the black leather coat and let it slide off his shoulders. The coat hit the sidewalk, and he was naked except for a pair of black boots that came up to his ankles. Young Carl slowly turned so his back was facing the truck. He leaned over the trash can, spread his legs, and arched his back.

After that, two tall men got out of the truck. They crossed to the trash can where young Carl was leaning. They were both in their early thirties. One was smoking a cigar and rubbing his crotch. He was wearing a red plaid shirt, loose jeans, and a red baseball cap. The other one had long black hair, a thin lanky body, and a long tattoo on his right forearm. They were both wearing wedding bands, and they were both staring at young Carl's smooth, naked ass.

The one in the baseball cap said, "Me and my buddy here been watching your little show from the truck." Then he stepped behind young Carl and ran his large, rough palm down young Carl's back. "Looks like you wanna give us both a little Christmas present tonight."

Young Carl stood up and leaned into the man's chest. While the man ran his rough hands up and down the sides of young Carl's naked body, young Carl lifted his

arms in the air and said, "Let's go into the cab. I'll give both of you a Christmas present you'll never forget."

The thin guy with the dark hair smiled. Then he reached for young Carl's arm and yanked him away from the guy wearing the baseball cap. "You gonna let me and my buddy take turns on you?" His voice was deep. He had a rough beard and it looked as he hadn't shaved in two or three days.

Young Carl's naked body went forward and he fell into the strong arms of the dark-haired guy. He put one hand on the guy's shoulder and grabbed his crotch with the other. He said, "Do you guys have condoms?"

The dark-haired guy nodded yes and slapped young Carl's ass a few times. "Extra-large, and I wanna go first."

While young Carl and the two men climbed into the truck, the Ghost pointed to the truck's cab and shook the black glove up and down.

Carl turned away from his younger image and said, "I want to leave now. I already had to live through this once. I don't want to do it again. I just want to go home now. I can't take much more."

The Ghost turned toward Carl and lifted the glove. "It's time to leave anyway."

Chapter Seven

"What are we doing here?" Carl asked. The Ghost was standing beside him. They were in the lobby of a low-rent high rise apartment building, but Carl wasn't sure exactly where. The walls were gray cinderblock, the floors had gray tiles, and the elevator doors were dark brown. Carl took a deep breath and rubbed his jaw. This looked like one of those buildings in places he saw on the six o'clock news, where people shot each other without thinking twice and gangs ruled the streets. Carl knew what it was like to be poor. He'd been the child of a single mother who'd worked as a housekeeper. But he'd never known this kind of poverty.

Two teenage boys loped past them. Their shoulders rocked and their heads went back and tipped to the side. Their jeans were so baggy and hung so low on their waists their boxer shorts were showing. One was taller than the other. The tall one had an earring in his nose and the shorter one had large diamond studs in both ears.

The taller one banged into the shorter one with his elbow and said, "I'll whip your fucking pussy ass today, man."

The shorter guy was carrying a basketball. "The fuck you will, man. I'll fuck you up." He bounced the ball on the gray floor a few times. The cracks and snaps echoed through the hollow hallway. Then he lifted his arms as if he were about to toss it through an invisible basketball hoop. When he lifted his arms, Carl noticed a small handgun hanging halfway out of his back pocket.

Carl stared at the Ghost and shook his index finger. "You'd better have a good reason for bringing me to a place like this. I'm a well respected man in my profession and I don't go near places like this. And frankly, I resent you subjecting me to this." He couldn't understand how he could possibly be associated with anyone in this building.

The Ghost touched Carl's shoulder. A second later, they were standing inside the living room of a small apartment, with white walls that were turning brown at the edges. In one corner of the room there were seven old televisions stacked together. They were all different sizes, and covered with so much dust you could write your name on the screens. Above the stack of old televisions, there was a long, cloudy window with Christmas balls attached to faded red ribbons. The ribbons had been fastened to the window with masking tape. One of the Christmas balls was cracked in half; another was coming loose from the ribbon and ready to fall to the floor. The entire room smelled of stale beer and cigarettes and there were huge piles of magazines and newspapers everywhere.

On the other side of the room, an overweight man was watching television in his undershirt and boxer shorts. He hadn't shaved his round face in a few days, salt-and-pepper stubble popped from his double chin, and his white undershirt was faded and stained. He crushed a cigarette in a plastic ashtray overflowing with butts and coughed without covering his mouth. He cleared his throat and swallowed back. Then he lifted a can of beer from the coffee table and took a long, hard gulp. He crushed the can in his palm and tossed it toward a trash can next to the sofa. It was already filled with so many other crushed beer cans it hit the top and bounced to the floor with a soft clink. The large

man looked down at the olive green rug and shrugged his shoulders, then rubbed his stomach and belched so loud his lips vibrated.

A middle-aged woman stepped out of a small kitchen and frowned. "That was real nice, Bucky. You're a real class act, you are. I can't wait to hear the grand finale." She was wearing a faded pink housecoat and blue vinyl mules. Her teeth were yellow and there was a large round mole above her lips on the right side of her face. She had thick ankles and stood with a permanent hunch. Her red hair was long in the back and there were two pink curlers fastened to the top of her head. She held a dishtowel in one hand and a can of tuna in the other.

"Ah, go fuck yourself, you dumb bitch," Bucky said. "You're not exactly the queen of England yourself. You haven't taken those curlers out of your hair in three days.

And it's Christmas Eve."

The woman slouched and rubbed her hip with the dishtowel. "We're almost out of cigarettes, Bucky. You'd better go get some. We won't be able to get anything around here tomorrow on Christmas Day." She had one of those high-pitched, irritating whines that went up at the end of each sentence.

"Why should I go?" he asked. "I was just getting ready to watch something on TV." He rubbed his stomach again and belched.

"I'm not dressed," she said. "And my hair is in rollers. By the time I get ready, the store will be closed."

Bucky laughed. "Yeah, like anyone cares what you look like."

She threw the dishtowel at him and shouted, "Your sister's ass, you pig."

Bucky ducked and the towel landed on the back of the sofa. He sat back and scratched his private parts. He shook his head and said, "Send the kid." Then he laughed and said, "This is one of the good things about having a foster kid."

The woman stared at Bucky for a moment and shook her head. Then she turned toward and narrow hallway and shouted, "Hey, Carl. Get out here right now. I want you to go to the store for me."

Carl's eyes opened wide. He turned to the Ghost and asked, "Did she say Carl?"

A minute later, a small boy limped into the living room. He looked to be about eight years old; he was small and thin. There were dark circles under his eyes, his face was gray, and he walked with a limp.

When he entered the room, the woman reached for her purse, pulled out a twenty-dollar bill, and said, "You need to go out and buy us cigarettes. We're almost out."

The boy frowned and looked down at his sneakers. "I hate buying cigarettes," he said. "They always look at me weird. They think I'm the one smoking."

Bucky reached for a magazine and slammed it on the surface of a table beside the sofa. He glared at the boy and shouted, "Don't you dare give us any lip. We give you a home and food. You should be thankful, you little shit. And when we ask you to do something for us, we expect you to do it, buddy. Now get your ass moving and get the fucking cigarettes like she asked." Then Bucky looked at his wife and shouted, "This one has to go back. He's nothing but trouble. No matter how many times I take the strap to him, he never listens."

Carl stared at the boy and shook his head. "Is this my son? Is this the baby with one leg I saw on Riverside Drive?" He pressed his hand to his forehead and closed his

eyes. The Ghost didn't have to answer him; it didn't matter. He already knew the boy was his. The kid had Donna's dark hair and Carl's strong chin.

Carl lifted his fists and clenched his teeth. He crossed the room and shouted at the woman, "You can't send a child for cigarettes. Are you insane? What kind of a person are you?" Then he looked down at the boy's arm. He had a long black-and-blue bruise from his wrist to his elbow. There was an open cut on his index finger that looked infected.

The woman reached for a tattered brown coat on the floor next to a pile of old shoes. She tossed the rag at the boy and said, "And don't spend any money on anything else. Get the cigarettes and bring me all the change. I know how much they cost."

Bucky slammed the magazine on the table again and shouted, "And if you don't, I'll get the strap out again tonight. Just like I did last night, when you thought I was asleep and I seen you in bed reading. Do you understand?"

The little boy frowned and nodded his head up and down very slowly. "Can I have something to eat when I get back? I'm hungry."

Bucky scratched his privates again and said, "She'll make you a tuna fish sandwich, *if* you're good."

Carl turned to the Ghost and said, "There has to be something we can do. I can't leave him here with these horrible people. This is no life for a child. Please, tell me we can help him." He'd never felt such an awful pull in his heart before. This was even worse than when Victor had left him. This was more painful to watch than anything that had ever happened to him in his entire life. He wanted to run up to the boy, scoop him up, and carry him away from these decrepit people.

The Ghost moaned, "There's nothing you can do. You've made choices in life, and these are the results."

"But I based my decisions on the information given to me at the time," Carl shouted. "If I'd known I had a child, I would have been there for him."

The Ghost pointed at him. "You could have known about him. You chose not to know about him when you threw away all the letters from his mother. Indirectly, you didn't actually base your decisions on the information given to you. You were too busy wallowing in bitterness and self-pity to care about important information."

When the little boy put the bruised arm through the coat sleeve, he pressed his lips together and made a face. He zipped the coat up halfway and crossed to the front door, leaning most of his weight on his right leg.

Bucky looked down at the boy's right foot and said, "Tie your shoe, too. You're already missing one leg, and the last thing I need is for you to break the good one. Or worse, have you break the fake leg. You're lucky to have that peg leg paid for by child services. I wish someone would give *me* something for free, is all I can say. I never got anything for *free*."

The boy stopped and turned to face Bucky. His eyebrows went up and he said, "I can't tie my shoe."

"Why not?"

"It's too tight. If I tie it my foot will hurt. I already have a blister."

The woman shook her head and said, "He must have outgrown his shoe. Those are the same shoes they sent him here with last year."

Bucky shook his head and sighed. He reached for another can of beer and said, "I'm telling you, this one is going back next month. He's turning out to be more trouble and more money than he's worth. And you can't just buy one shoe. You have to get two, so they match."

Carl lowered his head and glared at Bucky. Carl knew people with foster children received compensation. He should have been buying the kid shoes instead of buying beer and cigarettes for himself.

The little boy just stood there staring at Bucky with a blank expression. His lips were pressed together and his small fists were clenched. The sides of his face were moving, as if he were grinding his teeth to keep from talking.

Bucky looked at the boy and frowned. "What the fuck are you staring at, you little shit? Get the fuck out of here and get those cigarettes." He opened the beer and took a long swallow. Then he wiped his lips with the side of his hand and said, "And if you don't get back here in a half hour, I'm locking you in the closet again."

The little boy's eyes opened wide. He squared his small shoulders and lifted his chin. "I'll be back in twenty minutes. Please don't lock me in the closet again. I'm afraid of the dark. I'll do anything. Just don't lock me up again."

"They lock him up?" Carl said. "What kind of creatures are these people?"

The woman shook her head and went back into the kitchen. Bucky laughed and looked at his watch. "Then get moving, you stupid little shit. I'm going to time you. And if you're not back in twenty minutes, you'll spend Christmas in a locked closet."

Carl's eyebrows furrowed and his face contorted. "I'll flatten the fat son-of-abitch for this. How dare he treat my child this way?" Then he crossed toward Bucky, lifted his fist, and tried to swing at him. But his fist went right through Bucky's head, and Bucky just sat back and took another swallow of beer.

The little boy ran to the door and opened it. On his way out he shouted, "I'll be back in less then twenty minutes. I promise." His eyes were wide with fear and his voice trembled.

When the boy was gone, Bucky laughed and shouted to his wife, "You see how I do it? You have to put the fear of God into these little bastards. I'll break him if it's the last thing I ever do." He rubbed his large stomach and belched again. "The little peg leg will be back in fifteen minutes, I guarantee it."

The woman turned toward the kitchen. "Are we still going out to the bar tonight like we do every year? I have to get my hair ready if we are." She lifted her right palm and fluffed the back of her flat head.

"Sure we are," Bucky said. "It's Christmas Eve, and I'm going to tie a good one on tonight."

"What about the kid?" she asked. "I can't get anyone to watch him at this late notice. Maybe you'd better go alone and I'll just stay home this year."

Bucky waved. The flab under his arm swung back and forth. "I'll put him in the closet and lock the door. It's good for him. It'll make him stronger."

Carl put his head in his hands and moaned. "Can we go? I can't listen to this anymore. I could strangle this man with my bare hands."

Chapter Eight

When the mantel clock in the living room struck two, Carl rolled over on his stomach and pulled the bedcovers over his head. He touched the pillow with one hand and squeezed the sheet with the other. He wanted to feel the surroundings; he wanted to make sure he was actually in his own home and in his own bed. The last thing he remembered was standing in that awful apartment while Bucky laughed about locking the little boy in the closet so he could go out drinking on Christmas Eve.

He stretched his legs and yawned. Every muscle in his body ached. His dream about the Ghost of Christmas Past had seemed so real he couldn't get it out of his head. But Carl wasn't the type of man who believed in ghosts, so he closed his eyes and murmured, "It was just a silly dream. I'm over it."

When his head finally found a comfortable position on the pillow, he heard bells jingling near the bedroom window. It sounded like someone was down on the street, in front of his building, shaking those annoying silver Christmas bells he'd been hearing since Thanksgiving. He assumed that whoever it was would pass by and the sound would disappear.

But the bells didn't become gradually softer. They grew louder, until Carl was forced to curl into a fetal position and cover his ears with his hands.

While the bells jingled, a woman's voice shouted, "Merry Christmas, Carl Smite. Get out of that bed and stop wasting time. We have a lot to do." Her voice was smooth and easy, as if she'd been trained as an announcer for a late-night radio program.

Carl pulled the covers all the way over his head and shouted, "Go away, whoever you are. I'm not going anywhere. I need my sleep."

The woman stopped shaking the long strand of bells. She laughed and said, "You don't have a choice. Either you get out of bed right now, or I'll take matters into my own hands."

Carl took a deep breath and sighed, then pulled the cover down and leaned forward on his elbows. When he looked up, he saw an attractive middle-aged woman standing at the foot of this bed. Her red hair was large and puffy, pulled up like a Gibson girl with a carefully arranged elaborate cluster of French curls on top of her head. She wore large diamond earrings like crystal chandeliers. Her eyelashes were long, her lips bright red, and her eye makeup was stippled with tiny little sparkles that glistened from the street lights. She was wearing a red velvet coat over her hourglass figure, trimmed with thick white fur and a wide black belt cinched tightly at the waist.

Carl yawned and rubbed his eyes. "Who are you? Why are you here? And why do you keep ringing those infernal bells?"

She lifted her arm and shook the bells again, softer this time. "These are the Christmas Bells of Life, Love, and Hope," she said. "For people who love life and believe in hope, there isn't a sweeter sound in the universe."

"I've never heard of any bells like that," said Carl.

"You just haven't been listening, Carl."

"Well, I'm trying to sleep," he shouted. "Go ring your stupid bells somewhere else."

The woman smiled and lifted her right arm. Her fingernails were two inches long and coated in red lacquer. She shook the bells a few times and said, "I'm the Ghost of Christmas Present, my dear. My name is Helena. And I'm here to take you for a few Christmas visits. After all, it's the holiday season."

Carl sat up against the headboard. "I'm over it. I don't celebrate Christmas,

Helena, so I'm afraid you're wasting your time." Then he crossed his feet at the ankle and
folded his arms across his chest. The Ghost of Christmas Past had intimidated him. But
this frivolous woman with too much makeup and big hair standing at the foot of his bed
looked harmless.

Helena pursed her lips and lifted an eyebrow. She stared at Carl for a moment, with her tongue pressed to her cheek. She put one hand on her hip, lifted the Christmas bells with the other and started to shake them above her head.

At first Carl just watched, with his arms still over his chest. But as she continued to shake the bells, the sound grew more intense. A moment later, the bells were so loud he had to cover his ears, and his head began to throb and pulse. When a water glass on his nightstand shattered into a million pieces, he lifted his arms and shouted, "Stop. Please stop. I'll go with you. Just stop that racket." His lips were vibrating, and his legs were trembling. There was a pain so sharp across his forehead it felt as if his brain were ready to explode.

Helena lowered the bells and smiled. "Are you ready?"

Carl looked down at his body. "I'm not wearing anything. I'm stark naked. I want to get dressed first."

Helena smiled. "We don't have time. Where we are going you won't need clothes because no one can see you. And don't worry about me, my dear. I've seen plenty of naked men before. You don't have to be embarrassed." Then she reached out with her right hand and pulled the covers off his body. "Now get out of bed and take my hand."

Carl lifted his legs over the side of the bed and stood up fast. He looked down at his penis and frowned. He felt awkward about standing naked in front of a strange woman, even if he was gay and she was a ghost. When Carl's penis was soft, it was almost as long and thick as it was when it was erect. It was a good thing he never went to the beach, because it wasn't easy finding a bathing suit that didn't make him look obnoxious.

Helena lifted both eyebrows and said, "I must admit you certainly are a lucky, lucky young man."

Carl covered his penis with his right hand and said, "I thought you said you've seen plenty of naked men before." The way she stared between his legs made him blush.

She laughed. "I have," she said, "but most men don't look like *that* unless they are fully erect." She shook her head and smiled. She waved her arm and said, "Let's get moving. We don't have time to stand here discussing your ample appendage. Now take my hand."

Carl stepped toward her and placed his palm in hers. Now that he could see her in full length on the other side of the bed, he noticed the red coat was short. It stopped just below her private parts. And there was more white fur trim along the bottom of the coat. For a ghost, her shoes were surprisingly outrageous. They were sleek red velvet stilettos, with a two small puffs of white fur on each instep. He tilted his head to the side and took

a deep breath. "I can't believe I'm talking to a ghost who looks like a retired *Playboy* bunny dressed up for Christmas in drag."

She wrapped her small, warm fingers around his large hand and smiled. "I'll bet you'd look cute in these shoes, Carl," she camped. "Now close your eyes and be a good boy." Then she lifted her left arm, pointed her index finger toward the ceiling, and they disappeared.

When Carl opened his eyes again, he was walking down Seventh Avenue South in Greenwich Village. There was no one around and there wasn't much traffic in the street. The pavement was thick with brown slush and the sidewalks were covered with snow. Some sections had been shoveled; others hadn't been touched and looked to be eight inches deep. The sections that had been shoveled were already covered with three more inches of fresh snow. Carl was naked; his feet were bare. When an older man wearing a bulky fur hat passed by, Carl covered his private parts and said, "I do hope people can't see me. I don't want to wind up in jail tonight."

Helena was next to him. She laughed and said, "Don't worry, big boy. You can let it flop around. No one can see you." While she walked, the deep snow didn't affect her. Snowflakes slid off her red velvet stilettos without leaving wet stains, as if they were made of crystalline dust. She crossed through the snow quietly, without trudging or breathing too fast.

And just as it had been with the first ghost, Carl wasn't the least bit cold. The bottoms of his bare feet were warm, and he didn't have the urge to shove his hands under his arms. When a young woman in a long black coat passed by, Carl asked, "Why are we

here? I'm not that far from home." Carl's shop was only a few blocks away, on Bleecker Street.

Helena stopped at the corner of Christopher Street and pointed to a store. It was one of those news shops that sold everything from magazines to over-the-counter cold medicines. "You'll see why we're here soon enough, Carl. Now stop being so impatient and follow me."

They crossed Christopher Street and stepped into the news shop. There was an overweight man with gray hair sitting on a stool behind a tall counter, watching some kind of a Christmas special on a small television. The sound was low, but Carl could hear a choir singing *Silent Night*. Carl couldn't see much behind the counter, because there were tobacco displays on both side of the man. The tin can Christmas music coming from the television made Carl frown. He shook his head and said, "I'm so over all this. I feel as if this is the longest Christmas Eve of my life."

Before Helena could reply, a young man stepped into the shop. He walked with a limp, his head was down, and he was wearing a thin denim jacket. The young man stood in front of Helena and Carl for a second, looking back and forth to see if he was being watched.

And when the young man lifted his head to see what the clerk behind the counter was doing, Carl pressed his palm to his chest and said, "I know that kid. He was the nasty little guy who delivered Able's takeout order this afternoon. He didn't think I gave him a large enough tip, the snotty little bastard."

"Did you tip him?" Helena asked.

Carl squared his shoulders. "Of course not. No one ever tips *me*. Let him find out the hard way that people have to work for their money and it's not just handed to you frivolously. His father and mother should have taught him this fact of life years ago."

Then the young man coughed. The hollow sound that came from his chest was thick and crusty. He covered his mouth with one hand, pressed the other hand hard against his chest, and squinted with pain.

When the clerk behind the counter heard the cough, he looked up at the young man and opened his eyes wide. "That doesn't sound good, buddy," the clerk said.

The young man smiled and cleared his throat. "I'm just getting over a bad cold, is all," he said. "I'm fine."

"Are you looking for anything special?" the clerk asked.

The young man smiled again. "Nothing special. Just something to read." Then he turned and crossed to the back of the shop, trying hard not to limp too much. His face was pale, almost a watery shade of blue, and his lips were dry and cracked.

Carl frowned and gave Helena a look. "If you ask me, he shouldn't be wasting his money on silly magazines. He should be putting it into a bank account and saving for his future." Then he rubbed his jaw a few times and said, "I wonder if his parents know that he's out lurking in the streets this late on Christmas Eve."

"He doesn't have parents," Helena said. "He's on his own, and has been for a while now." Then she moved away from Carl and crossed to the back of the shop where the young man was looking through sports magazines.

Carl pressed his lips together and followed her. The young man was skimming the magazines as Carl and Helena stood by his side. There was a tall, thin paperback display

turnstile to the right of the magazine rack, and a shelf filled with over-the-counter cold and flu remedies on the right. The young man moved slowly to the right, pretending to read the magazine. He looked back to see if the clerk was still watching him. When he saw the clerk was watching TV, he reached for a bottle of cough medicine and turned it upside down. He looked at the price and frowned. Then he put it back on the shelf and reached for another cold remedy.

While Carl and Helena watched, the young man repeated this with about five or six more bottles of cold medicine. He'd turn them over, look at the prices, then put them back on the shelf and start all over again.

"He seems to have trouble making up his mind," Carl said. "I've always believed that indecision shows a lack of character." He looked at the young man and shook his head.

"Are you a blind man, Carl?" Helena asked. "Can't you see anything? It's not that he can't make up his mind. He's trying to see which one he can afford. And so far, they are all too expensive."

Finally, the young man reached for the first bottle of cough medicine he'd examined. He looked back and forth fast, then shoved the bottle into his baggy jeans and cleared his throat.

Carl pointed and said, "Did you see that? The little crook just stole that bottle of medicine. We should tell the clerk." He clenched his fists and frowned at the young man.

"Don't worry, Carl," Helena said. She pointed to a hidden surveillance camera above the magazine rack and said, "The clerk saw everything. He knows what happened."

"Good for him," Carl shouted. "If these kids think they can steal and get away with it, they won't stop. I'd be mortified if someone came into my shop and stole an antique."

Helena laughed right in Carl's face. "Kids don't steal *antiques*, Carl. Only greedy, mean adults do that. Like the chair in your front window with that horrible murdered zebra print. You stole that from the woman in Brooklyn. And from what I've been told, you stole a dollar just this afternoon."

Carl clenched his fists tighter. "That chair was a good bargain. I paid her one hundred dollars for it, fair and square. And the dollar bill was just an accident. I didn't plan that, so it's not officially stealing." Carl raised his right hand and ran his fingers across the white fur on Helena's coat. He smirked and said, "And I suppose this soft white fur is nowhere near as horrible as my murdered zebra skin."

Helena shook her head, tossed it back, and laughed. "This isn't real fur, you asshole. Nothing about me is real, Carl. I'm a ghost."

While Carl was still staring at the white fur, the young man picked up a small, inexpensive magazine and crossed to the counter. Carl and Helena followed him. When he reached the counter, he placed the magazine in front of the clerk and said, "I'll take this." Then he coughed again. This time it was such a deep, throaty cough he had to turn and bury his face in his elbow. His entire body shook and his eyes began to water.

When he regained control of his breathing, he reached into his back pocket and pulled out a wrinkled five-dollar bill. He handed it to the clerk and forced a smile.

"Here it comes," Carl said. "This is where the clerk is going to bust him for stealing the cough medicine." He started to rock back and forth on the balls of his feet.

But the clerk just smiled and sat back in his chair. He folded his arms across his chest and said, "Take the magazine, kid. It's on the house. Consider it a Christmas present."

Carl blinked twice and said, "I thought you said the clerk saw him steal the cough medicine."

Helena smiled. "He did see him do it. He's just not saying anything."

The young guy's head went up and he stared at the clerk. "Are you sure? I don't mind paying."

The clerk waved his hand. "Naw, kid. Just take it and leave. And take care of that cough, too. It doesn't sound good. You might want to go over to St. Vincent's and pay a visit to the emergency room."

The young guy rolled the magazine up and put it under his arm. As he turned to leave, he looked back at the clerk and said, "Merry Christmas, man."

The clerk smiled. "Merry Christmas to you, too, kid."

"Ah well," Carl said. "I guess because it's Christmas it's okay to steal. I think I'll go over to the Mercedes dealership and see if I can walk out with a free car tomorrow."

Chapter Nine

Carl and Helena followed the young guy out of the shop. The snowflakes were smaller now and visibility had worsened. The boy limped about six blocks through the heavy snow, hunched over with his head down and his hands in his pants pockets, and turned right into a dark alley. He leaned back into a brick wall and pulled the cough medicine out of his pants. He tore the box open and pulled out a plastic bottle filled with dark red liquid.

While he tried to remove the childproof cap, he started coughing again. He dropped the bottle into the snow, doubled over in pain, and coughed so hard he wound up on his knees. Then he sat down on the cold, snowy ground and rested his back against the hard brick wall. His face had grown even paler, his sneakers were soaked with wet snow, and there was a patch of snow on his head. When he reached for the medicine, his hands were shaking so much the bottle wobbled.

Carl frowned. He heard the echo of Christmas music and a group of voices in the distance. He figured someone was having a Christmas party in the neighborhood. Carl pointed to the young man and said, "He really should go to the emergency room. He's very sick. I doubt that cough medicine is going to help at all."

Helena sighed. "I'm glad to see that you have some feelings left, Carl."

"I'm not an idiot," Carl said. "I can see that the boy is seriously ill."

Then the young man stretched out his legs. When one leg went forward, his pant leg slid up and exposed a metal prosthesis. He took a deep breath and opened the cough

medicine. He lifted the bottle to his lips slowly, as if moving his arms was too painful to bear. When he took a long swallow and gulped, he started to cough again. Cough medicine sprayed from his mouth and landed on his thin denim jacket. The perimeter of his lips was coated with shiny red syrup. The bright red against his pale gray complexion made him look even sicker.

When he stopped coughing, he dropped the medicine in the snow without replacing the lid. It tipped on its side and red syrup spilled into the white snow. He rested his head back against the brick wall and closed his eyes. When he tried to take a deep breath, his chest heaved forward and his eyes squinted.

Carl stepped toward him and leaned over. "If he falls asleep like this, he'll die.

Why doesn't he just go to the emergency room?"

Helena put her hands on her hips and tilted her head. "Because he's still a minor, Carl. He's only fifteen years old. He's terrified to go to the emergency room because they'll have to report him. He ran away from the foster parents who abused him. Among many things, they beat him regularly with straps, they refused to buy him new shoes, and they kept him locked in dark closets for long periods of time throughout his childhood. He doesn't want to go back there. He's terrified. And he knows that if he does go back, they will only punish him even more for running away."

Carl turned fast. "There must be something we can do. He'll die like this. What about his real parents? Surely they can do *something*?"

"He never knew his biological father," Helena said. "And his mother was run over by a taxi when he was just a baby. This boy had no one in the world, and no one is going to miss him." Carl bent down to get a better look at the young man's face. His jaw was strong and square, his nose small and thin. Though his head had been shaved, there was an evident layer of dark brown hair sprouting from his scalp. Carl stared at his ears. They were small and delicate, just like Carl's own ears. Then he stared at the young man's fake leg.

He jumped up and jogged toward Helena. His heart was pounding and his chest was heaving. He grabbed her elbows and said, "This is my son, isn't it? He's the boy I saw in the dream, isn't he?" He shook her hard and shouted, "We can't let him stay here. We have to get help. He's going to die." Then he faced the boy and shouted, "I can't let him die. He's not all alone in the world."

Helena pulled her elbows out of his hands and shrugged her shoulders. "I'm sorry, Carl. There's nothing we can do for him. We aren't real. Ghosts don't get second chances like people who are alive." Then she reached for Carl's hand and squeezed it hard.

"I don't want to leave him here," Carl said. "I can't do it. He's my son." He tried to pull his hand out of hers, but she wouldn't let go. "Please don't do this. He'll die. I'll pay you. I'll give you any amount of money."

* * * *

The next thing Carl knew he was standing inside the hollow vestibule of an old building. It looked like a New York building, so he figured he was still in the city. Helena was standing by his side. It smelled like roasted turkey mixed with damp towels. The white walls were cracked and chipped and the black and white tiled floors were dull with age. When he leaned forward and looked into a large open room filled with people, he rubbed his chin and said, "The *last* place I want to be is at a Christmas party." Then he

tightened his lips and frowned. He heard the sound of Bruce Springsteen's jagged voice coming from muffled speakers, singing a hard rock version of an old Christmas carol. "Wait a minute," Carl said. "Wasn't this the same song I just heard in the alley?"

Helena nodded yes and shrugged her shoulders. "The alley is on the other side of this building."

Carl closed his eyes and groaned a few times. "My son is freezing to death in an alley next door. I'm not interested in watching a bunch of fools celebrate Christmas, Helena. I'm over it."

Helena tilted her head and smiled. "This isn't just any ordinary Christmas party, Carl. Your son was on his way here to get something to eat before he went into the alley to rest. Let's go inside." Then she smoothed down the front of her coat and stepped into the massive room alone. Her stilettos clicked against the hard tiles.

Carl rolled his eyes and followed her. He knew he didn't have a choice. He crossed through wide double doors and looked back and forth. The room appeared to be a large school gym set up with folding metal tables and chairs. The hardwood floors were scuffed and scratched, with faded paint lines that had once defined a basketball court. When he looked up, he saw old basketball hoops on both ends of the room. The nets were torn and hanging halfway from the hoops. The ceiling was so high every sound rose and echoed.

He gaped at the people sitting at the tables. He didn't know anyone. They were all different ages, sizes, and colors. No one appeared to have anything in common other than the fact that they were all there at the same time. The table to his immediate left had a man, a woman, and three small children at one end and a group of older men at the other.

The children had dirty faces and they were laughing, poking each other in the chest. And the table to his right had a group of teenage boys, an older man and woman, and three middle-aged men with scruffy beards. Everyone in the room was eating food from medium-sized white dinner plates. Some people raised their voices and shouted, others murmured quietly, and a few just sat still and stared at their food without saying a word.

Then Carl heard a familiar voice shout, "Over here, this table still hasn't been served." It was Able's voice, shouting to someone on the other side of the room.

Carl turned fast. Able was carrying a large round platter, walking fast and weaving in and out of other tables. Able moved toward Carl and pointed to another table full of people who hadn't been served their food yet. Carl turned and said to Helena, "There's my employee, Able Anderson."

Then Carl noticed another familiar face. The woman who owed the tearoom across the street from his antiques shop was carrying another large tray and she was crossing toward where Able was standing. Carl didn't know the woman well; he couldn't even recall her name. The first day she'd opened her shop she'd introduced herself to Carl, but Carl had only nodded and turned his head to answer the phone. When he hung up and saw she was still standing at his desk, he'd told her he didn't have time to chitchat. He'd never believed in getting too friendly with the other shop owners on the street. After all, they were all in competition with each other. If someone was out shopping, they could buy a bag of tea just as fast as an antique box.

A few months after the woman from the tearoom introduced herself to Carl, she started a huge commotion over the fact that Carl had placed a real baby giraffe skin in the front window of his shop. First, she tried talking to Carl in person and reasoning with him.

She asked him to remove the skin from the window so everyone on the street didn't have to look at it. She said it made her sick to her stomach to think of anyone killing an innocent baby giraffe for pleasure. It made her even sicker to think anyone would buy such a vulgar item. Carl laughed in her face and told her to get the hell out of his shop.

Then she tried to make him remove the giraffe skin with a signed petition from all the other shop owners on the street. Evidently, everyone in the neighborhood agreed with her that Carl's window display, with the large sign that read, "Baby Giraffe," was tasteless. But Carl called his lawyer and found out there was nothing she or anyone else could do about his window display. Her bleeding-heart, save-the-animals petition meant nothing. The baby giraffe had been killed more than a hundred years ago and it was an authentic antique. So Carl crossed to her shop, knocked on her door, and told her that if she didn't like looking at dead baby giraffes she should just turn her head in the other direction. Then he told her to go fuck herself and walked back to his own shop.

Now the tea woman rested the massive tray on top of a folding stand next to Able and said, "I hope we don't run out of turkey. I was just talking to the boss and he said if we get any more people tonight, there won't be enough to serve for dinner tomorrow." Her short blond hair was clumped together and sticking up in different sections. She was wearing a white apron with grease stains and bright red sneakers.

Able frowned and reached for a dinner plate on his tray. "I hope that doesn't happen. I hate to see anyone go hungry on Christmas." He moved fast. He set a plate of turkey, mashed potatoes, and string beans in front of an older woman with crooked fingers. There was no stuffing, no cranberry sauce, and no hot buttered roll. But the portion he served was large. The older woman looked up, smiled, and thanked him twice.

While Able was setting another plate in front of an older man, he turned to the woman who owned the tearoom and said, "I didn't think we'd be this crowded tonight. If I'd been allowed to get here sooner, everyone would have been served a lot sooner. But Mr. Smite wanted to keep the shop open as late as he could." He reached for another plate and said, "And we didn't have one customer all day. It was a complete waste of time."

Carl clenched his fists and shook them. "How dare he speak about me this way? I've been good to him. The man has no work ethic whatsoever. I should fire the lazy bastard on the spot, right now. It wasn't a complete waste of time. He finished the zebra chair on time so I could have it in the front window on Christmas Day."

Helena laughed in Carl's face. "You can't fire him now. He can't even see you."

Then she pointed to Able. He was serving dinners fast, moving his arms with such speed he could hardly catch his breath. "Carl, if Able is a lazy bastard, you sure could have fooled me. I've never seen a young man work so hard. He's not even getting paid to work here. It's a homeless shelter."

Carl folded his arms across his naked chest and said, "He has no right to talk about me that way to another shop owner. It's insubordinate and disloyal."

The woman who owned the tearoom gave Able a look. "I guess Mr. Smite doesn't care much about Christmas. This morning I waved to him and he just kept on walking as if I were invisible."

Able served the last dinner plate on the tray and said, "Don't take it personally, seriously. Old Mr. Smite doesn't care much for anything or anyone. It's just how he is,

I'm sorry to say. I tried to give him a small Christmas gift this afternoon, and he wouldn't even take it."

The tea woman rolled her eyes. "I can't imagine how awful it must be to be *him*. This is Christmas. It's the time to forgive and forget."

Able ran his fingers through his hair. "Don't get upset now," he said. "But I figured I'd better warn you about something. Mr. Smite put an antique chair covered in zebra skin in the front window this afternoon. You're not going to like it when you see it."

Carl folded his arms across his chest and smiled.

The tea woman stopped moving and stared at Able. "Not another one. I still get sick to my stomach when I think about the baby giraffe skin. I can't help wondering what this man has against harmless animals." She closed her eyes and shook her head. "I'm not going to think about Smite or his dead animals. I'm not going to let him ruin my Christmas."

Able shrugged his shoulders. "I warned him that he'd be upsetting the entire street again, and he didn't seem to care. You know, I think he wanted that chair in the window for Christmas. I've never met anyone who hated Christmas so much."

Carl raised his fist and shouted, "I don't care. I have to make a living, and that damn animal has been dead for years. If you don't like looking at it, then you can turn your backs."

Helena tapped Carl's arm and said, "Calm down, big boy. They can't hear you."

The tea shop woman frowned. "Well, I think Mr. Smite is nothing but a despicable monster. The man is evil."

"I am not evil," Carl shouted. "I'm just sensible, is all."

Able smiled. "C'mon now, he's not that bad. Mr. Smite has *some* good qualities. And it is Christmas. I hate saying mean things about anyone on Christmas Eve. Let's make a Christmas toast to Mr. Smite and get back to work. I just saw a few more people enter and they all look hungry."

There were a few glasses of water on Able's food tray. He lifted one glass and handed it to the tea woman, and then he took another glass for himself. When he lifted his glass and clicked it against hers, he smiled and said, "To Mr. Carl Smite: a very Merry Christmas and a happy and prosperous New Year."

The tea woman smiled and shouted, "To Mr. Smite! I feel better already."

Carl watched them make the toast with wide eyes. He took a quick breath and exhaled fast. He knew Helena was checking his expression. He didn't want to say anything aloud, but he couldn't understand why they would actually toast him. Able, especially, knew how much he hated anything to do with Christmas.

When they finished toasting Carl, Able said, "Let's go back and check with the boss. I want to know if we should start handing out smaller portions now."

They lifted their trays and crossed toward the kitchen. Helena nodded to Carl, and they followed Able and the tea woman to the back of the room. They walked into an industrial-style kitchen, with stainless steel counters and a long gas cook top. Pots and pans clamored, dishes clinked, and voices mumbled. One woman was preparing instant mashed potatoes in a large stainless steel pot. Her head bounced up and down while she stirred with a large wooden spoon. She whistled along with the Christmas music coming through the speakers. They followed Able and his friend past other volunteers who were

arranging food on clean plates. Arms and hands moved fast; everyone was smiling and having fun. Carl lifted his eyebrows and stared back and forth. He never would have imagined that Christmas Eve in a homeless shelter could make people smile so much.

Able and his friend crossed through the kitchen and into a small office. Carl and Helena followed them. When Able knocked on the door frame, he asked, "How are we doing, boss? Should we start serving smaller portions?"

There was a man with dark hair sitting at a gray metal desk. From the back, he looked to be in his mid-thirties. The chair was one of those old-fashioned swivel chairs on wheels, with a green vinyl seat and gray metal trim. His back was to Able and the woman, and he was sifting through a stack of papers on a shelf behind the desk. He set the papers down and arranged them into a neat pile. Then he pressed his palms on the arms of the chair and slowly turned to face them.

When the man behind the desk lifted his head, Carl opened his eyes as wide as they could go. He reached for the door frame with one hand and pressed the other to his throat. He stared at the man behind the desk and said, "It can't be. I must be seeing things. Is this some kind of a cruel joke?"

The man behind the desk smiled and said, "We're well stocked with side dishes, but we're running out of turkeys. It doesn't look good, Able. I've been trying to figure out how to get more for tomorrow. We have enough for tonight, but I don't know what tomorrow will bring. It's a good thing we made extra for tonight. But I was hoping to save the extra ones for tomorrow."

Able put his hands into his pockets and stared down at his shoes. "Can't we call some people for donations? We can't let people go hungry on Christmas Day. They depend on us, Mr. Briarwood."

"Able called him Mr. Briarwood," Carl said. He took a step forward. He glared at Helena. I heard him say it with my own ears." Then he stepped up next to the desk and leaned forward. "Victor, is that really you?" He patted his chest. "It's me, Carl."

Helena smiled. "He can't see you either, Carl."

Carl ignored the ghost and smiled for the first time since he'd entered the homeless shelter. Though there were a few lines at the corners of Victor's eyes, he hadn't changed at all. His straight dark hair was still thick and parted on the side, his face was still smooth and clean, and he still had a deep cleft in his strong, square chin. He was wearing a white dress shirt and jeans. The shirt was tailored to fit and the jeans were snug. From what Carl could see behind the desk, Victor still had the strong, muscular thighs of a football player and his chest was still bulging with hard muscle. He'd never been the pretty-boy, male model type. But he was still all man.

Hanging on the wall behind Victor's desk was a collection of presidential photographs. They were in small gold frames, and all the presidents were there, ending with Barack Obama. Carl smiled again. Victor had been collecting these photographs since he'd been a teenager. He'd always been extremely patriotic, with complete love and trust for the office of the president, and absolutely bipartisan.

The casual expression on Victor's handsome face hadn't changed either. It looked as if he were ready to lift his arms and catch a football. Carl's stomach jumped and his

heart started to beat faster. He wanted to sit down on Victor's lap and wrap his arms around his shoulders.

Victor stared at the wall in front of the desk; he didn't look at Able or the tea woman once. He slid the chair back and said, "I'm going up front to get my coat. I left my cell phone in my pocket and I have a few contacts in my phone I can call. Maybe I can come up with someone willing to donate some money at the last minute. If not, I'll figure something out. I'll call the market and charge the turkeys to my own credit card if I have to."

Able threw out his right arm. "Don't get up, Mr. Briarwood. I'll go get the phone. What does your coat look like?" He seemed almost too eager to help Victor.

Victor smiled. "I can get it myself, Able. I know my way around this place better than my own apartment." Then he stood up and reached for a thin, white folding cane.

When the white cane was in his right hand, he tapped the floor, then tapped the side of the desk, and took three steps forward.

Able and the tea woman leaned into the wall so they wouldn't be in his way. Able stared at Victor's feet and said, "We'll walk out to the kitchen with you, Mr. Briarwood.

I'm sure there are more dinners ready to serve now and we're shorthanded as it is."

Carl watched Victor slowly navigate his way around the small office. His head was high and his eyes focused straight ahead. Carl knew white canes were used by people with vision problems. He slumped forward and said, "He's blind." Carl's voice trailed off.

"I'm afraid so, Carl," Helena said, smiling and tilting her head.

"I was so focused on seeing him again after all these years I didn't even notice.

When did it happen?" He watched Victor leave the room. Victor stood straight, without

wavering, creating the illusion that it was all so simple. Even without his sight, Victor was still the strongest man Carl had ever known.

Helena ran her fingers down Carl's arm and sighed. "When Victor arrived in England more than fifteen years ago, he rented a small car at the airport so he could drive to his new school. It was a small university, affiliated with a school here in the United States, in Wroxton, England. Victor had never driven on the left side of the road. It was a dark, rainy night; Victor missed a turn and wound up driving off a cliff. He almost died and was in a coma for more than six months. When he regained consciousness, he was blind. He blamed his father for everything, and never spoke to him again. He gave up his father's money and his inheritance and never went back to Briarwood Manor."

"Why didn't he contact me?" Carl asked. "He knew I was in school. I would have gone to England. I would have gone anywhere for him."

Helena shrugged her shoulders. "In the beginning, he was both bitter and helpless. He didn't want you to see him like that. He didn't want to be a burden to anyone. It took him years to learn how to live as a self-sufficient blind man. First he remained in England and learned how to live with his disability. Then he moved to San Francisco and got a degree in social work. By the time he was ready to contact you, you had dropped off the face of the Earth. He tried contacting Donna Fratelli, but she was dead by then. You had moved to New York and had started working for Marty Keller." Then Helena sighed and patted his arm. "When you decided you didn't want contact with anyone from the past, Carl, you cut everyone off and made it impossible for anyone to contact you."

Carl lowered his head to the floor. "So that's why he never wrote. That's why I never heard from him again." He sat down on one of the office chairs and put his head in

his hands. All those years he'd spent feeling sorry for himself had just exploded in his face. He'd never even considered the idea that Victor could have been hurt.

A moment later, Carl stood up and ran into the dining room. He wanted to see Victor again. He didn't care if he was blind.

He was still in love with him.

Victor stood with a group of people near one of the speakers. They were singing the same Christmas song that the pianist had been playing the last Christmas Eve that Carl and Victor had spent together. It had been the last song they'd heard before they went outside to make love in the back seat of Mr. Briarwood's old car. Victor had called it their "Christmas Love Song."

The people around Victor were laughing and swaying back and forth. Able's mouth opened wide and his deep voice rose above the others. Victor's lips were moving and he was singing along with them. But he wasn't laughing and his body wasn't animated. While the song filtered and echoed through the room, there was a heart-rending smile on Victor's face, and one small tear rolling gently down his right cheek.

Carl stood there watching his lost love sing. He couldn't stop thinking about how different his life would have been if he hadn't become so bitter as such an early age. He wanted to put his arms around Victor, but he couldn't. He wanted to hold him and guide him through the rest of his life with his eyes. But all he could do now was watch from a distance. He sniffed back a few times and swallowed hard. He didn't even know there was a tear sliding down his cheek until it hit his bare shoulder.

Helena walked up to his side and said, "It's time to go now, Carl."

Carl shook his head. "If I fought you and insisted on staying, would it matter?"

She squared her shoulders and reached for his arm. "I'm afraid not, Carl. Let's go." She squeezed his arm. "But don't be sad for Victor, or anyone else in this room.

They may not have money and power like you, but they are all happy tonight."

He faced her squarely and lifted his chin. He asked, "Then why is Victor crying?" She shrugged. "Maybe he's remembering the past."

Chapter Ten

After they left the homeless shelter, Helena brought Carl home. But she didn't bring him to his bedroom so he could go back to sleep.

When Carl opened his eyes and saw it was morning, he frowned and said, "I don't understand. You're supposed to be the Ghost of Christmas Present. I don't celebrate Christmas. Why on Earth would we come back here to watch *me*?"

Helena laughed and pointed to the bed. "This year you will celebrate, trust me," she said.

Carl focused on the bed, where he saw the image of his own body. Standing in the shadows and looking at himself this way felt weird, almost sinister. He was on his back with the covers pulled up to his chin, sound asleep. Carl shrugged his shoulders and said, "I'll probably just sleep later than usual, then go down to the shop and reorganize a few shelves. There's always something to do down there."

While Helena folded her arms across her chest and smiled, Carl heard loud knocks coming from downstairs. He looked at the bed to see how his image would react to someone pounding on his door so early in the morning. The image of Carl that was sleeping in the bed bolted forward and rubbed his eyes. Then he climbed out of bed, crossed the room, and opened the window. "Why are you knocking on my door? The shop is closed."

Invisible Carl raised his eyebrows and crossed to the other window. He looked down and saw an older man in a dark suit looking up. There was a black SUV limousine parked at the curb. The back door was open and there was a driver standing next to it.

The man in the dark suit shouted, "I want to buy that chair in the window. The one with the zebra skin upholstery. I'll pay full price, too."

Invisible Carl looked at Helena and said, "I'm shocked. This has never happened before. No one has ever knocked on the door, on Christmas morning, begging to buy anything."

Helena laughed. "I told you, Carl. This year you do celebrate Christmas."

The image of Carl shouted, "I'll be right down. I'll open the shop for you. Just give me a minute to get dressed."

Invisible Carl watched all this with an amused expression. He saw his own image close the window and run for his clothes. His penis was semi-erect. It bounced and flopped while he put on his pants. When he fastened his pants, he had to force his penis in and pack it down with his other hand so it wouldn't get caught in the zipper. He put on his socks and shoes in record time. He buttoned his shirt so fast he knocked a lamp off the dresser with his elbow. And in less than three minutes, he was pulling his tweed jacket over his shoulders while running down the staircase to open the shop for the customer.

Invisible Carl smiled at Helena. "I had no idea I could get dressed so quickly."

Then he asked, "Are we going to go down to see what happens? I'm curious to see if I actually do sell that chair. I knew I'd sell it eventually. But I never dreamed I'd sell it in one night."

Helena reached for his hand. A moment later, they were standing in Carl's shop and he was watching his image slide a platinum credit card through the machine. While the man in the dark suit waited to sign the receipt, the driver pulled the zebra skin chair out of the front window and packed it into the back of the SUV limousine.

While invisible Carl watched all this, he pressed his palms to his cheeks and stared in amazement. He kept saying to Helena, "I can't believe it. I didn't even get a chance to torture the woman who owns the tearoom. I wanted her to at least see the chair in the window for a few weeks. Nothing like this has ever happened before. Marty Keller would have had a heart attack and dropped dead on the spot."

Then Carl watched his image hand the man the receipt from the processed sale. He leaned over and read the receipt. The man had paid full price: twenty thousand dollars, plus tax. He signed the receipt, smiled, and said, "Thank you for opening the store like this on Christmas Day. I'm not fond of dead animal skins myself. Frankly, I don't even like looking at them. But I'm giving this chair to someone who collects these things and he'll be thrilled."

The image of Carl smiled and shook the man's hand. "Thank you, sir. I appreciate your business. Please come back again soon. My merchandise is always changing." Then he smiled and said, "And have a very Merry, Merry Christmas."

Invisible Carl laughed. "Look at me go," he said. "I'm so happy about selling that chair I'm wishing him a Merry Christmas, too. I haven't wished anyone a Merry Christmas in years." Carl bent down to look at his image's crotch. "I can't see anything. But I'll bet I have an erection."

Helena smiled and said, "Take my hand, Carl. It's not over yet."

In seconds, they were out of Carl's shop and standing in the dark hallway of a place that Carl knew all too well. He didn't want to be there; his stomach began to rumble and turn. The walls were painted black and the floors were brown tiles. The only sounds he heard were deep whispers and shuffles, and the air smelled thick and musty. This was the regular bathhouse that Carl frequented whenever he was tired of masturbating alone in his bedroom. He met men there for casual sex that required no emotional investment whatsoever. He didn't go there often. But he always went on Christmas Day because there was nothing better to do. And for some reason he couldn't explain, he went there whenever he sold a large, expensive piece of merchandise.

Helena was standing beside him. Her bright red coat with white fur trim popped from the shadows. Carl lowered his eyebrows and said, "I don't see what this place has to do with anything."

"This is how you usually spend Christmas Day, Carl," she said. "And it wouldn't be complete if we didn't visit this place, too. You were especially excited to come here after you sold the chair this morning."

Carl lowered his head and sighed. "Very well," he said. "I really don't care. I'm over it."

When he lifted his head a minute later, he saw his image walking down the hallway. He watched his body move into a dark, narrow doorway next to Helena.

Helena said, "Let go inside, Carl."

Carl followed her into the room. There was a chair, a long narrow table, and a short dresser. A small lamp on top of the dresser created enough light to see things

clearly. There was a stack of dingy towels on the chair. Above the chair, there were two metal hooks. Carl folded his arms across his chest and leaned into a dark corner.

The image of Carl removed his clothes slowly, casually. He hung them neatly on the hooks above the chair and wrapped one of the towels around the lower half of his naked body. Then he climbed up on the long, narrow table and stretched out on his stomach. He rested the left side of his face on his hands and closed his eyes.

Helena turned to invisible Carl and said, "You are bold, Carl. I have to say that.

This place isn't exactly what I'd consider safe."

Carl made a face and said, "It's just a cruise spot. It's perfectly safe. I don't even know why we're here. This is ridiculous. If you wanted to embarrass me, you've succeeded."

A few minutes later, a young man in his early twenties stopped in the doorway. He was wearing baggy jeans, black boots, and a gray hooded sweatshirt. The hood was over his head; his eyebrows were thick and dark and his facial features were strong and pointy. When he saw Carl lying on the table stark naked, he shoved his large hands into his pockets and licked his lips.

Invisible Carl, standing in the corner, took a quick breath and frowned. And the image of Carl on the table opened his eyes and slowly removed the towel from his naked body. He dropped the towel on the floor and smiled at the young guy. He stared at him with glazed eyes. Then he spread his legs wider, arched his back, and said, "Why don't you come inside?"

The young guy pulled his hands out of his pockets and crossed into the room.

While he was walking, he lowered his zipper and yanked out a long, thick penis and low-

hanging testicles. The uncircumcised head was covered with smooth skin. His dark balls had wiry black hair. The young guy went to the head of the long table and stood in front of Carl's face. He lifted his thick penis, leaned back slightly, and waved a floppy, semi-erection back and forth.

When the image of Carl on the table opened his mouth, invisible Carl in the corner shouted, "I want to leave. I get the point, Helena." Then he stormed out of the room and waited for her in the hallway.

Helena followed him. "It's not very romantic, is it, Carl? There's no love here." Carl shrugged his shoulders. "It is what it is. I have needs."

Helena frowned and reached for his hand. "I'm not here to judge you, Carl. We have one more stop. Then my time with you is finished."

* * * *

Helena brought Carl back to the homeless shelter. This time it was Christmas afternoon and everyone was preparing food in the kitchen. Able and the tearoom woman were washing turkeys and preparing them to be roasted. Able pulled the insides out of the turkey he was cleaning and said, "I wonder how Mr. Briarwood paid for all the new food that was delivered. I know we were out of funds."

The tearoom woman shrugged her shoulders and inserted her right hand into the dark cavity of a turkey. "I don't know and I'm not going to ask," she said. "I'm just glad there will be enough food for everyone today." While she rinsed the inside of the turkey, she said, "By the way, Able. I walked by the shop this morning and I didn't see anything in the front window. I thought you said there was a chair there with a zebra skin. I was holding my breath. But when I looked at the window, it was empty."

"The chair was there last night," said Able, shrugging his shoulders. "Maybe old Mr. Smite had a change of heart and placed it in the back of the store."

Carl smiled at them and said, "Sorry, guys," he said. "I didn't have a change of heart and I didn't hide the chair. I sold it for more money than you'll both ever see at one time."

Helena ignored Carl's comment. She turned away from Able and the young woman and crossed back to Victor's office. Carl followed her without saying a word, bracing himself because he was about to see Victor again.

On that Christmas Day, Victor was wearing a black turtleneck sweater, comfortable beige slacks, and a long black scarf. His clothes were crisp and fresh and his hair was neatly styled. But the scarf was old and worn. There were knobby little balls and the edges were frayed. It looked as if he'd pulled it out of the trash that morning on his way to the shelter. Carl walked up to the edge of Victor's desk and turned his head sideways. He looked down at the scarf and gulped. He knew it was the same scarf he'd given to Victor the night they'd made love in the back seat of his father's car. There was a small red tag on the bottom of the scarf that had been there the day Carl had purchased it.

While Carl was gazing at the scarf, Able knocked on the office door and said, "Can I speak to you for a moment, Mr. Briarwood?"

Victor smiled. "Sure, Able. Come in." He adjusted his chair and stood so he could shake Able's hand. "Merry Christmas. How is everything going in the kitchen?"

Able shook Victor's hand and wished him a Merry Christmas. "Everything's great, Mr. Briarwood. But how on Earth did you pay for all the food that was delivered this morning?"

Victor sat behind his desk and folded his hands on his lap. "I paid for it myself. I maxed out my last credit card, but it was worth it."

Able frowned. "I'm sorry, Mr. Briarwood. I hope you can get that money back."

Victor waved his hand. "This isn't the first time I've paid for something out of my own pocket for a shelter, Able. I did it a few times in San Francisco, too. I'll survive. It's only money."

Carl's lips went down. He shifted his eyes to Helena and said, "What happened to all the Briarwood money? How on Earth could someone so wealthy have maxed out his last credit card?"

Helena gave him a look. "I told you, Carl. Victor was cut off from his father's money and his entire family after the accident. And it was by his choice. He's spent his life working in nonprofit shelters just like this one. He only makes enough money to survive. He's devoted his entire life to helping the homeless. He's not a wealthy man, but he's loved and respected by everyone. He's a very rich man in many ways."

"I see," Carl said. Suddenly, it felt as if something warm had passed through his body, but he didn't want to mention this to Helena.

Then the young woman who owned the tearoom came running into the office. She practically slid into Victor's desk. She shouted, "Call 911. One of the volunteers was taking out the trash and found a kid outside in the snow. He's in bad shape. It doesn't look good."

Carl shouted and shook his fists. "It's my son. Do something to save him."

Able reached for the phone on Victor's desk and dialed 911. He told them the address of the shelter and said he'd be waiting for them out on the street. Then Able grabbed Victor's arm and guided him to the back door in the kitchen. The tea woman followed, stopping in the kitchen pantry to get a few blankets and a bottle of water.

Carl ran after them. He stood next to the trash cans, with Helena by his side, watching while they covered his son with blankets. They tried to get him to drink water, but he wasn't conscious. His skin was almost blue; they said his body was ice cold.

When Victor pressed two fingers to the boy's throat, he waited for a few seconds, then said, "He's still alive. But just barely. Let's get him inside until the paramedics get here."

They carried him into the shelter and laid him out on one of the folding tables in the gym. The table was next to a fake Christmas tree with handmade ornaments and chains made out of construction paper. Then they covered him with another blanket and tried to get him to drink water again.

By the time the paramedics arrived and took his vital signs, it was too late. A tall man with a stethoscope listened for a heartbeat and said, "I'm afraid he's gone."

Carl shook his head back and forth with slow, steady turns. He kept repeating, "No, no, no..."

Chapter Eleven

As the clock struck three, Carl was in his own bedroom murmuring "no." The covers were over his head and he was lying in the middle of the bed in a fetal position. He was somewhere in between a fuzzy dream state and reality, and he couldn't control all the thoughts running through his head.

At the end of the third chime, a soft, gentle voice spoke out. It came from the foot of his bed and caused Carl's feet to jump. "It's time to get up now, Mr. Smite," the voice said. "We have work to do and I don't like wasting time."

Carl remained still for a moment. The voice he heard was not familiar and the accent sounded British. He slowly lowered the covers to his waist and sat up. He rubbed his eyes and went forward, blinking a few times. In the shadows of the streetlight, there was a thin, older man standing at the foot of his bed. He was wearing a deep purple velvet suit; a fluffy white, ruffled shirt; and a gold lame scarf that had been fastened together at his neck with a thick gold ring. The gold ring was studded with flashy rhinestones; the ends of the scarf trailed to his waistline in two narrow points. And as if that wasn't enough, his white hair was piled up and haphazardly arranged beneath a large picture hat that matched the purple velvet suit. The hat was tilted to the side for a dramatic effect. He wore campy violet eye makeup, purple sparkled blush, and bright red lipstick.

When Carl dropped the cover to his waist, the older man in the purple suit looked down at Carl's half-naked body and raised an eyebrow. He pressed his fingertips to his

lips and said, "Not bad, Mr. Smite. Not bad at all, from what I can see. You have exceptional chest muscles, indeed."

Carl's eyes bugged and he pointed. "I know you," he said. "You're that famous gay guy who wrote the book they made into a documentary." He was so stunned he couldn't think of a name or a title. "And they made a movie about you."

The man smiled and waved his wrist. "Tonight I'm only the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, Mr. Smite. I'm just a guide, and nothing more. There is no fame where I come from. I've come to show you what will become of you." He smoothed out his scarf and fluffed the ruffles on his shirt. "But I am impressed that you know who I am. I was before your time, and sadly, there's an entire generation of gay men who don't know who I am."

Carl thought hard for a moment, then said, "You're Quentin Crisp."

"I was when I was alive," he said, rolling his eyes as if he didn't want to be bothered. "And if it makes things easier for you, Mr. Smite, by all means feel free to call me Mr. Crisp." Then he clapped his hands together fast and said, "Now stop wasting time, young man, and get out of bed."

"This is ridiculous," Carl said. "How can *you* be the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come? You're nothing like the other ghosts."

The Ghost smiled. "Stop being such a bore, Mr. Smite. I was, after all, born on December 25th. That alone should give me a certain amount of credibility. I may not be *Father* Christmas, but I assure you I'm quite capable of handling this task."

Carl took a deep breath and shrugged his shoulders. He didn't want to go anywhere; he'd already seen enough with the Ghost of Christmas Past and the Ghost of

Christmas Present. His eyelids were so heavy they ached, and his forehead pounded. But he knew it would have been futile to protest. So he removed the covers and lifted his legs to the side of the bed. When he stood up, he asked, "Can I put some clothes on first?"

The Ghost looked at Carl's well defined body and smiled. His head went up and down a few times, and then it stopped moving when his eyes reached Carl's private parts. He pressed his fingertips to his lips again and said, "There's no time for that, Mr. Smite. Don't be shy." He put his hands on his hips and said, "Now come over here and put your arm through mine so we can get on with this."

Carl stepped around the bed and crossed to where he was standing. The Ghost had long red fingernails and he was wearing gold lame high-heeled sandals to show off his red toenails. "I only had to touch the hands of the other ghosts," Carl said. "I didn't have to walk arm in arm with them."

The Ghost stomped his foot twice. "Well, as you can see, I'm not other ghosts, Mr. Smite. Now take my arm and we'll be off."

Carl clenched his teeth and looped his arm through the Ghost's arm. A moment later, they were downstairs in front of Carl's antiques shop. A fine mist of snow was falling and the streets and sidewalks were already white. Carl's eyes went back and forth; nothing looked familiar anymore. All the shops around him were different, and the passing cars were much smaller than any cars he'd ever seen. Carl pointed to the other side of the street, "Where's the tearoom? Why are all the shops different now?"

"This is what the street will look like, Mr. Smite, thirty years from now," the Ghost said. "The young woman who owned the tea room across the street is long out of

business and gone. Everything is different now." Then the Ghost pointed up to a sign over the door of Carl's shop.

Carl followed his thin arm. The sign over the door now read, "Able Anderson, LTD." It was larger than Carl's old sign, and the gold letters were more brilliant. Carl clenched his fists and shouted, "How did Able get *my* business?"

The Ghost titled his head slightly, then gave Carl one of his famous Quentin Crisp half smiles. "He got it the same way you got the business, Mr. Smite. You left it to him the same way that Mr. Keller left it to you: on your deathbed."

Carl gaped at the sign and rubbed his jaw. "Well, I'm not going inside. If Able now owns my business, I don't want to see it."

The Ghost stepped aside and smiled. "Nonsense, Mr. Smite. We've come a long way to see this. And you might like what you see. You never know." Then he motioned toward the door with his left arm. "Now, Mr. Smite, if you would be so kind as to follow me inside, we can get this over with faster."

Suddenly, Carl was curious to see what Able had done to his business. All the other shops on the street were decorated for Christmas with pine garland, red bows, and Christmas trees. The new clothing store where the tearoom used to be had a large white Christmas tree right in the front window. But Carl's shop only had a small gangly wreath hanging on the door. It looked as if Carl had hung it there himself. The front window display had an antique bench that had been covered with a real leopard skin. Carl stared at the animal skin and frowned. He knew Able hated animal skins, and he never would have anticipated seeing one in a business owned by Able. So he extended his right arm and said, "After you, Mr. Crisp."

The Ghost nodded and smiled. He stared at Carl's crotch, rolled his eyes, and said, "You're a gentleman, Mr. Smite." Then he crossed right through the door without opening it.

When Carl stepped through the thick glass door, he lifted his head and looked around the shop. There was nothing inside the shop that even hinted it was Christmastime. And though the merchandise was all different, the general layout of the shop was exactly the way Carl and Marty Keller had kept it. The walls were still dark red, and the floors were still covered with dark brown carpet. On the far left wall, Able had a similar elaborate display of oil paintings in heavy gold frames, just like Carl's. On the far right wall, Marty Keller's old glass display cases were still filled with antique porcelain. Even the desk where Carl had done all his business transactions was still in the back near the storage room. Of course it was a different desk, but it was in the same place and tilted slightly on the same angle.

Carl's eyes darted back and forth. "I didn't expect this," he said.

The Ghost raised his chin. "You haven't seen anything yet, Mr. Smite."

A moment later, Able Anderson walked out of the storage room. He looked almost the same, but there were lines on his face and streaks of silver in his hair. He was wearing a black leather sport jacket, a white turtleneck sweater, and olive green slacks. There was a long, woolen scarf around his neck just like Carl used to wear. He was shuffling through a stack of papers on the desk. His eyebrows were down and his lips were pressed together. When he couldn't find what he was looking for, he closed his eyes, clenched his fists, and shouted, "Leonard, get in here this minute, damn it! I can't find the papers for that antique quilt I just bought at that estate sale. It was the best bargain I've

ever seen. I only paid that stupid widow fifty dollars for a quilt that can be sold to a collector for more than fifty thousand. But I need the papers. Otherwise I'll have to pay another appraiser."

Carl smiled at the Ghost. "Interesting," he said. "Able took advantage of a poor helpless widow? I didn't think the poor bastard had it in him. I'd always thought he was worthless as a businessman."

The Ghost squared his shoulders and gazed into Carl's eyes. "Ah well, Mr. Smite, you taught young Able everything he knows. You taught him well, too."

When an attractive young man with reddish-blond hair and tight jeans appeared in the storage room doorway, Carl stopped smiling. The man was wearing a heavy coat and gloves without fingertips. Evidently, Able didn't turn up the heat either. He slowly crossed to Able's desk, leaned forward, and said, "Did you want something, Mr. Anderson? I was polishing that pie crust table with the bird cage and I couldn't hear you clearly."

Able lifted a thick book from the desk and slammed it down hard. The young man jumped back and Able shouted, "I can't find the fucking papers for that quilt. Do you know where they are?"

The young man stepped back and crossed to a file cabinet behind the desk. He opened the middle drawer, shuffled through a few files, and pulled out a few papers. He handed them to Able and said, "Here they are, Mr. Anderson. You told me to file them in a safe place, the other day."

Able gave Leonard a nasty look and ripped the papers from his hands. He skimmed over the writing and handed them back to him. "I was worried. Now put it back

where you found it, Leonard." Then he turned his back on Leonard and sat down behind his desk.

After Leonard re-filed the papers, he folded his hands together and asked, "Do you think I could get off early tonight, Mr. Anderson? It's Christmas Eve and I promised my grandmother I'd be home for dinner. She's in the final stages of cancer and the doctor says she only has a few weeks left to live. I wanted to be there with her for her last Christmas Eve."

Able didn't look up at him. He stared at a stack of papers on his desk and said, "Your grandmother will live until you get home, Leonard. Just because everyone else gets so obsessed with Christmas doesn't mean you have to. Christmas is just a waste of time. You'll get over it. I did. I learned that from my own boss, the former owner of this shop, Mr. Carl Smite. He was a mean, horrid man, with little feeling for anything but money, but he taught me the facts of life. And I'm glad I learned them at a young age." Able turned around and looked Leonard in the eye. "I've worked late every Christmas Eve for the last thirty years, Leonard."

Leonard frowned and stared down at his shoes. "But she's dying, Mr. Anderson.

Just this once and I'll make up the hours later this week. I promise I will. I'll even come in tomorrow, on Christmas Day, and work all afternoon it you like."

Able shook his head no. "You'll remain here and your grandmother will get over it. You'll thank me for this one day, Leonard. Now go back to the storage room and finish that pie crust table. I want that table ready to be displayed in the front window by the time we close tonight at eleven o'clock."

Carl eyes bugged. "Did he say eleven o'clock?"

The Ghost nodded. "Able believes he should keep the shop open even longer on Christmas Eve, in case anyone is out shopping for a last minute gift. You see, one year you sold a twenty-thousand-dollar chair on Christmas morning, and after that you started keeping the shop open later and later each year. Selling the chair was just a rare fluke. Nothing like that ever happened again. But you wanted to remain open just in case it did."

Carl sighed. "But the guy's grandmother is dying. Surely Able can let him leave early for that."

"You wouldn't let Able leave early to serve Christmas Eve dinner at the homeless shelter, Mr. Smite," the Ghost said.

"Come on," Carl said, folding his arms across his chest, "that's different. I probably would have let him go if his grandmother had been dying." He shook his fist at Able and said, "If I were Leonard, I'd just quit and I'd leave. I'd tell old Able to go fuck himself and get another job. Leonard has options. He can make his own choices in life."

The Ghost lowered his voice and said, "Don't be stupid, Mr. Smite. Leonard has a full-time job here doing what he loves to do most. He's an expert craftsman, and he's gifted at restoration and refinishing antiques. There aren't many full-time jobs out there for someone like Leonard. He's a young man from a poor background with no education. So he doesn't have many choices or, as you were stupid enough to state, 'options.' How smug of you. Unless he decides to go to work as a dishwasher in a restaurant, he's willing to put up with Able to keep his job. And Able knows this. Just like you knew it with Able, Mr. Smite."

Carl turned to the window and stretched out his arm. "But the snow is piling up in the street. There's no one out there and no one's coming in here to buy anything. Let the poor guy go home. It only stands to reason."

"You'd think so, wouldn't you, Mr. Smite?" the Ghost said. "But Able's only concern today is making money. You taught him very well, indeed."

Carl folded his arms across his chest and crossed to Able's desk. When he looked down, he saw Able was now counting change. He was packing nickels into small paper wrappers, two at a time. He pressed his palm to his chest. He turned back to the Ghost and asked, "How did I die?"

The Ghost laughed. "How do you think you died, Mr. Smite?" He crossed toward him and lowered his voice. "You made eye contact on the street with one of those rough trade guys you always loved so much in the bathhouses. He knew what you wanted. The guy followed you to a dark alley, beat you to a bloody pulp, robbed your money, and left you to die. By the time they found you, it was too late. You lingered in brutal, conscious pain for a few days, which was enough time for you to leave everything you owned to Able. You begged him to leave your name on the storefront just as Marty Keller had asked you to leave his name."

Carl took a quick breath and sighed. "And the sneaky son-of-a-bitch changed the sign anyway and put his name up there."

"He did it the day after you died," the Ghost said. "He knew you were dying and he had the sign made up ahead of time. But you can't blame him, Mr. Smite. You did the same thing to Mr. Keller."

Carl rubbed his jaw and smiled. "Yes, I did, didn't I?" Then he looked down again at Able counting the nickels. His stomach tightened and he felt a chill pass through his entire body. "Can we leave now? I've seen enough. You've made your point."

"But don't you want to see how Able spends Christmas Eve?" the Ghost asked.

"He lives upstairs now, just the way you did. He's even sleeping in your bed now, Mr.

Smite."

Carl reached for the Ghost's arm. He closed his eyes and said, "I already know how he's going to spend Christmas Eve. He'll be completely alone."

The Ghost shrugged his padded shoulders. "Very well, then, Mr. Smite."

Chapter Twelve

Carl and the Ghost appeared in a small studio apartment. Carl's body jerked and he rubbed his face hard with both hands. The apartment was not familiar to him. There was a long window with no shades or window treatments, a dark gray industrial carpet that was wearing thin, and faded white walls that had water stains in the corners. There was a small kitchenette on the left side of the room that was partially hidden by a tall bookcase. On the right side of the room, Carl noticed a black leather easy chair, a full-size bed, and a few side tables that didn't match. There was a small desk near the front door, with a table-sized artificial Christmas tree on one corner of the desktop and a stack of books on the other. A man with graying hair was sitting behind the desk in a small chair. His wide shoulders were straight and his back was facing Carl.

"This reminds me of my old flat in London," the Ghost said, crossing to a narrow door that led to a small bathroom. "The only thing that is different is that he has his own private bathroom. I had to share mine with someone in the next room. The flat was called a *bedsit*. You had one room and had to share the bathroom with someone." He took a deep breath and smiled. "I spent some memorable years there."

Carl looked down at his feet. He was about to cross to the other side of the apartment, but a large cockroach scurried across the carpet. His eyes opened wide and he shouted, "This place is disgusting. Did you see that roach? It was the size of a mouse."

The Ghost shrugged. "In New York buildings like this, you can't avoid these things. It's part of life."

Carl heard the sound of pots and dishes being pushed about in the kitchen. Then he heard a woman's voice. "I'm almost finished washing the dishes," she shouted. "I'll start cleaning up out there in a minute."

The man at the desk waved his right arm and said, "Don't worry about it, Joan.

It's Christmas Eve. You must have other things to do with your time. I hate to be such a bother."

The woman shouted in a cheerful tone, "You are not a bother. I like being with you."

Carl lowered his arms to his sides and stared at the man's back. His stomach pulled and his heart started to beat faster. "I'd know that voice anywhere," he said. "It's Victor Briarwood." He turned to the Ghost and asked, "What on Earth is he doing in place like this? What happened to his hair? And why isn't he down at his homeless shelter preparing Christmas Eve dinners?"

"Ah well, Mr. Smite," the Ghost said, "a great deal has changed in thirty years time. The homeless shelter was shut down years ago because of a lack of funding. And, oddly enough, there are even more homeless people now. Victor lives here alone. This is all he can afford on his small pension from the government. There are not many jobs out there for a blind man in his sixties, Mr. Smite."

When the Ghost stopped talking, Victor stood up from the desk and turned around. Carl pressed his palm to his chest and gasped. Though Victor's dark brown hair was almost gray, it was thick and straight. His athletic body was still strong and lean. There were a few lines around his mouth and his eyes, but his face hadn't aged much at all. If he'd dyed his hair black, he could have passed for a man in his forties. He was wearing a

red sweater, black slacks, and something around his neck. Carl walked up to Victor's side and smiled. Victor was still wearing the black scarf that Carl had given him.

Carl's eyes filled and he cleared his throat. "He still has that old scarf. It's more than forty years old. And he's still wearing it. I'm shocked that he'd keep it this long."

His voice was low, with a slight tremble.

The Ghost lifted his eyebrows. "It is shocking, Mr. Smite," he said. "You were actually one of the lucky ones. Victor never stopped loving you. You had that great dark man I wrote about a long time ago in my book and you took it all for granted. You had the very thing that most of us only dream about, Mr. Smite." The Ghost pointed at Victor and frowned. "If I had had a great dark man like Victor Briarwood, I would have followed him to the ends of the Earth."

Carl faced the ghost and tilted his head to the side. "I did not waste anything. I only had 'the great dark man' for a short time. And he was taken away from me."

"You could have followed him to England," the Ghost said.

Carl rubbed tears from his eyes. "I didn't think he wanted me to follow him."

The Ghost raised one eyebrow and said, "That's debatable. You chose to drift off and become the bitter man you are right now. You chose your life. Sometimes there are other options. But it takes creativity and great courage to pursue them."

Carl leaned forward and spread his arms. "But I wasn't aware of my options. I thought my life was over, so I learned how to survive without Victor. It wasn't easy."

"Such a shame, Mr. Smite. It's an awful shame."

Carl turned his back to the Ghost. Victor was crossing the room and heading toward the black leather easy chair. He moved slower now, and the steps he took were

well calculated so he wouldn't trip. When he was seated, he looked up with a blank stare and shouted, "I feel just terrible about taking you away from your family like this, Joan."

The wall behind Victor's chair had his collection of small presidential photos. Carl walked over to the wall and stared at them for a moment. He didn't recognize the current president, but one of the photos of a past president toward the end was vaguely familiar. It was a photo of an extremely old woman. She was wearing a pantsuit and holding a cane, standing on the White House steps. Her hair was white and her body was hunched forward, so you couldn't get a clear view of her face. Carl pressed his index finger to his bottom lip and leaned in for a closer look. He stared for a minute, and then said to the Ghost, "I see that America finally elected a woman for president. Who was she?"

The Ghost tossed his head back and laughed. "Hillary Clinton, of course. She never gave up."

While Carl was staring at the photo, the woman stepped out of the kitchen and frowned. She was in her fifties. She had a slight middle-age spread across her waist. She wore eyeglasses with dark frames on the end of her nose. "Don't be silly, Victor. I enjoy spending time with you. It reminds me of the old days, when we used to serve meals on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day in the homeless shelter. I'll be home in plenty of time to celebrate with my family." She was holding a dishtowel in one hand and a dented, scratched frying pan in the other. "I wish you'd come home with me."

"Thank you for the invitation," Victor said. "But I'm happy here. I have plenty of good books and I know my way around the neighborhood. I'm comfortable."

Carl stared at the woman for a moment, then he pointed and said, "That's the woman who owned the tearoom across the street from my shop. She's gained some weight, but I'd know her face anywhere."

"Yes," the Ghost said, "her name is Joan. She kept in touch with Victor all these years. She lives in Brooklyn now with her husband and two daughters. But she brings Victor groceries, cleans his clothes, and makes sure he's okay. She's usually here once or twice a week."

When Carl heard this, he smiled at her. He'd never even bothered to learn her name, and now he was thankful she was taking care of Victor in his senior years. It didn't look as if Victor had anyone else.

Victor smiled and rested his palms on his lap. "Guess who I ran into last week, Joan? Do you remember Able Anderson? He used to help out at the homeless shelter. I ran into him at the post office. I heard him speaking to the clerk and I recognized his voice. I never forget a voice."

"I haven't seen him in years," Joan said. "I think the last time I saw him was about thirty years ago, when we were serving Christmas dinners. He never came back after that year we found the boy in the alley. I lost touch when I closed the tearoom the same year. How is he doing?"

Victor continued to smile. "I'm not completely sure, Joan. I tried to talk to him, but he blew me off. He said it was good seeing me but he didn't have time to talk. He was on his way to an antiques auction or something, and he wasn't too happy about the long lines at the post office because of Christmas." Victor sighed and shook his head. "I'm

afraid he's not a huge fan of Christmas anymore. He told me he wished they'd just cancel the entire holiday and be done with it. He was so dark, impatient."

Joan took a deep breath and frowned. "I guess people change sometimes. Able sounds just like his old boss. I swear that Mr. Smite was the meanest, cheapest man I've ever met. When I owned my tearoom across the street from his antiques shop, I tried to be nice and get to know him. But he turned his back on me every single time. I didn't own the shop long, though. I fell and love, got married, and closed the shop."

Victor rubbed his jaw. He smiled and said, "Able's boss was named Mr. Smite? I didn't know that. Able never spoke about his boss when I knew him. He never discussed his work."

"And that's because Able's boss wasn't worth talking about," Joan said. "I never mentioned him either. He was an awful character. He hated all holidays, especially Christmas."

"I knew someone named Smite once," Victor said. "But it can't be the same man.

The Smite I knew was kind and friendly to everyone. He was the dearest human being

I've ever known. I lost touch with him years ago." Victor held the scarf in his palm and
added, "He gave me this scarf, Joan. It's the one thing I've never been able to part with. It
makes me feel good, especially around the Christmas holidays."

When Joan looked down and saw Victor holding his scarf, she smiled and said, "It's a beautiful scarf, too, Victor. I can see why you love it so much."

Carl lowered his eyes and sighed. Joan was just being kind. The old scarf around Victor's neck was hideous. It was frayed at the edges and there were small holes on the bottom. Carl wanted to put his arms around Victor and hold him as tight as he could.

Evidently, they had been within blocks of each other all those years and never even knew it. The feelings Carl was experiencing were both strange and wonderful. Though Victor was an older man now, Carl was still just as much in love with him as he'd been the last time they'd been together.

Joan turned toward the kitchen. "I'm going to finish up in here. Then I'll put your dinner in the oven and do a fast clean-up around the apartment. I don't think I've dusted in a couple of weeks. I can write my name on that desk."

Victor laughed. "I think it was Quentin Crisp who once said, 'After the first four years the dust doesn't get any worse.' I tend to agree with him. You don't have to go overboard today. I'm fine."

"Well, I'm still dusting anyway," Joan shouted from the kitchen. "And you don't have any say in the matter."

The Ghost smiled. "I'm starting to like your Victor more and more, Mr. Smite.

That was one of the many things I said while I was alive."

"It's nice that she cleans and cooks for him," Carl said. "I wish I'd been nicer to her." He wasn't paying attention to the small talk. He was more focused on making sure that someone was watching out for Victor.

"It's too late now, Mr. Smite," the Ghost said. "Are you ready to leave?"
"I just want to look at his face one more time," Carl said.

Carl walked over to the black chair and sat down on the wide arm. While Joan was in the kitchen putting away pots and pans, Victor sat there holding the tip of the black scarf. Carl stared at him and smiled. "I've never loved anyone else, Victor. You are the one and only man I've ever loved. I love you more now than I ever did." Then Carl

looked up at the Ghost. Carl's eyes were wet again and his voice trembled. "He really was my great dark man, wasn't he?"

The Ghost tapped Carl's shoulder. "It's time to go, Mr. Smite."

"I don't want to go," Carl cried. "I want to stay here and be with Victor. I've lost my son. I've lost everything that was ever important to me." Then he went down on his knees before the Ghost. He pressed his palms together and begged, "There has to be something you can do. Just leave me here. Make me old so I can be with him. I don't care about money anymore. I don't care about anything but taking care of Victor. He needs me. Please, please, can't you do something?" Then he looked up at Victor and whispered, "If I could just spend the rest of my life with you, everything would be fine."

The Ghost lowered his eyes and frowned. Then he rested his palm on Carl's shoulder and said, "I don't have that kind of power, Mr. Smite. I can't change your fate for you."

Carl tried begging again, but the next thing he knew he was kneeling in the snow. They were outdoors, far away from the city, in a vast open place scattered with tall, naked trees. The sky was dark and gray, and the snow fell on Carl's body in huge white flakes. He looked up at the ghost and said, "There's something about this place that seems familiar."

The Ghost stepped back and pointed to the ground where Carl was kneeling. "That's because you've been here before, Mr. Smite."

Carl looked down. He was kneeling on something hard, but he wasn't sure what it was. So he leaned over and pushed the snow away. He couldn't feel the cold, but the snow was deep and heavy and he had to push hard to get to the bottom. When he finally

realized it was a block of stone, he looked up at the Ghost, pressed his palm to his chest and said, "I know where I am now. This is a graveyard."

"Read it, Mr. Smite," the ghost said.

Carl looked down again. He was kneeling on one of those flat, inexpensive gravestones. And the name on the stone was Marty Keller's. Carl stood up fast and brushed the snow off his knees. Then he stepped back into deeper snow that went up to his knees and shouted, "You brought me *here*?" He pressed his palm to his stomach and laughed. "If you think this grave has any significance to me, you're sadly mistaken."

The Ghost turned and stretched out his arm. He pointed to a section of the snow right next to Marty's grave. He jerked his thin arm hard and pointed with determination.

Carl looked down and walked to the spot where the Ghost was pointing. He slowly kicked the snow away until he could see that another gravestone. And when he saw the entire stone, his hands started to shake. It read: "Carl Smite. July 1, 1974 – December 25, 2029."

He jumped back and pressed his palms to his temples. His knees felt weak and there was a lump in his throat so large he thought he might vomit. "This is my grave.

Able buried me next to Marty. Oh my God, I died on Christmas Day."

The Ghost laughed and pressed his red fingernails to his lips. "Look at the bright side, Mr. Smite. At least now you have a damn good reason to hate Christmas."

Carl shook his head so hard his temples pounded. "No. I don't hate Christmas," he shouted. "I don't hate Christmas at all." He stepped over his own grave and grabbed the tails of the Ghost's gold scarf. "Please listen to me. I don't hate Christmas. Please,

give me a second chance. Don't let me wind up this way. Help me. I'm begging you. Please help me."

"I'm afraid that's not up to me, Mr. Smite," the Ghost said. "But there's always time for a second chance for the living."

"I don't understand," Carl shouted.

The Ghost yawned. "It's not that difficult, Mr. Smite. You're not a stupid man.

Now put your arm through mine and close your eyes. It's getting late. You're not the only mean old queen I'm visiting tonight."

Chapter Thirteen

When Carl opened his eyes on Christmas morning, it was daylight and all the ghosts were gone. He bolted forward and looked down at his naked body. He patted the sides of his torso, then slapped his thighs. He took a deep breath and shook his head a few times. He wanted to make sure he was still alive and that he was waking up in his own bedroom.

The snowstorm had ended and the winds had died down. There were bright rays of sunshine streaming through his bedroom windows. He heard the heavy, scraping sound of a snow plow pass by his building; someone across the street was shoveling the sidewalk. The clock out in the living room started to chime. When it ended on seven, he threw his legs over the side of the bed and rested his elbows on his knees.

And while he was thinking about his experiences with the three ghosts, and wondering if it had all been a dream, he heard a knock. It came from downstairs, right below his bedroom window. His eyes opened wide; he jumped off the bed and ran to the window. He pushed the curtains aside, opened the window, and looked down. There was a black SUV limousine parked at the curb in front of his shop. The back door was open and there was a driver standing beside it. When Carl leaned to the right and looked toward the shop, there was another man knocking on the front door. He was dressed in a dark suit; just like that man he'd seen with The Ghost from Christmas Present.

Carl hesitated for a moment. He held his breath. A chill passed through his body and the flesh on the back of his neck tingled. He rubbed his jaw and shouted, "What can I do for you?"

The man in the dark suit looked up, shielded his eyes with his hand, and shouted, "I want to buy that chair in the window. The one with the zebra skin upholstery. I'll pay full price, too."

Carl's eyes opened wide and he smiled. Maybe the previous night hadn't been a dream. He remembered what the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come had said, "There's always time for a second chance."

And he remembered his son, who had fallen asleep in a dark alley.

"I'll be right down," Carl shouted to the man. "I have to get dressed. Don't go anywhere." He knew exactly what he was going to do.

He shut the window and ran to his closet. He reached inside and yanked out clothes without thinking. He pulled a black turtleneck over his head, then a put on a pair of wrinkled beige slacks. He put his socks on so fast he didn't even realize that one was blue and one was black. After he put on his shoes, he ran to the bathroom. He didn't bother to flush the toilet; he didn't shave. He just washed his hands, splashed cold water on his face, and ran his wet fingers through his hair a few times. On the way out, he opened the bottom drawer of his dresser and reached way into the back. He fished out a small ring box and opened it. He smiled at the gold ring Victor had given him fifteen years earlier in the back seat of the old Cadillac, and he slipped it onto this ring finger.

A minute later, he was running down the steps with a scarf around his neck and his coat over his arm. He jogged over to the man standing near the door of his shop and

smiled. Then he grabbed the man's arms and shouted, "Merry Christmas. Isn't it a wonderful morning?" The street was quiet, and his voice sounded tighter with the dense snow. But he spoke with such force that the woman who owned the tearoom across the street stopped shoveling the sidewalk and stared across the street to see what was happening.

The man smiled and stepped back. "Yes, it is. Merry Christmas to you, too." Then he motioned to the window display with his arm and said, "I'd like to buy that chair."

Carl pulled a set of keys from his pocket and opened the front door of the shop.

Then he lifted his head and shouted to the woman across the street, "Good morning, Joan.

Merry Christmas. Could you please come over here for a second? I need a favor."

Joan dropped the shovel on the sidewalk and stood there staring at Carl as if he'd lost his mind. Her jaw dropped and she folded her arms across her chest.

He smiled and waved his arm. "This is very important, Joan. Please come over."

When she walked over to where Carl and the man were standing, Carl said, "You look wonderful today, Joan. You look absolutely radiant on this fine Christmas morning."

Poor Joan just stood there gaping at Carl as if he'd gone mad. "Are you okay, Mr. Smite?" she asked.

"I've never been better, Joan," Carl shouted. "I have a favor to ask. This nice man wants to buy that chair in the window for twenty thousand dollars, full price."

When Carl gestured to the zebra skin chair in the window, Joan frowned and said, "Ah well, Mr. Smite, you know how I feel about these things."

Carl smiled. He already knew Able had warned her about the chair. "I know. And I'm so sorry if I've offended you in the past, especially with that nasty old giraffe skin.

I'm truly sorry and I won't do it again. But this might make up for it, Joan."

Then Carl turned to the man and said, "Sir, you can have the chair right now. But I'd like you to make out the check to a homeless shelter instead of to me. I want to donate every single penny of that chair to this shelter, and Joan can take care of you. She volunteers down at the shelter and she'll tell you to whom to make out the check."

The man shrugged his shoulders and said, "I don't care who I have to pay. I just want the chair. It's a gift for someone."

Joan pressed her palm to her throat and said, "Are you sure you're okay, Mr. Smite? The shelter could use all the money it can get. But twenty thousand dollars is a huge donation."

Carl waved his arm. "I know exactly what I'm doing, Joan. And please call me

Carl from now on. We're neighbors, we see each other all the time in passing. We should

get to know each other better." He reached for Joan's hand, squeezed it tightly, and asked,

"Will you take care of this for me? I'll give you the keys to my shop and you can take

care of all the details with this nice gentleman. I have something very important to do

right now. It's one of the most important things I've ever done in my life."

Joan took the keys from his hand and said, "Of course I'll take care of it for you."

Carl hugged her and kissed her on the cheek. He hugged the man who was buying the chair and shouted, "Merry Christmas."

Then he stepped back and asked, "Where is the shelter, Joan? I'm going there right now." The only thought in his head at that moment was for his son. All this couldn't

have been just a dream. The man buying the chair was real. Carl had to get to his son fast; he had to save his son's life while there was still time. If The Ghost of Christmas Present had been correct, his son was lying in the alley next to the homeless shelter.

She told him the name of the street and the address, then asked, "Where should I leave your keys, Carl?"

Carl was halfway down the street by then. The shelter wasn't far from his shop.

He turned and shouted without stopping, "I'll pick them up at the shelter later. Don't worry about it. And thank you so much for doing this."

When he reached the homeless shelter and turned the corner at the alleyway, he slipped and fell on the snow, sliding into a brick wall with his right shoulder. He'd been running so fast his face was red and there were beads of perspiration dripping from his temples. He couldn't catch his breath and his chest heaved with the effort. But when he looked down the alley and saw a denim jacket in the snow, he bit his bottom lip and got up on his feet.

When Carl reached the denim jacket and looked down, the young man who had delivered Able's sandwich on Christmas Eve was lying in a pile of snow. It was the same young man that Carl had seen with the ghosts. His face was covered with sticky red cough syrup and the empty bottle of medicine was still next to his leg. Carl reached for his cell phone and called 911. He told them where he was and that it was a matter of life and death.

Then he removed his own coat and went down on his knees in the cold snow. He pressed two fingers to the boy's neck and closed his eyes. The boy had a pulse and he was still breathing. Carl lifted him slowly and covered him with his coat. When he sat

down behind the boy, he put his arms around the boy's shoulders as tightly as he could and cradled him in his arms. Tears ran down Carl's face; the boy's frail body was so cold. "Hold on, son. Please, please hold on. I'm so sorry for everything and I'm going to make it all up to you if it takes the rest of my life. You have to hold on. It's Christmas Day."

The boy's head moved. He slowly lifted his right hand and placed it on Carl's hand. "Where am I? Who are you?" he whispered. His voice was so weak he could barely finish a sentence.

Carl held him tighter. He rested his cheek on the boy's head and said, "I'm your father, Carl. Don't try to speak. Just hold on. You're going to be fine. Everything is going to be fine from now on. I promise."

The paramedics arrived within minutes. Carl watched, wiping his eyes, while they placed his son on a stretcher and lifted him into an ambulance. They covered him in blankets and placed an oxygen mask over his face. They handed Carl his coat and told him they were taking the boy to St. Vincent's and that Carl could follow them to the emergency room.

But when they began to close the doors of the ambulance, Carl grabbed a paramedic by the arm and said, "He's my son. I'm going with you and I'm riding in the back next to him."

"You can't do that," the man said. "You have to meet us there. It's against the rules."

Carl held his arm tighter and said, "I'm riding in the back with my son, and I'm going with you." He clenched his jaw and looked directly in the man's eyes.

The man could see Carl wasn't going to back down, so he frowned and said, "I'll make an exception because it's Christmas. Get inside and don't repeat this to anyone. We could get into huge trouble for this."

On the way to the hospital, the boy remained unconscious. Carl watched the boy's face as the paramedics continued to take his vital signs. Carl had one hand over his own heart, and he held the boy's hand with the other. Carl hadn't prayed for anything in a long time; he'd never been religious about anything other than making regular bank deposits. But while the ambulance sped toward the hospital, he kept looking up at the ceiling and silently begging, "Please, let him live. I'll make things different from now on. Just please let him live."

At the hospital, they wheeled the boy into the emergency room and told Carl to wait outside for a few minutes. The emergency waiting room was more crowded than Carl had imagined it would be on Christmas morning. He sat down next to an older man with a long gray beard and folded his hands on his lap.

It didn't take long for a young doctor to walk up to Carl's side. Carl stood up and looked the doctor in the eye. He clenched his fists and waited for the doctor to speak.

"He has pneumonia," the doctor said. "He's a very sick young man. The lung X-rays were almost entirely white. We put him on a ventilator and we're medicating him intravenously. We're bringing him up to the Intensive Care Unit now. You can go up to the ICU waiting room and we'll let you know when he's all set up. You can see him then."

Carl wiped a few tears from his eyes and said, "Is he going to make it, doctor?"

The doctor took a deep breath and said, "He's young. He has a good chance of pulling through this. And you got to him in time. If you hadn't called us when you did, he probably wouldn't have made it through the day."

Before he went up to the ICU waiting room, Carl filled out a few forms at the desk. When the woman asked if the boy was indigent, Carl raised an eyebrow and handed the woman his own health insurance card. "He's my son. I'll call my insurance company to make sure he's covered. The insurance agent is a good client of mine. He'll take care of everything. And don't ever refer to *my* son as indigent again. He has a father." Carl didn't want to think about money or insurance. If he couldn't get his health plan to cover his son, he'd pay them himself.

After that, he went up to the ICU waiting room and sat there for the next three hours. The waiting room was empty and there was only one magazine. It was the longest three hours of his life. When the young doctor finally came to get him, Carl stood up and ran to the entrance. "How is he, doctor?"

"You can go inside and see him now," the doctor said. "He's stable and the next twenty-four hours are critical. We had to be aggressive. We put him on a ventilator temporarily. It's the best thing to do until his lungs start to heal. So he's unconscious and he's not feeling any pain."

"But will he make it?" Carl asked.

"Like I said before, he's young and he's strong. His chances are good. But I can't promise anything. He's a very sick young man right now."

The doctor led Carl to a small room at the end of the unit. "I'll keep checking in on him," the doctor said. "If you need anything, call his nurse."

"Thank you, doctor," Carl said, "and Merry Christmas."

Carl crossed into the room very slowly and stared at his son. The boy was propped up high on a long, thin hospital bed. His eyes were closed in an induced coma. The small room was filled with the sounds of beeps and whistles. There were large machines behind the bed, with tubes and wires crisscrossing from the machines to the boy's body. One thick, blue tube connected to the biggest machine hung from the side of the boy's mouth. His skin didn't look gray anymore. It was still pale, but there were hints of color returning to his cheeks.

Carl went to the bed and held the boy's hand. He squeezed it and said, "You're going to make it, Carl. But you have to keep fighting." Then he rested his head on the edge of the bed and closed his eyes.

All the ghosts of Christmas were gone now. And Carl's only focus was on his son and the reality of getting him well again. He wanted another chance. He wanted to change. For Carl, it was all about living life to the fullest and making up for all the things he'd missed. He had hope and he wasn't going to let it go this time. But if he had still been able to see ghosts, he would have seen the transparent image of Donna Fratelli hovering behind the hospital bed. She was wearing a red Christmas sweater that had small green Christmas trees on the shoulders. When she leaned forward and wrapped her arms around the sick boy on the ventilator, she smiled and cradled him in her arms.

Chapter Fourteen

Carl spent the rest of that Christmas Day sitting at his son's bedside. The nurse assigned to follow the boy's progress brought Carl a small box lunch sometime around three that afternoon. The box contained a small can of orange juice, a turkey sandwich on whole wheat bread, and an apple. He thanked her, but refused the food. She insisted that he eat something, whether he felt like it or not. She told him that the hospital prepared these boxes of food for family members and friends of sick patients so they wouldn't get sick, too. Then she remained in the room with him, with her arms folded across her chest, until he'd finished the entire turkey sandwich.

At seven that night, the doctor returned to the boy's room. He had dark circles beneath his eyes and he yawned a few times. He'd spent the past twelve hours at the hospital and was on his way home to spend Christmas with his own family. But he wanted to check in on Carl's son before he left for the day. He listened to his heartbeat and his lungs. He checked the machines and read the charts. Carl sat in his chair and watched without saying a word.

When the doctor was finished with the examination, he lifted his eyebrows and said, "I see huge improvement. His lungs sound better already and his pulse/oxygen level is almost normal. But I'm going to keep him just like this for the rest of the night. And tomorrow morning we'll take him for more chest X-rays. If his lungs have improved, we'll start to bring him out of the induced coma very slowly and take him off the vent.

The faster we get him off and his lungs work on their own, the less we'll have to wean him."

Carl stood up and reached for the doctor's hand. "Thank you so much for everything you've done for him."

The doctor smiled. "This guy is a fighter and he has his youth on his side," he said. "And I think he's going to be okay. But now I think you should go home and get some rest. He's going to remain unconscious until at least late tomorrow morning. And you look like you could use a break. There's nothing more you can do here today."

"But you really think he's going to be okay?" Carl asked. "You're not just saying that to get me to go home?" He wanted to go to the homeless shelter that night. But he wasn't going to leave unless the doctor assured him his son was stable.

"Based on the improvements he's made since this morning," the doctor said, "I think he's going to be back to normal by the end of this week." He turned toward the door and said, "I'll see you tomorrow. I'm getting out of here."

Carl shook the doctor's hand again and said, "Merry Christmas."

When the doctor was gone, Carl stepped up to the side of the bed and placed his palm on his son's forehead. He grabbed the boy's hand and said, "Merry Christmas, Carl. I'm going somewhere right now. But I'll be back in the morning. I promise." Then he kissed him on the cheek and left the room.

When he passed the nurse on his way out, he wished her a Merry Christmas and told her he'd call to see how the boy was doing. She smiled and assured him he could call any time he wanted.

It wasn't a long walk from the hospital to the homeless shelter. But the sidewalks were slushy and the white snow was turning brown. All the snow had been plowed and the city was moving fast again. Carl could have taken a taxi, but he felt like getting some fresh air. He also wanted to think about what he was going to say to Victor. He hadn't seen him in more than fifteen years and he wasn't sure how Victor would react. And he couldn't tell Victor, or anyone else, about his visits from the ghosts.

By the time he reached the entrance to the shelter, it was almost eight o'clock. He crossed through the doorway with his hands in his pockets and his head bowed. Most of the Christmas Day meals had been served and there were only a few tables with people still eating. He heard soft murmurs and forks clinking against plates. Though he knew he'd never physically been there before, the entire room was exactly as he'd remembered it from his visit with the ghost.

While he stood in the vestibule staring at the tables, someone inside the building called his name. "Mr. Smite. What are *you* doing here?"

Carl saw Able Anderson on the other side of the room. He was wearing a white apron and a red-and-white striped sweater. He'd been cleaning off a table when he'd noticed Carl standing there. He was holding a stack of dirty dishes and his mouth was half open. Carl removed his hands from his pockets and started walking toward Able. When they were face to face, Carl handed him a one-hundred-dollar bill he'd pulled out of his pocket and said, "Merry Christmas, Able. This is just a small Christmas bonus. I'd give you more, but it's the only cash I have right now."

Able's eyes bugged and his jaw dropped. He put down the plates and reached out with both hands for the hundred-dollar bill. He turned the bill around, stared at the back,

and said, "Are you sure about this, Mr. Smite? I thought you hated Christmas and giving gifts."

Carl put his arms around Able and said, "Merry Christmas, buddy. You're a good employee and you deserve even more. And from now on, please ignore everything I've ever said up until right now. I've been an asshole. Things are going to be different from now on."

"But Mr. Smite..."

Carl cut him off. "It's only money, Able. Remember that. Money isn't the most important thing in life and it can't buy you happiness."

Able smiled and put the money in his pocket. "Thank you, Mr. Smite," he said. "And thank you so much for the donation to the shelter. When Joan came running in with a check for twenty thousand dollars in her hand this morning, we didn't believe it at first. My boss is still wondering about it. We were low on funds, and he had to use his own personal credit card this morning to order enough food. And he's not a wealthy man by any means."

"I just thought it was the right thing to do," Carl said. "And by the way, I'm not putting any more animal skins in the front window."

"I'm afraid I don't have a gift for you anymore, Mr. Smite," Able said. "I gave it to one of the homeless this morning."

Carl put his arm around Able's shoulders and patted his back. "I'm glad you did that, Able. You can consider that your gift to me. And you can do the same thing next year, too. Buy me a gift, then give it to someone who needs it more than I do."

Able blinked as if he didn't believe what he was hearing. "Seriously?"

Carl was about to say something, but Joan interrupted him. She was standing in the kitchen doorway. "You're here," she shouted. Then she turned back to the kitchen. "He's here, Victor. It's the man who donated the money to the shelter this morning! Mr. Smite. He's out here talking with Able."

Then Joan crossed toward Carl and handed him the keys to his shop. "All the paperwork from the chair is on your desk, Mr. Smite. I gave the check to my boss, the director of this shelter. And thank you again for such a generous donation. We really needed it."

"I told you to call me by my first name, Joan," Carl said. "After all, we are neighbors." Then he put his arm around her and patted her shoulder.

Joan gave Able a look, then smiled and said, "Okay, Carl." There was an awkward hesitation—she pronounced the C in Carl longer than she should have.

A minute later, Victor was standing in the kitchen doorway. He was wearing a white shirt, faded jeans, and a dark blazer. The same white cane Carl had seen with the Ghost was in Victor's right hand and he held the door frame with his left. The scarf that Carl had given him so many years ago was around his neck. Victor looked so good that Carl suddenly felt awkward and inferior. He hadn't shaved that morning, his socks didn't match, and he hadn't even bothered to see what his hair looked like all day. For all he knew, it was sticking out on the sides. He knew Victor couldn't actually see how he looked, but if he'd had more time he would have at least combed his hair.

Carl moved to where Victor was standing. He smiled and wiped a tear from his eye. When he reached out to touch Victor's arm, he cleared his throat and said, "Merry Christmas, Victor. It's been a long time. You haven't changed much at all."

Victor lowered his eyebrows. "It *is* you, Carl," he said. "When they told me the name on the check and that you were actually Able's boss, I wasn't sure. I thought it might have been a coincidence. It has been such a long time."

Joan leaned forward and tilted her head to the side. "You two know each other, Victor?"

"I didn't want to say anything, Joan, because I wasn't sure if it really was the same Carl Smite," Victor said. "So I decided to remain quiet, hoping this mysterious Carl Smite would eventually show up so I could thank him in person."

Carl gazed at Victor and smiled. He was still holding Victor's arm, and he couldn't stop staring at his handsome face. "We go back a long way, Joan. We grew up together," Carl said. He wanted to tell her Victor was the only man he'd ever loved. But he thought it was too soon for that. He wasn't sure how Victor still felt about him, and he didn't want to embarrass Victor by putting him on the spot in front of his workers. Also, he didn't know whether or not Victor was living his life as an openly gay man. He didn't want to "out" him in public and go against the unspoken rule that gay men didn't do that to each other.

Able reached for the dirty dishes and placed them on a tray. He shook his head and said, "Weird. You two were actually friends."

Victor smiled. "We were more than that, Able. We were lovers in college, and we haven't seen each other in fifteen years."

Carl smiled; he wanted the entire world to know he'd been Victor's lover. He stared at Victor's soft lips and said, "We were the best."

Able almost dropped the dishes. Joan pressed her palm to her throat and gasped. They both looked at Victor and Carl, then at each other. "We should finish up these tables," Joan said. "C'mon, Able, let's leave them alone for a while." They already knew Carl and Victor were gay, but from the shocked expressions on their faces, it looked as if they couldn't picture a gentle man like Victor Briarwood making love to an obnoxious man like Carl Smite.

Carl and Victor weren't paying attention to them anymore. They didn't even notice Joan was practically dragging Able out of the room because he couldn't stop staring at them. Carl reached for the scarf around Victor's neck and said, "I can't believe you still have this old thing. It's falling apart. I'll have to get you a new one."

"It makes me feel warm," Victor said. "Sometimes, when I hold it to my face, I think I can still smell you." Then he leaned the white cane against the wall and reached for Carl's hand. He touched Carl's ring finger and smiled. "You still have the ring I gave you."

"Yes," Carl said, "This is the first time I've worn it since that last night we were together. But I've kept it in a safe place for years. For a long time, it hurt too much to look at it. So I put it away for safekeeping." When Victor touched his finger, Carl felt his pants getting tighter. His breathing increased. He wanted to wrap his arms around Victor's wide shoulders and wrap his legs around Victor's waist.

Victor released Carl's hand. "When Joan told me about the check, I was afraid to even consider the possibility that you were the same Carl Smite that had given the donation. And when Able said you were his mean, vicious boss who wouldn't let him

leave early, I was certain you couldn't be the same man that I once knew. The Carl Smite I knew was kind and generous to a fault."

Carl shrugged his shoulders. "I'm afraid everything Able told you about me is true. I'm not proud of the way I've been. But I'm hoping I can get another chance." Then he put his arms around Victor, hugged him tightly, and asked, "Can we go for coffee or something? I'd like to be alone and talk."

Victor hugged him and took a deep breath. When he stepped back, he shouted, "Able, can you and Joan handle things around here? I'd like to leave now."

Able shouted from the kitchen, "No problem. We're fine. Have a good night, and Merry Christmas."

* * * *

They walked to a small diner a few blocks away from the shelter. Carl put his arm through Victor's and they talked the entire time. In the diner, Carl told Victor about Donna Fratelli and his son, but he couldn't go into details for obvious reasons. He couldn't start talking about ghosts. He just said he'd lost touch with Donna years ago and he'd only recently learned he had a son. And when he spoke about his past, he didn't go into great detail there either. He just said that he'd worked hard to become a successful antiques dealer and that he'd made a few mistakes along the way. And now he wanted to correct the mistakes. He also told Victor he'd had no idea that Victor was the director of the homeless shelter until Christmas Eve. He said Able had mentioned Victor's name in conversation and he knew it had to be the same Victor Briarwood he'd known. Able hadn't mentioned Victor's name, but Carl had to say something convincing.

Victor didn't go into detail about his past either. He told Carl about his accident and how he'd lost his sight. He said he hadn't spoken to his father or anyone in his family for fifteen years. After the accident, while he was still in the hospital recovering, he came out of the closet and openly admitted his sexuality. He was contentious about it, doing it to get even with them for sending him to England. His family refused to accept his lifestyle. His father had wanted to send him to a psychiatrist and his mother had wanted to send him to a monastery. So Victor cut off all contact, moved to San Francisco alone, and built his own life without his family or their money.

When they were leaving the diner, Carl stopped walking. He faced Victor and asked, "Why didn't you get in touch with me after the accident? I would have been there for you. I would have dropped everything and I would have gone to England." He had to ask. The question kept turning in his mind. "All it would have taken was one letter."

Victor lowered his head and frowned. "It was a very dark time, Carl. I felt cheated and worthless. I didn't want you to see me that way. And I didn't want to ruin your life with my blindness." Then he sighed and said, "It was a huge mistake, though. If I could go back and do things again, I wouldn't do them the same way. You would have been the first to know. It's just that when you're young, you tend to take things less seriously then when you're older."

Carl smiled and reached for his arm. "There's always another chance, Victor.

Let's not talk about the past anymore. Let's talk about the present and look forward to the future."

Victor frowned. "We can't ignore the fact that I'm blind, Carl. I'll never see again. My blindness rules my life. There aren't many people who would want to deal with that."

Carl stopped walking. He pulled Victor's arm. "It's *not* an issue with me. And don't *ever* say that again. You're still the same wonderful man whom I fell in love with years ago. You're still the same man with whom I've been in love with all my life. Maybe it's too soon to say that after all these years. But I don't care. I'm not letting you get away again."

Victor reached for Carl's hand and smiled. "Where are we right now? I've lost track of everything tonight. I'm usually more aware of my surroundings. I'm totally self-sufficient."

"We're only a few blocks from my shop," he said. "I own the building and I live upstairs. Let's go there tonight."

Victor laughed. "It doesn't sound like your intentions are pure, Carl. It sounds like you're trying to embrace *coitus* with me."

When Victor said the word *coitus*, Carl laughed so hard he started coughing. He hadn't heard that ridiculous, awful word since the last time he'd been with Victor. He reached for Victor's arm and said, "You'll just have to judge my *coital* intentions for yourself in the morning."

Chapter Fifteen

On the way to Carl's building, it felt as if no time had passed between them. Victor put his arm around Carl's waist and he kept trying to put his hand down Carl's pants. The first time it happened Carl's eyebrows went up and he blinked. Carl knew he was horny, so he put his arm around Victor's waist and leaned into his warm body. He pressed his palm on Victor's chest and said, "If you keep this up, people are going to think we're a couple of perverts. And we haven't seen each other in years. We *should* be acting like strangers. At least that's how most people would react in a situation like this."

Victor grabbed his ass and said, "But we aren't strangers and we've never been 'most' people. We were intense lovers. All you had to do was touch me with one finger and I got aroused. Besides, I have to hold on to you. I have an excuse. I can't see and you have to lead the way."

"Then why does it feel as if you're leading *me*?" Carl whispered. But he wasn't complaining. There were other people walking on the streets, and Carl didn't care what they thought. With Victor's arm around his waist, he felt safe and warm, as if nothing bad could ever happen to him again.

By the time they reached Carl's building, Victor's arm was under Carl's coat and his hand was working its way down the back of Carl's pants. Carl reached into his pocket for his keys and said, "Be good now and get your hand out of my pants. There's a long flight of steps and I don't want you to fall. What if Able and Joan saw us? Her tearoom is right across the street."

Victor rubbed his stubble on Carl's neck and kissed his earlobe. "I think Able has a crush on you. He said he thinks you're very attractive."

Carl laughed. "Able has been making advances toward me for the last year. But he's not my type. Besides, I'm already interested in someone very special." He opened the door and said, "Be careful. The stairs are steep."

Victor pulled his hand out of his pants and said, "Just give me directions and tell me what to look for. Tell me how many steps there are. I know how to get around very well. I won't fall."

Carl unlocked the front door, counted quickly, and told him there were fifteen steps. Victor went first; he didn't waver and he didn't miss a single step. When they reached to top, Carl took his hand and walked him to his bedroom. He explained where they were going, which way to turn, and how to navigate around furniture. There were no rugs; the floor was hardwood. Victor reached for door frames and walls without making it look difficult. Carl watched closely to make sure he didn't trip, and he was amazed at how independent Victor had become. If he hadn't known Victor was blind, he would have had to look twice to actually detect it.

When they reached the bedroom, Victor said, "I was expecting to climb more steps. This was easy."

Carl led him to the edge of the bed and said, "There are two more floors to the building, but I never use them. I've always wanted to keep things simple, and I've always been cautious with money." He took a deep breath and sighed. "Actually, I've been cheap. And I'm going to apologize for this place ahead of time. I haven't changed a thing since I've lived here, and the previous owner never changed anything either. I'm going to make

a few changes soon, though. I'm going to open up the third and fourth floor. I'm tired of hoarding money."

Victor smiled. "I'm sure everything is just fine."

Carl frowned. "It's really not. It's awful. But thank you for being polite. And I didn't make the bed this morning. I usually do, but I ran out of here so fast I didn't even think about it." For the first time in many years, Carl wanted to please someone.

Normally, he wouldn't have cared what anyone thought of his home.

Victor lifted his arm and touched the side of Carl's face with his palm. He slowly ran his hand down and leaned forward. Then he kissed him on the lips and said, "Stop making apologies. I don't care what the house looks like. I don't care if you sleep in a box. I only care about you, and being with you."

Carl closed his eyes and wrapped his arms around Victor's body. He rested his cheek on Victor's chest and said, "I still can't believe I'm actually with you. And that you've been living in New York and neither of us knew it."

Victor grabbed his ass again and whispered, "I hope I don't disappoint you."

Carl reached down and cupped Victor's crotch. Victor's penis was already semierect. "I don't think that will happen."

"We'll see," Victor said.

Carl released Victor's genitals and placed his hands on his large biceps. "I have to call the hospital to see how my son is doing. I can't stop thinking about him. Then I want to take a fast shower and shave," he said. "I feel like a complete mess. While I'm in the bathroom, you take off your clothes and get into bed."

Victor slapped his ass. He was breathing heavier and his heart was beating faster.

He pressed his crotch into Carl's and said, "Don't be long."

Carl kissed him on the chest and went into the hallway to call the hospital. The nurse told him Carl Junior was stable and doing well. He took a deep breath, looked up at the ceiling, and whispered, "Thank you."

After that, he showered and shaved fast. He brushed his teeth and combed his hair. In less than fifteen minutes, he opened the bathroom door and walked into his bedroom naked. His penis was already semi-erect; his testicles were moving up and down in his scrotum. When his testicles moved this way, it was because he was extremely aroused. And it didn't happen all the time. The only light in the room came from the small lamp on his nightstand. When he looked at the bed, he smiled and bit his bottom lip.

Victor was on his back, in the middle of the bed, stark naked with his feet crossed at the ankles. His body hadn't changed at all. His strong football player legs were still packed with muscle and covered with a thin layer of soft dark hair. His chest muscles were square and his abs were ripped. A thin line of dark brown hair began just below his chest and ran all the way down to his public hairs. And just below that, a thick erection rested on the right side of his pelvis.

Carl wet his lips and walked toward the bed. He bent down and picked up the black scarf Victor had placed on top his clothes. Then he smiled and said, "You look nice. It reminds me of an afternoon a long time ago when we were in high school."

Victor smiled. "How does this remind you of high school? That was a million years ago."

Carl reached down and grabbed Victor's left foot with both hands and started to massage it. "We were seniors and we hadn't made love yet. We were still terrified of our feelings for each other, pretending to be good buddies, ignoring our erections. You were still dating that cheerleader and I was hanging out with Donna Fratelli. I used to watch you in the locker room after football practice. You never knew I was watching. I was very careful about it. There was one afternoon in September, after football practice, when I saw you lying back on one of the narrow locker room benches. You were very relaxed about it. Your hands were behind your head and you were joking around with the coach. All the other guys were changing their clothes and you were waiting to use the whirlpool because you had pulled a leg muscle during practice. Your long legs were stretched out and your feet were crossed at the ankle just like they are now. I remember you had athletic tape on the bottoms of your feet and your jock strap was on the floor right beside the bench. Your balls were all shoved up because your legs were together, and your dick was resting on your stomach. You kept reaching down and scratching your balls. Your dick was soft and it kept jumping. You were magnificent, and I wanted to fall down on my knees and bury my face between your legs right there in front of everyone."

Victor smiled. "I have a confession to make. I remember that afternoon. You were changing clothes after a long run. I knew you were watching me. I was scratching my balls on purpose. I wanted to grab the back of your head and shove it between my legs."

Carl released his foot and climbed up on the bed. He crawled between Victor's legs and rested his palms on his thighs. "I had no idea you knew I was watching."

"I thought it was cute," Victor said. "You had such a hungry expression on your face." Carl moved and the scarf brushed against Victor's leg. "Are you wearing the scarf you gave me?"

Carl smiled. "That's all I'm wearing. Just the scarf."

"I like that," Victor said. "I'll hold that image of you, when we were in the back seat of the car on Christmas Eve, in my head until the day I die."

"When you knew I was watching you in the locker room, was that the first time you knew you were in love with me?" Carl asked.

Victor reached out with both hands and held Carl's face in his palms. "Not at all," he said. "The first time I actually knew I was in love with you was long before that, and it had nothing to do with sex. We were outside, swimming in the pool at Briarwood Manor. You tried to dive but wound up falling into the water flat on your stomach. My heart stopped and I raced to the pool. I jumped in and swam to you to make sure you were okay. It looked painful, and I couldn't bear the thought of you being in any pain."

"I remember that day," Carl said, laughing. "It was very painful. You carried me out of the pool. After that, you were my hero. I would have done anything to make you happy."

Victor rubbed his face. "Was that the first day you knew you loved me, too?"

Carl turned his head and licked Victor's middle finger. He stuck his tongue all the way out and ran it up the back of his finger slowly. Then he smiled and said, "I've always been in love with you. I've always known it. Though I didn't understand it and it terrified me, I think I even knew it when we were children." Then he lowered his head and

pressed his entire face between Victor's legs. His nose went into Victor's crotch; his lips pressed against Victor's testicles.

Victor moaned and spread his legs apart, then he placed both hands on the back of Carl's head and pushed it between his legs. Carl took a deep breath and opened his mouth. He sucked both Victor's testicles into his mouth and closed his eyes. He applied gentle pressure with his tongue; his head rocked very slowly while he sucked. He could tell Victor liked this, because Victor wouldn't let go of his head and he wouldn't stop moaning.

When Carl finally released Victor's balls from his mouth, he grabbed the base of Victor's shaft with his right hand and pulled Victor's erection to his face. He smacked it hard against his lips a few times with loud cracks. He lifted his head and stuck out his tongue so he could lick it. The tip of his tongue touched the bottom of the erection. He wiggled his tongue fast and Victor moaned again. Then he pressed his entire tongue flat against Victor's shaft and slowly licked his way up to the head. By that time there was already pre-come. Carl wrapped his lips around the head and started to suck, swallowing as much of Victor as he could.

Victor's hands were still at the back of Carl's head. When Carl sucked the entire erection to the back of his throat, Victor spread his legs as wide as they would go. Victor pressed so hard Carl felt the tip of Victor's dick hit the back of his throat. Carl didn't gag and he didn't show any uneasiness. His lips pressed into Victor's pubic hairs; they tickled the end of his nose. He took a deep breath through his nose and inhaled Victor's masculine scent, then pushed his tongue against Victor's thick shaft and started sucking. His cheeks went in; Victor's legs bent at the knee and rose from the bed.

A moment later, Victor grabbed the sides of Carl's head and started moving it up and down. Victor's large hands cupped Carl's ears, and he squeezed so tightly Carl's face turned red.

At first, Carl thought Victor wanted to get off this way. Victor wouldn't let go of Carl's head and he was bucking his hips into Carl's face. And Carl's only goal that night was to please him in any way that he could. But then Victor stopped bucking his hips and he yanked Carl's his dick out of Carl's mouth. He took a quick breath and said, "If we keep this up, I'm going to come. I don't want to come this way. I want to go inside you. I'm disease free and I don't sleep around. I haven't actually been with anyone in more than a year." He spoke fast, trying hard to breathe at the same time.

Carl wiped his puffy red lips with the back of his hand and smiled. "You can do anything you want to me," he said. "But I have to get a condom. I've never had unsafe sex, and I'm not going to start now. We'll get tested as soon as possible to be sure. But until then, we need condoms. I have a son to think about now. I can't take any chances with my life."

Victor ran his palm across Carl's cheek. "Your skin still feels as soft and young as it did fifteen years ago. Of course I'll use a condom. I like the fact that you're responsible enough to insist on one." He ran his hands through Carl's damp hair and smiled.

Carl reached for the nightstand drawer and pulled out a pre-lubed condom, then covered Victor's penis and straddled Victor's waist. Victor grabbed his ass with both hands and he arched his back. He leaned forward a little and wrapped his right hand around Victor's dick. His knees were bent and his legs were spread; he gently inserted the head and lowered his hips. After a small amount of discomfort, Victor's entire penis

slipped into the deepest part of his body. When it was all the way in, he leaned forward and kissed Victor. He shoved his tongue into Victor's mouth and wrapped it around Victor's thick, warm tongue. When he closed his eyes, sparks and flashes exploded.

Victor squeezed his ass harder and groaned. His toes curled back and his face contorted. "Ride it now," Victor whispered. "Ride it just like you used to ride it."

Carl sat up, lifted his arms up over his head, and closed his eyes. He squeezed the lips of his anus as tightly as he could and started to ride. His body went up and down on Victor's erection. His ass slapped into Victor's flesh with loud cracks. Victor guided him with both hands. He squeezed the sides of Carl's hips so hard he left red marks that would probably remain for days.

Eventually, Victor slapped his ass and told him to stop so they could change positions. He told Carl to get down on all fours so he could enter from behind. Carl got up, braced himself on his hands and knees, and spread his legs. When Victor mounted him, he arched his back and sighed. Suddenly, it all came rushing back to him. He remembered this had been Victor's favorite position in bed.

Victor slammed deep and hard. He held Carl's hips and guided Carl's hole toward his cock. Victor wasn't shy about getting what he wanted in bed. He'd always known how to take complete control, which only made Carl want to submit completely and willingly. With each strong bang, there was a loud crack and someone moaned. Victor's heavy balls slapped against Carl's flesh while Carl's head bobbed up and down. He clutched the sheets and begged Victor for more, with gentle sobs. The more he begged, the harder Victor slammed. When the slamming increased to the point where the bed was

shaking, Carl reached down and grabbed his own penis. He held it in his palm and tugged on the shaft.

A minute after that, Victor pressed down on the small of Carl's back and grumbled as if he were choking. Then he slapped Carl's ass hard and shouted, "I'm coming...here it comes."

"Yes, Victor," Carl shouted. "Let me have it. I want it all."

Victor's legs began to tremble. His mouth fell open and his head went back. Then he bucked into Carl's body with a few hard slams and filled the condom.

And while Victor was still grunting, Carl blasted his load all over the sheet.

After that, Victor pressed on the small of Carl's back and gently and forced him down to his stomach, pinning him to the bed, letting his penis remain deep inside Carl's body. He wrapped his strong arm around Carl's neck and kissed him on the neck, then on the lips. He shoved his tongue inside Carl's mouth, swirled it around a few times, and pulled back. He took a deep breath and said, "I love you so much I hate to pull out."

Carl rested his cheek on the mattress. He closed his eyes and smiled. "And I love you so much I want you inside me as long as you can stay there."

"Let's fall asleep just like this," Victor said. "I don't want to move."

Chapter Sixteen

When Carl opened his eyes the next morning, he was lying in the middle of the bed naked, flat on his back. Victor's hand was on his chest and Victor's leg was bent at the knee and hanging over his legs. Carl reached for Victor's hard shoulder and squeezed it a few times. "Are you awake?" he asked in a stage whisper, playing with Victor's muscles.

Victor slipped his other arm under Carl's body and pulled Carl into his chest. He snuggled and said, "I've been awake for a few minutes. I was listening to you breathe. I felt your heart beating in my palm. And I was thinking."

"About what?" Carl asked.

"You said you had a son, and that the mother was Donna Fratelli," Victor said. "It really doesn't matter. It was years ago. But I never knew you and Donna were involved that way."

Carl sighed. He had to explain this to Victor and make it clear to Victor that he hadn't cheated on him with Donna on purpose. And, in the same respect, he didn't want to tarnish Donna's name either. Carl had witnessed how she'd seduced him that Christmas night. She'd had no idea that he was gay or that he was involved with Victor. If she had known, Carl knew she never would have seduced him.

Carl took a deep breath. "The night your father caught us in the back seat of the Cadillac, I was devastated. I wanted to die. And when you didn't contact me, Donna helped me through it all. I couldn't explain anything to her in detail, because we were

both in the closet at the time. Donna had no idea that you and I were lovers. And I had no idea she was in love with me. One thing led to another, and I got very drunk on cheap wine. I don't even remember the details, but we had sex. I didn't know she'd conceived my child. I've just learned about it recently. Donna and I were together only once. The next day, after you left for England, I told Donna I was in love with you, and she never said a word about how she felt about me. I guess she was embarrassed and felt foolish. She knew how close you and I were, but never suspected we were lovers." He rubbed Victor's shoulder. "Please don't be mad. Donna was a good woman and a good friend."

Victor smiled. "I'm not mad," he said. "I liked Donna. We were all very confused back then. And we were so young we didn't know how to deal with it." Then he climbed on top of Carl's body and kissed him on the lips. When he stuck his tongue in Carl's mouth, his hips bucked into Carl's pelvis.

Carl reached for Victor's biceps and slowly opened his legs. Victor's erection pressed into his groin and the tip of Carl's erection rested just below his naval. While they kissed, Carl lifted both legs, bending them at the knee. Then he reached for another condom on the nightstand and handed it to Victor. He whispered, "Here, put this on. I want you inside me."

Victor took the condom and covered his dick fast, without changing positions. A second later, he entered Carl's body with one quick poke. Carl had already relaxed his muscles and he'd been prepared to take him. Though there was a moment of pain, it didn't take long for Carl to arch his back and to wrap his legs around Victor's waist. He sighed and said, "This is the kind of love I never want to live without again. When you're inside my body this way, I feel as if anything is possible. I have no fears. I have no

doubts. And everything that was ever bad is suddenly right again. Go deep, Victor. Go as deep as you can."

Victor bucked his hips hard. The bed jerked and the headboard cracked against the old plaster wall. When he was as deep as he could possibly go, he whispered, "If I get too rough, let me know. When I'm on top of you, I have a tendency to lose control of myself. I don't ever want to hurt you again. We've both been hurt enough."

Carl crossed his feet at the ankle and rested them on the small of Victor's back.

He put his arms around Victor's wide shoulders and said, "Don't hold anything back

Victor. You can't hurt me this way. I love your passion and your strength. I love

everything about making love to you. It feels as if we've never been apart."

Victor took a deep breath. His breathing was already short, with quick desperate puffs. While his erection began to slide in and out of Carl's body, he shoved his tongue back inside Carl's mouth. The bed began to rock, and the headboard hit the plaster so hard the wallpaper split and chips of white powder fell on Carl's forehead. Victor's rhythm increased until there were loud slaps against Carl's ass. The slapping continued until Carl lost all track of time. And while their lips were still locked and Carl was sucking Victor's tongue, Victor banged into Carl's body as hard as he could and filled the condom again.

Carl came a second later. While Victor was still in the throws of post-orgasmic sensations and he was still deep inside Carl's body, Carl reached between their bodies for his own erection and climaxed all over his stomach. Their lips were still locked, and Carl was still sucking Victor's tongue.

Victor fell on top of Carl and took a deep breath. His chest was damp and there were beads of perspiration dripping from his forehead. Carl cradled Victor's head in his palms and said, "We have to get up. I have to go to the hospital now and see my son. Will you come with me? I might need support."

"Of course I'll go with you," Victor said. He kissed Carl on the lips and pulled out of his body. "Lead me to the shower."

This time, instead of taking his usual fast shower, Carl turned on the water and soaped Victor's entire body. He started at Victor's neck, working his way all the way down to Victor's feet. When he soaped and massaged Victor's private parts, he went down to his knees. He pressed his cheek against Victor's thigh, right next to his soft penis, while the hot water splashed against his face. While he massaged and soaped Victor's body, Victor leaned back against the white subway tiles and moaned with pleasure.

Carl even insisted on drying Victor's body. When Victor hesitated and said, "I can dry myself, really. I'm blind, but I'm not helpless," Carl took the towel from his hand and said, "I know you're not helpless. I'm not doing this because you're blind. I'm doing it because I want to make you feel special."

Victor smiled. "It's been a long time since anyone has said or done anything that nice for me. But then, you always knew how to make me feel special." Then he lifted his arms and said, "Feel free to dry every inch of my body. And take your time between my legs." Then he grabbed his dick and rubbed it against Carl's thigh.

Carl went down on his knees and kissed Victor between the legs. "I will," he said, as he ran the towel up between Victor's thighs.

While Victor was getting dressed, Carl called the hospital again to check in on his son. The nurse said that because he'd responded so well, they'd taken him off the ventilator and he was still in stable condition. She said he was weak and very groggy, but he was conscious again. Carl thanked her and said he'd be there within a half hour.

Then he called Able and told him to open the shop on his own that day. Carl said he'd leave the keys under the mat and check in later with him. Able was shocked—Carl Smite had never missed a day of work, and he'd never allowed Able to open the shop alone. When Able asked if everything was all right, Carl laughed and said, "You'd better start getting used to the new me, Able. Things are going to be changing around here."

By the time Victor and Carl reached the hospital, the doctor was standing outside Carl Junior's door reading a chart. Carl introduced Victor to the doctor and said, "I'm glad I ran into you. How's he doing?"

"He's responding very well," the doctor said. "We did more chest X-rays very early this morning and his lungs have cleared up a great deal."

"How long do you think he'll be in the hospital?" Carl asked.

The doctor rubbed his jaw. "If he continues to improve this way, he should be ready to be discharged by the end of the week."

"Can I go in now?" Carl asked. "Is he conscious?"

"He's awake," the doctor said, "but he's still very weak. Try not to get him excited about anything. He shouldn't talk too much. His voice is weak." Then he shook Carl's hand and said, "I'll be back later to check in on him."

Carl thanked the doctor and turned to Victor. "I'm a little worried about this," he said. "I'm not sure how I'm going to explain that I know he's my son, or how I knew he was lying there in the alley."

Victor rubbed his jaw and frowned. "Actually," he said, "I'm kind of curious about that, too. How *did* you know? You told me Donna never told you she was pregnant."

Carl shrugged his shoulders. "This is one of those times you're going to have to trust me, Victor. Do you believe in Christmas miracles?"

Victor shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not sure," he said. "But I can't say I don't believe in them either. I've just never witnessed one."

"Well, I did," Carl said. "And that's all I can say. The boy in the room is Carl Fratelli, and he's my biological son. Donna was killed when he was very young, and he's been brought up in foster homes that were abusive and dysfunctional. And it's a true miracle that I finally found him. Just the same way it's a miracle that I found you again after all these years."

Victor reached for his hand and squeezed it. They were standing in the ICU hallway, surrounded by people, and he didn't hesitate about showing his feelings. "I trust you. And if I can help you out in any way, I will."

When they crossed into young Carl's room, Carl walked to the foot of the bed and Victor sat down in the chair in the corner of the room. The large ventilator was gone and he was only hooked up to the standard hospital machines. The blue tube was out of his mouth and his skin wasn't gray anymore. Though he was painfully thin and his lips were dry, he looked better than he'd looked when he'd delivered Able's sandwich to the shop

on Christmas Eve. He was sitting up in the bed and the nurse was straightening his pillows. Carl looked into the boy's eyes and smiled. The boy tilted his head to the side and lowered his eyebrows.

Carl smiled at the nurse and said, "He looks much better today, doesn't he?"

She patted the pillow one last time and said, "I'll say. He's a very lucky guy. If you hadn't brought him in here when you did, I'd hate to think about what might have happened. The entire hospital is talking about it. We're calling him our Christmas miracle." Then she gathered a few rumpled covers from the foot of the bed and said, "If you guys need anything, just ring. I'll be out at the desk."

When she was gone, Carl walked to the side of the bed and asked, "How are you feeling?" He figured he'd wait until the boy started asking him questions, instead of getting into any dramatic, emotional scenes. He wanted to hug him as hard as he could. But that would have been out of place. He wanted to tell everyone in the world that this was his son. But he had to be patient.

The boy's voice was weak and wrecked from the breathing tube. "You found me?" he asked. "How did you know I was in the alley?" Then he looked across the room at Victor and asked, "And who is he? He looks familiar."

When Victor stood up from the chair and felt around for the end of the bed, it became apparent that he was blind. He smiled at the boy and said, "I'm a very good friend of Carl's. My name is Victor Briarwood. I'm the director of the homeless shelter next to the alley where Carl found you. Have you ever been to the shelter before?"

The boy nodded and said, "Yes." But he was staring at Carl the entire time. "You've probably seen me there," Victor said.

The boy's eyebrows went up. He looked into Carl's eyes and asked, "Your name is Carl?"

"My name is Carl Smite," he said. "We met on Christmas Eve when you delivered a sandwich to my employee." Carl rubbed his jaw and looked down at his shoes. "I'm sorry that it wasn't the best first impression. I was very rude."

The boy glared at him. "I remember. You're the guy who refused to tip me on Christmas Eve."

When he said that, Victor gave Carl a confused look. Evidently, he hadn't heard about the mean, cheap side of Carl Smite.

Carl lifted his hands and said, "I'm sorry about that. It was wrong, and I'll make it up to you in the future. I promise."

The boy looked back and forth between Victor and Carl. "Why would you be part of my future? I don't know either one of you. This is starting to freak me out."

Carl took a deep breath and pressed his palm to his chest. He knew there was no simple way to say this. "I'm your father. I knew your mother, Donna Fratelli. She was my best friend."

The boy's eyes widened and he stared at Carl. "How do you know my mother's name? She was killed when I was a baby, and I never knew her. I only have some photos and papers left."

Carl smiled. "She was a good friend."

"I knew her, too," Victor said. "She was a wonderful person."

The boy lowered his eyebrows. "If you're my father, where were you all these years? I've lived in foster homes all my life. My birth certificate doesn't even list a father,

just my mother. This doesn't make sense." He rested his head on the pillow and closed his eyes. Each word he spoke seemed to be an effort.

"I didn't know about you," Carl said. "Your mother never told me she was going to have a baby. I had no idea. I didn't even know you were my son when you came into the store on Christmas Eve. If I had known, I would have taken you to the hospital that minute. You have to believe me."

The boy's voice was weak. "Okay, let me get this right. You're saying that on the same night you found me dying in an alley, you also found out, magically, that I was your son, seriously."

Carl shrugged his shoulders and turned away. "I don't know what else to say. I know it sounds odd. But I honestly can't explain it to you. It was a miracle, and sometimes you just have to believe in miracles and love and hope. Trust me, they all exist."

"Why didn't my mother tell you she was having a baby?" the boy asked.

"She couldn't tell me," Carl said. "I stopped all contact with her, and I guess she was too proud to come running after me. I'll never know the exact reason. But I made a mistake. I should have kept in touch with her. I'm so sorry I didn't."

Victor stepped closer. "Your mother also knew your father was gay, and he was in love with me," he said. "We had no way of knowing about you. It's very long story that we can explain later."

"I know this is a lot to take in right now," Carl said. "And you're still very weak.

But I don't want to lie to you. I could make up something, but I don't want to. I want to tell you the truth, always. And I want to be your father. I know I can't make up for all the

bad years with that horrible man named Bucky who abused you and locked you in closets, but I can try to make the rest of your life better, starting right now. I'm here, and I'm never going away again."

The boy frowned. "How do you know about Bucky?"

"I can't go into detail about that," Carl said. "I only found out about Bucky and the way you were treated very recently. If I had known *any* of this, I would have taken you out of there." He leaned forward and pressed his palms on the edge of the bed. "Please believe me and trust me. It's the best I can do right now. I'm sorry. Will you give me this chance? Please?"

The boy looked at Victor and said. "You knew my mother, too."

Victor nodded and said, "I wasn't as close as Carl, but I knew her."

"Are you both together, as a gay couple?" the boy asked.

Carl pressed his lips together and took a deep breath through his nose. "I hope that's not a problem, Carl," he said. "We are a couple and we're going to be a couple for the rest of our lives." He gave Victor a look and smiled. They hadn't discussed the future yet and he wasn't sure if he was being presumptuous.

But Victor smiled and looked into Carl's eyes. He said without hesitation, "We're never going to be apart again."

The boy shrugged his shoulders. "I'm cool with that," he said. "I'm not gay, but I'm cool with gay guys. It's just that it's really hard to believe you're my father, man."

Carl smiled. "Look, I'll tell you what we'll do," he said, "I'll arrange to have DNA tests done, and when there's proof, I'll take care of everything as far as getting full legal custody. I've also talked to the doctor about getting you fitted for a new artificial

leg. But for right now, let's take it slowly. You're tired and I only want what's best for you. All I ask is that you trust me. Will you do that?"

"I am really tired," the boy said. "I think I want to sleep now for a while."

Carl reached for his hand and squeezed it. "We'll leave you alone and let you rest."

The boy tilted his head to the side and asked, "Will you be back later today? I've never been in the hospital like this and it's kind of creepy, you know."

Carl smiled and squeezed his thin hand tighter. "I'll be back in about three hours, then I'll stay until they kick me out."

The boy nodded and closed his eyes. He was still so weak he could barely move his legs to get comfortable.

On their way out the door, Carl touched Victor's arm and turned back toward the bed. "Is there anything I can bring for you when I come back?"

The boy's eyelids went up halfway. "That tip you took from me on Christmas Eve would be nice."

Carl knew the kid was only joking. But he smiled and reached into his back pocket. He pulled out his wallet, opened it up, and reached into the money compartment. Then he crossed to the edge of the bed and placed three one-hundred-dollar bills in the boy's palm. He'd never given out that much cash to anyone in his entire life. He hadn't spent that much money on anything in months.

The boy lifted his arm and stared at the money with furrowed eyebrows. Then he looked at Carl and whispered, "Aren't you afraid someone might steal this from me?"

Carl smiled. "It's only money, Carl. You hold on to it, and when you get out of here you can buy something you've always wanted."

On the way out of the hospital, Carl asked Victor, "How do you think that went?" Victor smiled and placed his palm on Carl's back. "I think everything is going to be fine," he said.

Chapter Seventeen

One year later, Carl closed the antique shop early on Christmas Eve and packed the trunk of his car with Christmas gifts. He'd considered closing the shop all day, but Able thought it would be a public service to leave the door open until three in case someone wanted a last-minute Christmas gift. So Carl agreed to remain open, then gave Able the day off with a nice holiday bonus so he could do his charity work.

Carl placed the last Christmas package in the trunk of his car and turned to look at the front door of his house. It was starting to snow and he wanted to get out of the city before the roads became too dangerous. The Weather Channel had been predicting a heavy snowfall. He saw his son, Carl Junior, open the door and step into the snow. "Be careful. It's getting slippery," Carl shouted.

While Carl Junior shut the door and checked the lock, he shouted back, "I'm okay, Dad. I know how to walk in the snow." There was a hint of sarcasm in his voice. "I'm a big boy."

Carl bit his bottom lip while he watched him cross to the car on the slippery sidewalk. His son had grown taller and his body had filled out in the last year. With his new artificial leg, it was almost impossible to notice his slight limp. He was carrying a white shopping bag filled with gifts in one hand and a large green duffel bag with the other. They were leaving the city that afternoon to spend the Christmas holidays in Briarwood Manor with Victor, Able, and Joan. Carl had become very fond of Joan. Her tearoom hadn't done well that year, so Carl invested in her business as a Christmas gift.

"I'll put these in the back seat," Carl said, taking the shopping bag and duffel bag from his son. "There's no more room in the trunk." It was packed so tightly he could barely shut the trunk lid.

On the way to Briarwood Manor, Carl Junior listened to music and Carl focused on the wet road. The snow wasn't heavy yet, but he couldn't go as fast as he normally would have. He kept glancing at his son and smiling. A year earlier, when he hated everything about Christmas, he never could have imagined that his life would change so much. In the last year, Carl had renovated his entire home, Carl Junior and Victor had moved in with him, and now they were heading out to Briarwood Manor to spend Christmas.

Nothing about these transitions had been simple, by any means. The first thing Carl did was take care of the legal matters. He gained full legal custody of his son and told the foster parents he thought they were despicable people. Carl wanted to press charges against them for abuse, but young Carl didn't want to go through the ordeal. So Carl let it go and they started focusing on the future by forgiving the past.

Gaining Carl Junior's trust, however, had kept Carl's eyes open many nights. Carl and Victor would sit up and talk until three or four in the morning, wondering what they could do to make the boy feel more comfortable. Even after the DNA tests proved Carl was his real father, the boy still didn't trust him. All those years of being pushed around and taking abuse had left him emotionally damaged. But it wasn't irreparable damage. Carl and Victor were patient, and eventually the walls the boy had been building for years began to crumble. By Thanksgiving, Carl Junior was calling Carl Dad. Up until then, he hadn't been comfortable calling him anything.

When Carl finally pulled up to the front gate at Briarwood Manor, he sighed and said, "I haven't spent Christmas here in many years. It feels very strange. I grew up here. And there was a time when I never thought I'd be here again. Victor's father threw me out because I was gay." The memory of Victor's father throwing him out still caused his stomach to turn. The sound of disgust in Victor's father's voice still haunted him at night sometimes.

Carl Junior shrugged his shoulders and lowered the radio. "Don't think about it,

Dad," he said. "You're gay, no big deal. You know who you are. And this is a great place.

I wish we could live here all the time instead of in the city."

Carl smiled. He was proud of his son. "Maybe we will someday," he said. "But right now I have a business to run and people who depend on me, and Victor is still the director of the homeless shelter. So we'll have to be content to just enjoy weekends and holidays out here. Besides, there wouldn't be much privacy here. The house is a residence now for a lot of people."

In the past year, moving in with Carl hadn't been the only change in Victor's life. In February, Victor had been contacted by his father's lawyers. The father had suffered a massive stroke, he'd been left paralyzed from the neck down, and had suffered so much brain damage he didn't recognize anyone. Victor's mother had passed away five years earlier, and the father had been living in Briarwood Manor alone. When a maid found the old man lying on his bedroom floor, he'd been there for almost twenty-four hours.

The lawyers told Victor that his father had listed him in a will as his only heir and he'd given him complete power of attorney. This meant that Briarwood Manor and the father's multimillion-dollar estate became Victor's. At first, Victor sat back and clenched

his fists. He refused to go to his father and he refused to communicate with his father's lawyers. He didn't even want to discuss it as a matter of principle. He told Carl he wanted nothing to do with Briarwood Manor and he didn't care what happened to his father or the estate.

Then Carl finally told Victor all about his experiences with the three Christmas ghosts and how they had changed his life. He reached for Victor's hand and said, "Think of all the things you can do now to help other people, Victor. Think about your father. Even if he doesn't know it, he deserves another chance, too. He must love you. He would have changed his will if he didn't. Don't be bitter. You have to forgive. Taking over this estate will change the course of your life, and many other lives." Carl remembered the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come taking him to Victor's small apartment. He couldn't know for sure, but he had a feeling that Victor had refused to deal with his father's estate, and this decision had altered the rest of his life. Now there was still a chance to fix that.

Eventually, Carl persuaded Victor to contact the lawyers and take control of his father's estate. But Victor would only agree to do it under one condition. Victor wanted to turn the entire house into a residence for homeless people living with AIDS. When the lawyers told him he had complete power of attorney and that he could do whatever he wanted, he decided to take full responsibility for his father.

Carl parked near the front door at Briarwood Manor. It was already dark outside and the snow was falling in heavy flakes. There was a Christmas wreath on every window with a red bow, a huge wreath on the front door with a bigger red bow, and little white lights sparkled in the shrubs that surrounded the main house. Carl's stomach jumped. Everything looked the same as it had sixteen years earlier.

Joan opened the front door to greet them and shouted, "Where have you guys been? We've been worried about you. Merry Christmas."

Carl got out of the car and went to the front walk, looking back to be sure that Carl Junior wouldn't slip in the snow. "We're fine. I just drove a little slower. Merry Christmas to you, too." Then he turned back, while he was still walking, and said to Carl Junior, "Be careful. It's slippery. I don't want you to fall and break something."

The brick walk was covered with snow and Carl wasn't watching where he was going. Before Carl Junior could even reply, Carl missed the bottom step and fell backwards. But while he was falling, a pair of strong hands reached under his arms and caught him just in time.

Carl Junior pushed his father up, with little effort, and said, "You'd better watch *your* step, Dad. You don't want to break a hip." Then the boy laughed and grabbed Carl's arm. He walked him to the front door with a smug grin on his bright young face.

Carl's eyebrows went up and he gave Joan a look. Then he smiled and said to his son, "I guess I deserve that. I'll try not to be overprotective. But sometimes I just can't help it."

Carl Junior patted Carl on the back and said, "Don't worry. I'm getting used to it." Then he hugged Joan and went into the house to find Able and Victor so he could wish them a Merry Christmas.

The house was filled with people. Christmas music bellowed from the grand piano and everyone had plenty to eat. The Christmas tree in front of the bay window twinkled and swags of pine garland made the entire house smell like Christmas. Victor had planned a Christmas Eve party that night and a Christmas dinner the next day for the

residents. Along with his job as director of the homeless shelter in the city, Victor now ran the private, nonprofit AIDS residence at Briarwood Manor. He'd taken on a great deal of responsibility and Carl helped him out as much as he could. Victor had been running both places so smoothly it looked as if he'd been doing it for twenty years. He hired people to be there all week while he was in the city, and he had several good, dependable volunteers like Able and Joan. Victor was one of those men who required very little sleep and he seemed to thrive on the fast pace.

But Carl was the one who always made sure they had private time together. His life didn't revolve around money anymore. It revolved around taking care of his son, and pleasing his life partner. So while Able and Carl Junior were singing at the piano, and Joan was clearing plates from the tables, Carl asked the pianist to play something special, and then he crossed the room to the fireplace where Victor was standing and whispered, "I hope you're not too tired. I'm going outside to the garage. Meet me out there in ten minutes. I want to celebrate a few Christmas minutes alone, with just you in my arms."

The piano started playing their special Christmas love song. Victor's head went up and he smiled. "I'm never too tired for you." Victor had been helping his father's nurse. She was trying to get his father to eat something, but his father kept spitting the food out of his mouth. The old man spent most of his days in a hospital bed in a small room on the first floor off the kitchen, and the doctors said he didn't have much time left. There was always a nurse with him, and Victor visited him on weekends. Victor could have put him into a nursing home. But he didn't.

Carl shoved his hands in his pockets and smiled. He touched the top of Victor's hand with his fingertips and whispered, "Can you get out there without me?" He knew

Victor had limitations, and he was always sensitive to them without damaging Victor's ego.

"I'll be there in ten minutes," Victor said. "Don't worry. I'll find my way. I grew up here, remember?"

Ten minutes later, Carl was holding a thick plaid blanket and leaning against the back of the old Cadillac. His clothes were in a heap next to his feet and he was stark naked except for a tattered black scarf around his neck. There was a dim light coming from an overhead bulb and the garage wasn't as cold as he thought it would be. Since the last time he'd been naked in that garage, Victor's father had installed a low-voltage heating system and new garage doors to protect the old car from the cold weather.

When he heard the side door of the garage squeak, he looked up and called Victor's name. When Victor called his name, Carl tossed the blanket into the backseat and walked toward the door in his bare feet. He greeted Victor by putting his arms around his neck and kissing him on the lips.

Victor put his arms around Carl and said, "I can't believe you're not wearing anything but a scarf." He kissed him again and placed his hands on Carl's naked ass.

While they were kissing, Carl pulled down Victor's zipper and reached inside his pants. He wrapped his fingers around Victor's erection and pulled it out. When he had a tight grip, he yanked it a few times and said, "Let's get inside the car. I have lube in the back seat." Then he led him through the garage, to the car, without releasing his grip.

Victor took off his clothes and sat down in the back seat. Carl climbed into the car and sat on his lap.

They did everything they'd done the last time they'd been together in that car, and this time no one interrupted them.

When they were finished, Victor forced Carl down and fell on top of him. He pulled the plaid cover over their bodies and held Carl in his arms. Then he sighed and whispered, "You feel just as beautiful now as you did sixteen years ago. And I love you sixteen times more."

Carl's arms were around Victor's warm shoulders. He rubbed his cheek against Victor's stubble and said, "And so are you, Victor. When you were a beautiful young football player, I couldn't get enough of you. You've turned into a magnificent man, and I still can't get enough of you. And I know, with absolute clarity, that I'm going to feel the same way when you're older and you have white hair." He ran his fingers through Victor's hair and smiled, remembering how Victor had looked as an older man.

Victor reached down and pressed his palm against the bottom of Carl's ass. He pressed harder and smiled. "How do you know you're going to feel this way about me when I'm old? What if I get fat and bald?"

"I just know it," Carl said, "because I love you." He rested his head on Victor's strong shoulder and closed his eyes. "Merry, Merry Christmas, Victor."

Victor's hand went up to the middle of Carl's back. He pressed his hot palm against Carl's flesh and said, "Merry Christmas, my love."

And when their lips touched, in the distance, barely recognizable, it sounded as if someone was ringing bells; just like The Christmas Bells of Life, Love, and Hope he'd heard the night of his visit with The Ghost of Christmas Present.

THE END

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