

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

ELLORA'S CAVE
Quickies

*Ghosts of
Christmas Past*
CRICKET STARR

White *Hot* Holidays

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Ghosts of Christmas Past

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GHOSTS OF CHRISTMAS PAST

Cricket Starr

Chapter One

It was cold on the rooftop. Calla stepped out of the shelter of the stairwell and felt the bite of the icy breeze through the threadbare coat she wore over her fast-food uniform. Thirty stories up, there was nothing to stop the wind.

Of course, the unprotected nature of the roof and its height were what had drawn her in the first place. It might be cold, but there was no way she'd survive a fall from here...a fall she planned to take in the next few moments.

Calla shivered as she crept to the edge. With the full moon it was easy to see the sidewalk far below. The view would have been pretty with the lights from the buildings around, but some of those lights were colored red and green. Christmas lights.

Another kind of shiver went through her. She hated Christmas...that was one of the reasons she was here on the roof.

She swallowed a hard breath. Was this really her only option? No, but it was the only one she wanted to pursue. She stepped onto the low wall that edged the roof.

Oblivion beckoned. She'd never feel the cold again, or pain. She'd never be alone anymore. No one would miss her...

She tried not to imagine what it would feel like to land on the concrete from this high. She expected it would hurt when her body shattered on impact, but perhaps the fall wouldn't be so bad. Possibly it would feel like flying and she'd always wanted to fly.

Even so, she hesitated. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea...

A sudden gust of wind hit her, and then she was teetering on the edge...

And then there was no longer any decision to make. She wasn't on the roof but falling, the glass side of the building a blur of light and dark bands as it swept past.

Terror grabbed her as the ground grew closer and Calla opened her mouth to scream.

But before she could, warm arms wrapped themselves around her and then her downward progress slowed until she was merely floating next to the building.

Floating in midair, in the arms of someone large and solid. Calla turned her head and saw his face—handsome, pale, with dark hair and compelling black eyes.

Those eyes compelled her now. *Sleep...* came an insidious whisper into her mind.

But she fought that. “Who are you?” She looked down at the expanse of space below their feet. They hovered at just about the fifth floor and now began to rise slowly. “You an angel, or some kind of Superman?” No wings were on his back, nor did he have a cape.

He smiled with large, evenly spaced teeth that gleamed in the moonlight. “Not even close,” he told her in a dark sensuous growl, and a third kind of shiver hit her, that of long-unexpressed sexual need. When was the last time she’d had that reaction to a man?

“But we’ve a ways to go and you should sleep.” Again there was that compulsion in her mind, stronger than before, and this time he gave her no choice. Calla’s mind went dark and she knew nothing more.

She came back to consciousness surrounded by warmth and water and...bubbles?

Calla opened her eyes to see and smell the unmistakable sensations of a bubble bath in a very large tub with a man sitting in the water behind her. His hands massaged her scalp, working shampoo into her hair.

She knew it was a man because of the large erection poking her backside.

Calla tried to pull away, but his arm went around her waist, clutching her close. “Hold still. You’ll get soap in your eyes.”

Soap in her eyes. Was he kidding?

No, I'm not. You needed a bath so I decided to give you one. She heard him sniff her scalp. You smell much better now. Hold your breath!

With a quick jerk he pushed her under the water and then let her sit up, wet hair streaming into her eyes.

With extreme annoyance, Calla shoved the hair off her face, twisted in his arms and glared at him. Of course she hadn't had a bath...the flophouse she'd called home these past few months didn't boast a working shower. Half the time the toilet hadn't been operational, but it was all she could afford on her Burger Barn salary.

So she'd smelled a little—that didn't give him permission to strip her and take her into his bathtub. She liked to pick whom she got naked with.

Even so, his intrusion into her mind bothered her more. "What are you doing inside my head?"

He grinned at her and again she was struck by how perfect his teeth were. "Not to worry. You are a psi with strong mental powers. My being able to touch your mind is not only normal, but under the circumstances quite useful."

In spite of how gorgeous he was, Calla's uneasiness grew. "What do you mean 'circumstances'?"

"The ones we are in. What I am...why you are here." He stared at her long and hard then gave a heartfelt sigh. "I guess we might as well get this over with."

He put two fingers into his mouth and with a jerk dislodged the teeth she'd been admiring, pulling and revealing an artificial upper plate. The teeth underneath—the real teeth—weren't at all even, but shorter than normal except for the incisors on either side, which were long and pointed.

He had fangs like a vampire and as she looked, his dark eyes briefly glowed red.

Oh my God...fangs, glowing eyes, and he could fly—he was a vampire!

Shock and fear battling within her, Calla tried to get out of the tub, her feet slipping on the bottom. "It's been very nice meeting you...thanks for the bath..."

He leaned back and watched her, "And saving your life."

Calla reached for a towel off the pile by the side of the tub. "Uh, yeah. That too."

"Is that the best you can do? You value your life so little that you can't even thank me for saving it?"

"No...that is..."

He grabbed her shoulders and pulled her back into the tub, still clutching the towel to her as if it were a lifeline. She held it to her chest even though it was sopping wet.

"I would think that the least you could do is kiss me."

"Kiss you? But you're a vampire!"

He actually looked hurt. "Actually, I use the term 'nightwalker'. The 'v' word isn't socially correct. And what does that have to do with kissing?"

"I don't kiss dead things."

"Nightwalkers are not dead things!" He sat higher in the tub, revealing the long hard line of his erection. "Do I look dead to you?"

Uh, well, no. Her first sight of his cock made her dumb with appreciation. It had been a long time since she'd been with a man, and never someone built like this.

He smirked knowingly. "Like what you see?"

Now Calla blushed, knowing she'd been caught staring. "What do you want with me?"

He crossed his arms and wiggled his eyebrows. "Are you not woman enough to know?"

Calla rolled her eyes. "Oh, please. But why do you want me of all people?"

He hesitated then shrugged. "I picked you when I saw you leave the homeless shelter without getting any food. You ran when you saw the Christmas tree and I read in your mind such desperation—I wanted to stop what you were thinking about doing."

She shivered, knowing what he was talking about. With little money from her part-time job available for food, Calla had gone for the traditional holiday feast served at the shelter, but as always the simple holiday decorations had paralyzed her and she'd run instead. She didn't remember thinking about ending her life at that time, but maybe she had.

"So since you thought I was willing to kill myself, you thought I'd let you bite me and die that way?"

The nightwalker frowned at her. "I am not a monster and I don't kill people by drinking their blood. I only take enough to survive and you can spare that much." He ran his gaze up and down her frame and she clutched the towel tighter across her breasts. "Even skinny as you are. I'll have to get more food in to feed you right."

"I'm not skinny."

"Aren't you?" With gentle, but firm pressure he pulled the towel from her and let it drop into the tub. His gaze turned admiring. "You do have very nice breasts."

"Do you always grab women off the streets to have sex with?"

"In your case it was more a matter of grabbing you in midair after you jumped. You wouldn't have been much good to me once you'd reached the street."

Calla shuddered, remembering her near miss. "I didn't jump, I was blown off the roof. It was an accident."

"Really." He didn't sound as if he believed her. "It is a good thing there's a full moon out tonight so I can fly. And no, I only do this once a year. It is a kind of Christmas tradition I have."

"I don't understand."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Every year I bring someone into my home to celebrate the holidays with. Usually a woman, sometimes a man...it depends on who I feel needs my help the most at the time. That's why I go to the homeless shelter to find someone. After Christmas day I let them go with enough money to live on for a long time."

He planned to set her free and give her money? That didn't sound so bad. He'd said he'd done this before, many times. Maybe she could trust him.

"You sleep with men?"

This time he didn't look affronted but just amused. "I don't object to homosexuality, but I don't practice it myself. If my guest is a man I don't have sex with him. In fact, I don't always make love to the women, but in your case I want to. Very much." He said the last with an emphasis she felt right to the center of her beginning arousal.

"I don't go to bed with strange men."

"Then I should introduce myself. Daniel Wilder. And you are?"

If there was an odder situation to be in than sitting in a pool-sized bathtub with a naked nightwalker who'd saved her life, Calla wasn't sure she wanted to know about it. It was even odd enough to make her willing to discard some of her normal wariness. "I'm Calla Douglas."

He seized her hand and shook it briefly, then drew her into his arms. "Happy to meet you, Calla. Let's get dried off and go to the bedroom."

She wasn't sure why she went with him, except for the fact that he was handsome and charming, and the size of his cock promised a rare treat for her body. Maybe he was casting a spell over her to ensure her cooperation, but at the moment, she was willing to be bespelled.

Very willing.

Chapter Two

Daniel tugged his guest into his bedroom and anticipated just how enjoyable the next few hours would be. Calla was perfect for him...just curvy enough to make his body happy, just strong enough mentally to engage his mind. Perhaps too strong mentally – twice now she'd been able to slip past his control over her, once in the air, and then again in the bath. He'd wanted her completely aroused before she'd regained control of herself and instead she'd woken while he was still washing her hair.

Fortunately she found him attractive, so it wasn't any problem convincing her to go to bed with him. He hardly had to exert his will on her at all. And she felt so good in his arms. He pulled her close and felt the press of her breasts against his chest, the tips of her nipples hard with arousal and awareness of him. As he'd said before, she had virtually no fat on her, but there was still a comforting roundness to her hips that he knew would welcome him when he thrust deep into the valley between her thighs. Her long slender legs would feel great wrapped around him.

When he'd gotten her back to his apartment and stripped her clothes off, he'd been more than pleased with what he'd found. It had been just like opening up a drably wrapped present to find something glorious within.

Already his cock was so hard he could barely stand it.

But he would have to be patient and not just toss her on the bed and have his way. Yes, she'd accept that from him now, but later she'd resent him and that wasn't how he wanted to begin their relationship, short as it was going to be. Better to seduce her and win her loyalty for the next couple of days.

Calla's feet slowed as they neared the bed and her face turned troubled. "I'm not so sure this is a good idea."

“Why not?” Daniel breathed in her sweet citrusy scent, the one he’d detected even before he’d bathed her.

“I don’t do meaningless sex.”

He turned her face to stare into her eyes. “Then we will make it meaningful, Calla. Something to remember all our lives.” He stroked her soft cheek. “Don’t worry about what future we have right now. That will sort out.”

And it would, as it always had in the past. He wouldn’t get too attached to her, even if she did have hair the color of an evening sunset and her eyes were as blue as the midday sky he barely remembered. He wanted her for the here and now, not for always. But that was all right, he knew she wouldn’t want him for longer either. Most of his previous holiday guests had been happy to take the money he’d given them at the end of their stay and leave. Calla wouldn’t be any different.

In the meantime, she felt wonderful in his arms, as if she really belonged there. Daniel drew her closer and let his lips gently press against hers, carefully avoiding piercing her with his fangs. Soon enough he’d taste her blood but he was afraid to do it before she was ready. It could frighten her.

He wanted her aroused and willing, not frightened. Fortunately she didn’t seem the least bit frightened of him as she gave up first her lips to him, and then her mouth fell open, giving him access. His tongue swept in of its own accord, as if it knew its welcome even before he did.

Her whole body seemed to accept him as its lover, as if they’d already made love a dozen times before. She felt new and soft against him, but there was still a familiarity...not a commonplace feeling, but more like that of coming home.

She tasted of sweetness and passion and caring. She tasted wonderful, of sunshine and a world that no longer belonged to him. And yet he felt welcome when kissing her.

Again he had to fight the urge to throw her onto the bed and cover her with his body, plunge his cock in her pussy, taking instead of asking for her favor. Again he had

to fight himself to take it slow...he might feel she belonged to him, but she undoubtedly did not share his opinion.

Instead he let his hand cup the back of her head and hold her gently to him. There was no pressure on her—she could pull away from him if she wanted. But she didn't want to now. He read her acceptance in her body as much as in her mind.

He felt a question in her and pulled back to give her the opportunity to speak. Her eyes looked puzzled. "Why am I not saying no to you?"

Daniel had to admit to being impressed. He was letting his own passion for her flood her senses through a minimal link and for her to question what she felt took greater mental strength than he'd expected. She'd seemed so dragged down by life when he'd first seen her that he hadn't expected such spirit.

"Do you wish to say 'no'?"

The puzzlement grew. "Not really. But I don't want to say 'yes', either."

"Then say nothing and just let things progress. We want and need each other. Let that be reason enough tonight."

A shy smile caressed her lips. "Reason enough tonight. I like that."

He let his finger trace the route of that smile, her lips soft beneath his fingertip. "I like you. I'm happy to have you here with me."

The fleeting smile returned in earnest. "I guess...I'm happy to be here."

Daniel smiled back but lost his smile when she faltered, and he realized that she'd again caught sight of his fangs and been reminded of what he was. He had to make her forget that, at least for a little while, so he drew her closer and kissed her on the forehead, pressing his cock against her soft belly. That, at least, was humanly normal.

The press of her nipples against his chest drew his attention and he reached to stroke them gently. Calla moaned as he did and her expression of concern faded. Again she was caught in the sensual spell he wove around her.

Carefully hiding his fangs, Daniel slipped to his knees and closed his mouth around one of those tempting maroon buds. Up close her skin was like many redheads', the color of cream flecked with freckles, tiny and barely distinct from each other. Freckles on top of freckles until they blended together, even on her breasts, which he knew must rarely see the sun.

She was a sun-kissed woman, a woman of day in his world of night—something rare and precious. He'd chosen wisely this year and was again glad that he'd spotted her at the shelter.

He was even gladder that he'd been concerned about her and had followed her and been there when she'd fallen. He'd made light of it before, but it had taken several years off his long life when she'd slipped off the roof. He'd needed all his speed to get to her in time.

Now she moaned as he worshipped her breasts, sweet altars of softness. He'd spoken the truth when he said she had lovely breasts. They were pale, full and round, the tips and areolas deep maroon in contrast.

Lovely. Between his lips her nipple was as textured and sweet as a berry. It grew harder under his ministrations, in contrast to the softness of the rest of her breast. That softness seemed to beg for his hand's caress, and he kneaded it with careful fingers.

Calla responded by placing her hands on his shoulders, pulling him just a little closer—a signal of acceptance that he noted with pleasure. He opened his mind more to her and read her desire, a reaction in part to his caresses but even more to his need for her.

She needed and wanted him. He saw that in her, and in her reaction to him. It was just what he'd hoped for and it was all he could do not to shout with pleasure.

Her hands came up to cup the back of his head, and she took a stance with her legs further apart. She moaned and her head went back and he sensed an orgasm coming, just from the effect of his mouth on her breasts. Her open stance gave him access and he

reached for her pussy, slipped his hand between the narrow cleft of her folds and unerringly found her clit.

At the first caress of his fingers she came apart, her legs shaking, and he had to grab her waist to keep her from collapsing to the floor. Jumping to his feet, Daniel swept her into his arms. She clung to him as he crossed the short distance to the bed, her body still shaking from what must have been an extraordinarily intense climax.

He wished he'd mentally linked with her so he could have experienced it himself, and then he realized how odd that was.

Daniel usually didn't allow that deep a link with his annual holiday guest. As he'd told her, it wasn't all that often that he found someone who both interested him and aroused him, but almost never did he try for the kind of link he now found himself wanting to create with her.

He was treating her like a real companion, someone to keep for far longer than a few days.

"Daniel." She said his name quietly but with appreciation, and he halted in mid stride, simply enjoying the way she felt in his arms. She felt as if she belonged there. She belonged to him.

Well, she did, after all. He'd saved her life and in some cultures that would mean he owned her. Not that he intended anything of the sort, but there was a brief visceral thrill at the thought of someone like her belonging to him.

Belonging with him.

His to be with, to take care of. *His to care for.*

Disturbed by his wayward and unfamiliar thoughts, Daniel completed the journey to the bed and laid her gently crosswise on it. She stared up at him with such trust in her eyes that for a moment it took his breath away.

Sure, she was partially reacting to his manipulation of her senses, the almost link that existed between them, as well as the fact that he'd just given her what had to have been one hell of an orgasm. The lady would have to be made of stone to not want him.

But he could feel that there was more than that to her reaction, not to mention his own. Something disturbing was happening between them and his mind wasn't so sure it liked it...even though his body and soul were more than happy about it.

Daniel shoved those disturbing thoughts to the back of his mind. Calla was a woman to seduce and a companion to secure for a few days. He kissed her again and enjoyed the sweetness of her breath against his mouth. He laid a line of kisses along her face, down her chin and to her neck, where he felt the throb of her arterial pulse just below his teeth.

A strong pulse, young and healthy. Deep within him came the urge to sink his teeth in her, drink her blood and leave his mark. It was nearly as strong as his impulse to sink his cock inside her pussy. He had to pull back. Time would come for that and soon, but not quite yet. He'd mark her when the time was right.

Instead he used his hands to stroke her body and used his mouth on her breasts until she was squirming again, seeking another orgasm, but this time he didn't give her the satisfaction she wanted. This time he wanted to be inside her when she climaxed, and feel her slick tightness grip his cock. That was the goal now.

Daniel ran his hand down her belly to where the soft hair that guarded her clitoris grew, the same red as her hair—a natural redhead was his Calla, just as her breasts were natural, something almost rare in Hollywood. But there was no mistaking her soft curves for anything enhanced.

He parted the hair with a gentle finger and found her clit and massaged it. Again he only wanted to bring her close to orgasm, not past it. Calla's eyes were wild by the time he slid two fingers inside her pussy. He stroked a few times and she moaned, her hands clutching first at his chest then on his back. She reached for his cock, hard and weeping for her, and gave it tentative pulls. Not an experienced move, but he didn't mind.

By the time she left him, she'd know much more about making love...he'd see to that. He'd told her the truth—that he didn't always take his once-a-year Christmas guests to bed, but with her there was no question about it. They were going to make love several times before he let her go.

Starting right now. Calla's untutored stroking of him had pushed him beyond reason and he couldn't hold off possessing her any longer. He rolled her onto her back and held her shoulders down as his knees slid between her thighs, opening her to him. He fit his cock to her just as Calla seemed to catch on to what they were about to do.

"Protection," she whispered.

He appreciated her concern, but she had to understand that she wasn't dealing with an ordinary man. He bespoke her to emphasize that point. *I can't make you pregnant and you cannot make me ill. There need be nothing between us.*

Oh... was her mental reply, and it was laced with traces of fear. Daniel kissed her until her mind was quiet and accepting, but as soon as it was, his cock was again at the entrance to her pussy.

He entered slowly. She was tighter than he'd imagined...not a virgin, but as he'd suspected, more innocent than most. Certainly not familiar with someone of his size.

She gasped aloud as he sheathed himself in her pussy and he covered her mouth with his, absorbing her soft cry. For a moment he simply lay on top of her, letting her body learn to accommodate him. He wove a thread into their link, making it stronger and easier for him to share his thoughts with her. Once she was marked it would become simple for their minds to touch.

Calla's hands found his back and raked across it gently. Daniel raised his head to stare into her face. A look in her eyes, of wonder, and something a little deeper, greeted him. Daniel pulled out, almost to his length and then reentered her, achingly slow. Calla's eyes closed and she whispered something unintelligible. He repeated the action, this time faster, and she cried aloud.

Now it was all he could do to stay in control. He moved in her with a push of his hips that sank her into the bed and her legs came up to wrap around his. He barely had the presence of mind to recognize how good those legs felt. Barely holding onto his sanity, he drove his cock deeper into her, fucking her hard, putting aside all thoughts of her inexperience. All she'd known before was irrelevant – now she was his.

And she knew it too, her body meeting each of his thrusts with raised hips, moving with him, their bodies intimately joined. His mind reached for hers and wrapped around it. Pink...her mind had a distinct pink color, which blended oddly into his silver thoughts.

Mine, mine, mine... Daniel wasn't sure if they were his thoughts or hers, but for the moment the sentiment seemed appropriate. He thrust and thrust until his mind couldn't hold back any longer, until there was only one thing left...

His mouth found her neck, and the now wild pulsing of her artery. With unerring accuracy he bit down and almost groaned as the first taste of her blood filled his mouth. He'd never tasted anyone like her. He swallowed and took another deep sip. Calla didn't cry out or jerk away as others had, but kept her head still, even as she continued to meet each drive of his cock.

He continued to drink deep until he felt her weaken, forcing him back to his senses. He pulled his mouth away and sealed the small wounds on her neck, but left them, leaving his mark. Now Calla moaned with oncoming passion, no longer passive, but crying with each thrust.

More, Daniel...please!

Through the link he sensed her climax before it started and he no longer tried to hold back his own orgasm. Calla cried out, her mind swirling with hot-pink passion and when it crested it swept him away as well. He'd barely noted how tight her pussy clenched his cock before it seemed to explode deep within her.

When Daniel came back into himself, he was lying over her on shaking arms, his body quivering as much as hers. Calla's face showed the same astonishment he felt

through their link. Slowly he lowered until he could not see her face any longer but only feel her tremble beneath him.

Had he *ever* had sex like this before? Granted it had been a couple of years since the last time he'd taken a woman to bed, but even so, this was profound in a whole new way. It had been wonderful...but a little scary as well.

Even so, he tried not to let her know just how affected he'd been. Instead he rolled to the side and held her against him.

When he caught his breath, he put two fingers over the holes he'd left in her neck. Even if their situation was temporary, he never failed to give the oath.

"I take you to be my companion, to serve me as long as you wear my mark. In exchange you have my support and protection."

Calla had a funny smile on her face as he finished. She licked her lips. "That was...odd. When you bit me, it was almost as if I could taste my own blood."

He blinked at her and it was all he could do to keep his jaw from dropping. It was a rare companion who could link deep enough to share tastes and there was no way an unlinked psi could do it. She must be mistaken.

"Don't worry about it, Calla."

"I'm not worried." Replete, she lay dozing on the bed next to him and for a moment Daniel was content to watch her. But he'd taken too much blood and she needed nourishment, now more than ever. He shook her shoulders.

"Wake up, Calla. We need to get you fed."

She perked up. "Food?"

He couldn't help smiling at the interest in her eyes. "Yes...a feast fit for a queen...or at least a nightwalker's companion, waits for you."

Daniel dressed her in one of his robes, which hung loosely on her. He took mental measurements and determined what he needed to order so that she would have proper clothes. He had no intention of letting her wear her original clothes, with the deep-fat

fry smell embedded in them, again. Ordering a new wardrobe would be a project for later tonight, after she'd gone to sleep, since she wasn't adjusted to staying awake to dawn the way he was.

Not that Calla seemed to notice how poorly the robe he gave her fit. She was still yawning as he took her hand and pulled her toward the kitchen.

Chapter Three

Hand in hand, Calla let him lead her from the bedroom. They traveled down a plush carpeted hall, with open doors revealing an office on one side and a second modern-styled bedroom as well as a guest bathroom on the other, neither of which looked like they received much use. They passed a window and she realized that her host lived in an apartment high in a building that faced Sunset Boulevard. So much for her first idea, that he lived in a gothic home in a dark corner of the Hollywood Hills.

When they reached the living room she scented the distinctive smell of pine and pulled away from him. Sure enough, there it was, an undecorated Christmas tree fully seven feet tall in the corner of the room. Daniel started as she pulled away, old terror gnawing at her and preventing her advancing.

It was the same terror that had struck her on entering the homeless shelter earlier that evening.

Daniel noticed. "What is it, Calla? Surely you aren't really afraid of a Christmas tree."

"I'm not afraid..." she started to say, but Daniel took her arm and turned her toward him. He put two fingers on the marks on her neck and his gaze grew serious.

"You bear my mark, Calla. This means there is a link between us and I know the fear you feel. What ghost haunts you?"

The whimsy of the question caught her attention. "Ghost?"

He smiled slightly, relieving the sharp lines of his face. "Memories, ghosts. Experiences that haunt us, we all have such things. Like in the book by Charles Dickens where a man is visited by the ghost of Christmas past to make him realize why he was the way he was. Scrooge was the result of the unpleasant things that happened to him at Christmastime. They'd turned him into a bitter man."

Something in his face—or was it the link he kept talking about—made her realize that he was speaking about more than just her. “You have ghosts?”

His smile tightened and he dropped his hand from her neck. “We all do. Perhaps we’ll share them later.” He pushed her through the living room and toward the kitchen. “Yours at least we should banish...I can’t have you going around being afraid of a harmless evergreen. At the moment think of it as a big green houseplant until we decorate it.”

“Decorate? You want me to...” Calla started to say, but broke off as soon as the smells in the kitchen caught her attention.

Like everything else in the apartment, the kitchen was modern and well appointed, with shiny pots and pans on display and beautiful china resting behind glass doors. It also looked distinctly underused. She supposed it wasn’t often that a nightwalker had to cook. Most of Daniel’s meals probably came in on their own two feet, or maybe he made withdrawals from the local blood bank like a vampire in a movie she saw once.

Daniel pulled a china place setting from a cabinet and silverware, which she could tell from its weight was real silver, and placed both on a place mat sitting on a table in the cozy breakfast nook. The source of the smell turned out to be the oven, set on low, from which Daniel pulled a number of individual delivery boxes from a restaurant she’d only seen the front of when passing by on the bus.

“You ordered a meal from Spumani’s...for me?” she managed to squeak.

“As I said, a meal fit for a companion.” In addition to what was in the oven, Daniel drew clear plastic boxes from the refrigerator, which included a salad and a dish of whole strawberries.

Daniel looked at the latter then replaced it. “Those are for dessert. There is plenty of variety, so pick what you want.”

He poured her a glass of white wine as she dug into the food, and then a second wineglass with a liquid the color of straw. Sipping from it, he sat opposite her and smiled as he watched her eat.

Calla loved the delicate flavor of the scallop appetizer and tried to offer him one. "Can't you at least taste them?"

With a grimace, Daniel shook his head. "I'm afraid most food disagrees with me. I can't digest it and it is unseemly to try and chew it without swallowing."

"That's so sad." Calla took another bite and thought about it. She distinctly remembered the taste of blood in her mouth through the link when he'd bitten her. Maybe it would work in reverse?

Unsure of what she was doing, Calla imagined opening the link between them, and bit into the scallop. Daniel's head shot up and he stared at her. "What did you do?"

She chewed and swallowed. "Tastes good, doesn't it?"

Clearly disconcerted, Daniel nodded. "You did that through the link...but you're untrained."

"I learn fast." Calla shared the rest of her meal with him the same way, and with each bite, Daniel seemed to grow more uneasy...not that he stopped her from sending to him. He clearly enjoyed what he "tasted".

Finally all that was left was dessert.

"Don't get up," she told him. Calla got out the strawberries, and a dish of microwavable chocolate fondue. In moments she was dipping the strawberries into the heated chocolate.

Daniel moaned at the first taste of chocolate-covered strawberry she shared with him. "It has been years since I've tasted chocolate."

"How about strawberries?"

He hesitated then grinned. "That I've been able to taste...sort of."

She wasn't sure of the sudden look of mischief on his face. Daniel came around the table and knelt on the floor in front of her. He took one of the strawberries and held it to her lips. "Bite the end off."

Wondering what he was up to, she did, then was surprised when he opened her robe and placed the juicy, dripping berry against her nipple. The chilled fruit sensitized her skin, and her nipple pebbled almost painfully. Calla gasped, then moaned as Daniel's lips closed around the tender bud.

"This is how I like my strawberries," he told her, giving her a final lick.

Calla's laugh was cut off when he gave her second nipple the same treatment. She leaned back in the chair and let herself appreciate his tender assault. She knew he could be strong when he wanted to be, but right now he was so gentle. Even the occasional brush of his fangs against her flesh didn't bother her. So he had odd teeth and an odder diet—Daniel was also a wonderful lover.

Right now he was teasing her, so she decided to play too. She grabbed the dish of chocolate and as he squeezed more strawberry juice on her nipples, she took a finger full of the fondue. Just as he leaned over to lick it, she put the finger into her mouth and shot the taste through their link.

Daniel sat upright and stared at her. Calla sucked her finger and smiled around it. "Like a little chocolate with that?"

He took the bowl of fondue from her and put it aside, along with the strawberry. "On second thought, I'd rather taste your flavor."

"Are you sure?"

He responded by grabbing her ankles and draping them over his shoulders, opening her up to him. Thrown off balance, Calla squealed and grabbed the chair seat, but Daniel took hold of her waist and secured her.

"Don't worry, little companion. I've got you." He then buried his head between her thighs and Calla didn't dare let go of the chair. He might hold her but she knew she'd collapse without him.

Scratch what she'd thought about Daniel being a wonderful lover...he was an exceptional lover. She'd rarely met a man willing to go down on her, and Daniel not

only didn't need to be asked, but seemed to take absolute pleasure with each lick and nibble.

In fact, she knew just how much he enjoyed it. Through their link she felt his delight in her taste. She also realized how every one of her gasps of pleasure gave him a sense of accomplishment. He liked making a woman feel good.

No...it wasn't that exactly. He liked making her feel good. She was special to him.

If she hadn't been overwhelmed by passion she might have started crying. It had been a long time since she'd been special to anyone. Without even trying hard she could imagine falling a little bit in love with this nightwalker.

Of course she couldn't admit it, and should even keep it quiet within her own mind, since Daniel could read at least some of her outward thoughts. Nothing spooked a man faster than a woman getting serious about him.

She was safe enough at the moment. Daniel had a one-track mind and was intent on making her come with his mouth. It wasn't at all hard to oblige him. She felt the touch of his mind, which she saw as a silver haze, attach to hers just before she climaxed.

As she recovered, she saw his look of self-satisfaction and resolved to do something about it. Turnabout was fair play after all. Calla sank to the floor before him and before he could do a thing to stop her, she had his robe open and her hands around his erection.

It was as long and as wide as she'd remembered and it took effort to stretch her lips around the tip. Daniel breathed out an appreciative sigh as her mouth closed over his cock. "This isn't necessary..." he started to say, but she interrupted him with her mind.

This would be my pleasure, Daniel.

He didn't argue further with her, just cupped the back of her head with his hands in tacit permission. He was too big to fit entirely in her mouth so Calla used her hand to stroke his shaft, while focusing her lips and tongue on the more sensitive tip of him.

Calla hadn't given many blowjobs in the past, but she knew the basics and soon realized that being able to tap into the way Daniel felt made it much easier to find out what he liked.

For example, he had this one spot just below the head of his cock that he loved to have nibbled. She used her tongue to play with that very sensitive place until Daniel's breathing grew hard.

"That's so good...so good..." and then he lost the ability to speak at all. All he could do was gasp as she took hold of his heavy balls and fondled them carefully.

Like it? she asked mentally.

Fuck, yes!

She touched his mind the way he'd done with her when she'd approached orgasm and found herself swept along as well. He bucked under her hands and mouth and then cried out as his cock erupted in her mouth. She had to swallow quickly as his semen poured out of him.

He was shaking when it was over, and then he grabbed her shoulders and pulled her up into his arms. "Thank you, little companion," he whispered into her ear.

"My pleasure." Calla licked her lips. "You know, you were right, you taste good...even without chocolate."

Chapter Four

Calla woke the next evening to blackness. For a moment she couldn't remember just where she was or how she'd gotten there, although she had to admit to being comfortable. Unlike her flophouse bed, this mattress was soft and the covers warm.

The hard body behind her was warm as well, if far more still than she'd expect a man to be in his sleep. She sat up to realize that the dream she'd had of a handsome stranger taking her into his home hadn't been a dream after all. The stranger lay next to her, apparently dead to the world.

Then she remembered who and what he was, and the dead part no longer seemed so much of a joke, even though he'd assured her he was quite alive. The way he lay with eyes closed and not breathing, she could have sworn he wasn't amongst the living.

After the incident in the kitchen, Daniel had hauled her back to the bedroom for another bath and a round of lovemaking that now had her aching from tits to crotch. She'd fallen asleep until he'd joined her just about dawn. She'd roused only to have him whisper something into her mind that put her back to sleep. Her last memory had been the sound of heavy shutters sliding closed over the bedroom windows.

The shutters were still closed and from the clock she realized it was still an hour or so before sunset. She wasn't sleepy any longer, but hungry and the idea of investigating the leftovers from her feast the night before sounded good. Unwilling to re-dress in her smelly uniform, she found a large T-shirt and a pair of sweatpants that were only a couple sizes too large for her.

She was enjoying reheated pasta in the shuttered kitchen when the apartment door buzzed once. Calla peered through the doorway just in time to see the bolt slide back and two people enter, a woman and a man, the latter heavily loaded down with packages.

"Just put them down over there, Albert," Calla heard the woman say. "I'll put the rest in the kitchen."

Not knowing what to do, Calla ducked back into the kitchen and hid behind the counter, hoping not to be noticed when the woman put a bag into the refrigerator.

Her hopes were dashed though. "Come out, come out wherever you are," the newcomer said humorously. "We know you're in here. Albert can hear you breathing."

Slowly Calla rose to her feet. The woman she faced was attractive, in her middle years, and had an amused expression on her face. She looked Calla up and down and nodded approvingly.

"What did I tell you, Albert? Daniel picked up another winner. I knew it the minute I saw the order that she'd be something special."

The man, a somewhat brutish fellow with a surprising amount of facial and body hair, sniffed the air then grinned. "She sure smells like nightwalker. He's been all over her. Can't say I blame him, she's choice."

Calla blushed, but the woman shook her head at the man. "Albert, how crude! The young lady will think we have no manners at all." She stepped forward and held out her hand. "I'm Mira Anton, dear, and this is my business partner, Albert Lupas. We handle special orders for the parafolk world."

She took the proffered hand. "I'm Calla Douglas."

"You can call me Al," he said. "In fact, you can call me anything you want."

Mira gave him an annoyed glance. "Please, pay no attention to my shapeshifter friend. This close to the full moon, he's quite impossible."

Shapeshifter? "You mean like a werewolf?"

"Now who's being crude," Al said. "We don't use that word."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm still learning all this."

"I'm sure you are." Suddenly Calla felt a strong voice in her mind and Mira's hand gripped hers more strongly. *But I think maybe you are a quick student.*

Shocked, Calla pulled away. Mira nodded smirking. "Oh, yes. Definitely a strong psi, even if untrained. I knew it the minute I saw that you were awake before dusk. Daniel won't like it that you were able to break free from him."

"I couldn't sleep any longer..."

"Oh, you don't need to explain it to me." Mira nodded. "Yes, yes. You'll do very well."

"I'm sorry...but what are you talking about?"

"As soon as Daniel lets you go I want you to come see me. I'll find you a new position, right away. There are plenty of nightwalkers who would give their right fang for an appetizing companion like you."

"But he and I..." Daniel was her lover now...wasn't he? He'd said the future would work out. Didn't that mean she had a chance of winning a longer place by his side?

"I told you his smell was all over her."

A sudden look of sympathy covered the woman's face. She played with a small gold star pendant she wore around her neck. "You and he. I know how that goes. But Daniel does this every year...he told you that didn't he?"

Calla had to nod.

Mira looked relieved. "He never keeps a companion very long. The good part is that he almost always finds some poor lost soul with psi talent and brings them to the parafolk. So everyone benefits in the end." She patted Calla's shoulder. "It will work out all right, you'll see."

The sound of a well-tuned motor started up and the shutters over the windows began to slide open. "It's dusk. We better get going." Mira pulled a card from her pocket and pressed it into Calla's hand. "You call this number, day or night, and I'll see that you're taken care of."

She headed for the door, but Al lingered behind. "You can call me, too, if you ever decide you want to step onto the wild side."

"But I'm not a shapeshifter..."

"Hey, I'm not prejudiced – I like a little norm meat now and then. You like it doggy style? I'm the original bad dog."

Al was so good-natured that Calla found she couldn't be offended. Instead she had to smile. "I'll keep it in mind."

He grinned at her. "That's all I ask."

"Time to go, Albert," Mira said impatiently from the door.

He joined her and they left, but just before the door closed he poked his head back in. "Enjoy the presents," he said then closed the door. The bolt slid shut again.

"Presents?" Calla slowly turned to examine the pile of bags and boxes they'd left behind. A moment later she squealed with delight.

* * * * *

When Daniel woke at dusk, he anticipated having his new companion in his bed, available for a quick cuddle...and bite. He reached for her, only to find the bed empty.

Annoyed, he sat up. He distinctly remembered putting her to bed last night and putting the compulsion into her mind to stay next to him. As he looked around, the shutters that automatically opened and closed with the fall and rise of the sun slowly slid back, revealing the twilight sky outside and reinforcing how empty his bed was.

Twilight on Christmas Eve...his least favorite night of the year. He'd told Calla that everyone had ghostly memories to haunt them and that he was no different. By tomorrow night he'd no longer need someone around, but on Christmas Eve he found it easier to keep distracted.

Taking a companion banished his annual holiday ghost and this year he'd even found a bonus, a woman of incredible sensuality who heated his blood unlike anyone he'd met in the past hundred years.

Trouble was, his coping mechanism seemed to have overcome the compulsion to stay put and had removed herself from his bed. Her mind was far stronger than he'd given her credit for, particularly given that she was untrained.

Of course, there was the way she'd shared the taste of her food last night. That had also been unexpected, but a pleasant surprise. His sister had been able to do that sometimes...he'd missed that.

Disconcerted by his wayward thought of Abigail, he got up and dressed in his usual black slacks and a black shirt before hunting down his missing companion. At least he felt her nearby in the apartment.

A sudden cry from the living room made him drop his shoes and run.

Her antipathy for the undecorated Christmas tree in the corner apparently forgotten, Calla sat in the midst of cheerful chaos. Around her clothes were scattered, obviously pulled from the pile of boxes and bags to one side. She was holding a pair of short-heeled boots to her feet, her face alive with sheer delight.

"I see my order arrived," he said with amusement.

Calla leapt to her feet and dashed over to him, throwing her arms around his neck and kissing him wildly. "Thank you so much!"

He meant to disentangle himself, but somehow his arms went around her waist instead and he just held her close. "It was my pleasure, Calla. After all, I have to have you properly dressed.

"Oh, Daniel, you bought more than enough for that!" She gestured to the dozen or so outfits littering the couch, tables and floor. "Look at all this! I've never seen such beautiful clothes. I can't wait to wear them."

Originally he'd planned to stay in tonight but now he wanted to take her out and show her off. He kissed her gently on the forehead. "Pick out something pretty and get dressed, Calla. I'm taking you out for dinner."

She didn't need to be told twice. Arms loaded with clothes, Calla disappeared toward the bedroom.

* * * * *

It was far later when they returned to the apartment. Daniel tossed his car keys onto the small entryway table angrily. Behind him Calla entered, a slight smile on her face. He turned to face her and her smile disappeared.

"I can't believe that miserable nightwalking jerk came on to you that way in front of me." Daniel said.

"I'm sure that Mr. Harper didn't mean any disrespect. He was just being friendly."

Too friendly! Daniel shot at her. "It is beyond rude to ask someone else's companion to dance."

Calla hung up the warm coat that had come with the rest of her new wardrobe on the entryway hooks. "He only asked if I was going to be at the parafolk Christmas party tomorrow night, and if so to save a dance for him." She turned to face him. "You told me yourself that you don't keep companions beyond Christmas day, so by then I won't have your mark."

Daniel's chin lifted. "The mark is there tonight and I won't have anyone behaving as if it isn't."

Calla put her hands on his chest. "I haven't forgotten it's there." She decided to change the subject. "I had no idea there were so many nightwalkers and shapeshifters in Los Angeles. That nightclub was full of them."

"The Dark Water Tavern specializes in providing for parafolk of all kinds. It's owned by the city chief, Jonathan Knottman. He and his lady host the party tomorrow night as well."

"Will you be there, Daniel?"

"I don't normally go. I...like to be alone."

She wasn't so sure of that, but didn't argue. There was something about Christmas that haunted her nightwalker and she wondered if she'd ever find out what it was.

"So what should we do now?"

Daniel cheered up. "Now we listen to old Christmas albums and we decorate the tree."

Chapter Five

"Decorate?" Calla turned to face the evergreen tree she'd been attempting to ignore since last night. Old, familiar dread filled her and she backed several steps away.

Daniel acted as if he hadn't noticed and went to where several plastic crates were stacked against the wall. He opened one up and pulled out a carefully wrapped bundle of lights. He tossed it to her and without thinking Calla caught it. She stared at the unlit lights while he pulled out two more bundles.

"First we have to test them." He plugged the bundles into the wall, and smiled approvingly when they all lit up. "These are good. What about the one you have?"

Calla dropped it onto the couch. "I don't think I can do this."

Daniel caught her before she could run from the living room. "Time to banish that ghost, Calla. What it is about Christmas trees that upsets you?"

She shook her head, but he didn't give up.

"Don't tell me you've always hated Christmas. I haven't met a little kid yet who didn't love the holiday."

Calla stilled and a rough sob slipped out. "Oh, when I was little, I loved it. I loved the lights, and the decorations." She stared up at him and saw the sympathy in his eyes. He really wanted to know what was wrong.

"I loved them so much, I'd beg my mother to take me to the stores so I could see them. We didn't have anything at home...my mother always said we were too poor to waste money on stuff we didn't need, but I would stare at the decorations when we went out. And so, one Christmas Eve she took me to see the best display in the biggest department store in the city. It took us three buses to get there, but I'd never seen anything so beautiful..." Her voice trailed off, remembering that night.

Daniel's arm slipped around her shoulders and he hugged her to his chest. "What happened, Calla?"

For a moment she had trouble finding the words. "The tree looked like it was a hundred feet tall and there were huge presents and a sleigh underneath. It glowed with lights, glittery balls and shiny tinsel. I stared at it for what seemed like hours...and when I looked around, I realized my mother wasn't there."

Daniel went very still. "What do you mean she wasn't there?"

"She'd left me. I looked for her everywhere, but she was gone."

Daniel's flash of anger felt like fire through their link. "Your mother abandoned you on Christmas Eve in a department store?"

"I was afraid but I thought she'd come back and be angry if I wasn't there so I hid in the sleigh until everyone was gone. I was only about four..."

For the first time in years, Calla burst into tears. Daniel held her close and stroked her back, but said nothing and she sensed he was waiting for her to finish her story, which she told through her sobs.

"I waited but she didn't come back...I spent the night under the Christmas tree with the lights still glowing. In the morning a security guard found me and called the police. By then my mother had disappeared...there was no way to track her... I never saw her again. Since then even the glimpse of a tree terrifies me."

Daniel continued to hold her until her sobs finally subsided. By then she could sense his thoughts, his anger over what her mother had done, his understanding why colored lights on a tree held bad memories for her.

"You were poor and she probably thought you'd be better off without her. Abandoning you where you were happy probably made it easier for her to walk away."

She hadn't thought of it that way before. They had been so poor...maybe her mother had loved her and it had been desperation that made her leave. "I suppose

you're right...and in a way my trying to commit suicide was just as much running away."

"I thought you said it was an accident that you fell off the roof."

"I did...but I was thinking of jumping at the time." It was the first time she'd admitted it aloud. "But as soon as I fell, I knew it wasn't the answer to my problems."

"I'm glad that's true. Suicide is a permanent solution when problems are almost always temporary. Even so, I have to admit, Calla, that's one pretty big ghost to get rid of."

"I'm sorry, Daniel. I don't want to spoil your night."

"You aren't going to spoil my night, Calla. We're going to deal with this, you and I."

She looked up at him and saw determination in his face. "How's that?"

"We're going to make decorating this tree so much fun that the memory of this Christmas Eve will banish that old one of yours like the moldy ghost it is."

Calla looked dubiously at him. "How?"

Daniel smiled confidently. "Oh, I'll think of something. At least tonight I intend to fulfill every sensual fantasy you've ever had. You willing to try it, Calla?"

She eyed the still undecorated tree, and then him. What harm could it do her? She nodded slowly and Daniel handed her the bundle of lights she'd dropped. "First thing is to test the lights. You do that while I get the music started."

Feeling as if she was stepping into deep water, Calla took the string of lights over to the electrical socket and tentatively plugged it in. Every light glowed bright and she found herself smiling at the colors. From behind her soft music began playing, a holiday album by some musician who'd been dead for a long time, but somehow the music seemed to fit the mood.

Calla turned to see Daniel watching her, his gaze cautious. She held out the bundle of glowing lights. "It works, Daniel."

Daniel smiled slowly. "Yeah, I guess it does."

Turning to face the tree, Calla approached it with the strand of lights, Daniel by her side. He put one strand on and all she had to do was plug hers into the end and drape it over the branches. Simple to think about doing.

Not so simple to do. Her old feelings of loss and abandonment rose inside her and she stopped a few feet away.

A sob rose in her. "I can't do this."

Yes you can. In her head Daniel's voice beckoned and coaxed. Warmth slid through her as well, like a hand moving up her back. It seemed to press her forward, and Calla stumbled toward the tree. *Just put it onto the tree.*

She reached forward and plugged it in and the strand lit up. Calla stared at it, mesmerized by the colors. The invisible hand came back, stroking her back then sliding around to her breasts. Calla gasped as she felt fingers tweak her nipple. She spun to face Daniel, his hands filled with lights and a mischievous look on his face.

"How are you doing that?"

He stared at her breast and the fingers settled into a soft stroking motion. "We're linked. I think of something I want to do to you and you feel it. Do you like it?"

Calla licked her lips. The teasing massage of her nipple was making her crazy. "Yes."

Then put the lights on the tree!

Too distracted to think of anything but compliance, Calla quickly draped the strand over the branches under the first set of lights. Before she could turn she felt Daniel's body pressed against her. His breath was hot on the back of her neck. He ran a line of line of kisses along her neck, his fangs sharp but not breaking the skin.

Another set of lights was pressed into her hand. *Do the same with these.*

His smell and warmth supporting her, Calla did as she was told. She gasped as they lit up, but it was easier to hang them. As soon as she finished that set of lights, he gave

her another, and then another. In the meantime he stayed behind her with his lips on her neck. The phantom fingers kept up their massage of her nipples and Calla's fears slid away.

Daniel pulled her back from the tree and engaged her in a deep kiss. "That's all the lights," he murmured.

"So what do we do now?"

His real fingers began working the buttons on her green silk blouse. "I have something in mind," he whispered softly in her ear, his voice loaded with sensual promise. She shuddered as the silk fell from her shoulders, revealing the black lacy bra that had been amongst his purchases. She'd never seen underwear as beautiful as what he'd bought...and he'd even gotten her size correct.

Daniel seemed pleased as well. He cupped his hand around the delicate lace. "Now that's what I call proper packaging."

Calla couldn't help teasing him. "Wait until you see the panties that go with it." Daniel's eyes glowed briefly and Calla glowed as well.

Close your eyes, Calla.

She did as she was told, then gasped as something cool and smooth was slid along the upper curve of her breast. Opening her eyes, she saw a pair of red glass balls in Daniel's hand. In a sudden move he hooked them through the lace of her bra cup, the hooks cold against her sensitized nipples. Calla looked down to see the pair dangling from her breasts.

He grinned at her. "Time to put the balls on."

Reaching for his shirt, Calla toyed with the top button. "Only if we stay dressed the same."

Making no move to stop her, Daniel let her undo his shirt and toss it on top of hers on the couch. He gave her a smile full of fangs. "I've never decorated a tree without clothes on...could be a new trend. Remove an article with each new set of ornaments."

"I thought you said you had fun before."

Some of his humor faded. "With my sisters – not quite the same kind of fun."

"I imagine not. Well, we'll just have to make up the rules for ourselves."

Daniel picked up a pair of green balls and eyed her lacy bra. "Where should I hang these, I wonder?"

Calla unhooked the balls on her bra. "Let's put them on the tree," she said, and did, and then stepped back to realize, "That was so easy."

Behind her Daniel slipped an arm around her and handed her another ornament. He slid an arm around her waist and nuzzled her neck and through the fabric of their pants she felt the solid rod of his cock harden.

The phantom fingers returned, this time moving down her backside and into the cleft of her ass. Calla almost dropped a ball.

"I think you're right," Daniel murmured. "Let's put the balls on the tree."

With shaky fingers she hung the one in her hand, and then the next several he gave her. He stayed close to her, handing her ornaments, more often than not standing behind her, his chest smooth satin against her bared back. Even when he wasn't right next to her, she felt his presence in the phantom fingers that moved over her body, tweaking her nipples, stroking her clit, and paying special attention to her anus, something she'd never really experienced before. She wasn't sure she liked it...but it was...*interesting*.

She hung one ball high, and in its shining surface saw her face and Daniel's behind her, his eyes glowing, mouth nibbling at her neck.

"I can see us..." she pointed to the reflective surface.

Daniel turned her to face him. "It's an old tale that nightwalkers don't cast reflections. They said it was because we lack souls...but my soul is right where it belongs, here with you."

And then he kissed her and she knew he was right because she felt his soul wrap itself around her. He slid her bra off her shoulders and undid the catch, letting her breasts spill into his hands. Again he worshipped the tips, sucking hard on her nipples.

She tried to grab for his crotch, but he stopped her. "I'm set to go off like a rocket if you play games with that tonight." Then he grabbed a length of garland and wrapped it around her wrists, tying them in front.

"Time to lose another layer of clothes, Calla." He tugged on her pants, pulling them off her. He had to take her boots off as well, and now all she wore was her underwear, black lace that as much highlighted as hid her private places.

Calla eyed his pants and tugged on the garland around her wrists. "I wonder if I could get those off with my teeth?"

"No need." He stripped out of them and Calla couldn't help but smile at his totally naked body.

"Don't you believe in underwear, Daniel?"

"Only when it looks like it does on you."

She lifted her bound hands. "So what do we do now?"

"Now you hold still while I make you come a few times."

He lifted her onto the couch and spread her legs. Closing his mouth over the crotch of her panties, he sucked hard. *You've been getting very excited, Calla. You're dripping wet.*

That surprises you?

He leaned back and licked his lips. "Not really. But I haven't made you come yet." Daniel did something with his teeth and tongue that made her legs twitch and her body scream for release and just before it did, he reached behind her and teased her anus with his real finger this time. That sent her over the edge and she screamed as the first crest of pleasure hit her.

Carefully Daniel pulled her underwear off and held it up so she could see how wet the crotch was. "I think you really want me, Calla."

"Maybe."

"Oh I think more than maybe. You want me, and no other nightwalker."

He really was jealous of the attention she'd gotten at the club. Hope rose in Calla...maybe he really would rather keep her than let her go to another man. She knew she didn't want to leave him.

"I want you...anyone else will have to wait unless you give me up."

She felt that he didn't like her answer but he didn't say anything. Instead he pulled her arms over her head and covered her with his body, teasing her pussy with his cock but not penetrating her. He did not smile but stared into her eyes.

You are mine, and no other's tonight!

And tonight that was true no matter what happened tomorrow, or the next day, and that Calla readily agreed to.

Now he imprisoned her with his body, hers taut beneath him, her hands bound, her legs held fast by his. She couldn't move unless he let her. Calla felt his will bear down on her. This was not the coaxing, gentle lover from last night but a man intent on getting his way. He wanted her to acknowledge what he was to her...her nightwalker, who rescued and saved her. A man who pushed her into facing her deepest fear and vanquishing it.

She surrendered to him. *I belong to you and no other. I swear, Daniel.*

Just the hint of a smile touched his face. He leaned down to ravage her lips with the kiss of a conqueror. Calla's mouth opened wide and she accepted his tongue delving deep within her mouth, tasting her.

Through the link she sensed her own taste, sweet and spicy. It fired her senses further and she spread her legs wide. *I need you.*

Daniel grabbed her wrists with both hands, stretching her against the couch. She couldn't have moved if she wanted to. He pushed his cock again into her aching pussy and entered her slowly, inch by agonizing inch, taking possession with strength and

caution, like an invading army, on guard, uncertain of its welcome. He was so large...as big as last night, but then there had been the novelty of having sex compounding the experience. Now she knew him...and yet he felt even larger. He felt huge and she felt nearly split apart by his entry.

She felt split by what she felt for him as well. She wanted him...she needed him in her life as well as her body. But he wasn't really hers, in spite of his words. He needed to believe that she would look to him only, but she knew in her heart their relationship had no future.

It was hell to know this and feel the heaven of his entry at the same time.

But then he finally reached the deepest part of her. With one last push he completed his entry and Calla lay panting beneath him. A hint of red glowed in the blankness of Daniel's eyes.

Mine now. The silver of his mind covered her and she let her mind join with his, pink and silver together.

Yours...

He moved, thrusting in and out and Calla cried out. "Yours!"

Mine.

Yes, yours.

And then there were no words possible. He thrust and thrust and Calla lifted her hips to meet each one. He picked a rhythm that she felt in her bones, and they didn't stop. Calla reached climax and shrieked, but he didn't show signs of finishing.

Eventually he slowed. "I'm not ready to come yet."

She'd come twice, at least. "What are you waiting for?"

He lifted and pulled out of her completely and Calla moaned at his absence. Daniel pulled her onto the rug, soft under her. "Turn over," he said.

She did, with his help, her hands still fastened together. He positioned her so she was facing the tree, her rear end high in the air. Two of Daniel's fingers found their way

into her pussy while his thumb played elaborate games with her clit. Calla leaned back into his hand, again aware that his other hand was again teasing her anus, this time with serious intent.

What do you have in mind, nightwalker?

Going where no man has gone before...

Certain of that?

He slapped her rear lightly. "I know you better than that, Calla. No one has ever fucked you in the ass."

"I'm not so sure this will work."

"I am." One finger was inside her, then two, then three. He was in her mind, testing her readiness. She wasn't so sure of the third finger.

Wait here...

And then Daniel was gone and she was alone, facing the tree. For an instant Calla felt her old fear, but then she knew he'd be back. He hadn't abandoned her.

Miss me? And he'd returned, stroking her back gently. Then something warm and smooth was being spread into the tight muscle that guarded her backside. *Just a little lubricant. I don't want to hurt you.*

He was serious. "Daniel," she said, and she wanted to protest, but there was something so erotic about where his hands were. Her body relaxed into his control.

Then it wasn't his fingers anymore. Something large was pushing its way into her anus. He took it slow, pushing then easing off. Again, then again. Then he pushed and didn't stop and she felt the tight muscle blossom open, letting him inside. She'd expected pain, but he'd prepared her well enough and all she felt was pressure and a delicious fullness she hadn't experienced before.

He seated his cock completely inside her and spread himself along her back, supporting his weight with his hands on the floor. "Are you all right?"

Was she? "I guess."

He pulled out and entered again, his heavy balls slapping unexpectedly against her pussy. Well, maybe she was a little better than all right. "That's...interesting..."

Calla, you are soooo fucking tight, I can barely stand it. I know you aren't used to this, but I had to have all of you tonight.

And she knew that was true.

His mouth was on her neck, licking, nibbling, tasting. She knew what he wanted. *Take what you need, nightwalker mine. Drink deep as you want.*

She felt his fangs against her skin, then the sharp near pain of them piercing the skin over her vein. Again she tasted what he tasted, blood, sweet and satisfying. He sucked and stroked and Calla again felt her body succumb to yet another orgasm, bigger than any before. The phantom fingers she'd felt before returned and were suddenly everywhere at once, on her clit, her nipples, and deep in her pussy, enhancing the sensation as Daniel's cock burrowed into her ass.

She was fixed in place, hands bound, Daniel holding her to the floor. All she could do was surrender into climax...so surrender she did. Calla cried out, again and again, each orgasm bigger than the one before.

Daniel stiffened and stopped feeding, licking clean her neck. *Now Calla, NOW!*

They came together this time, in a crash of pleasure that drove away all haunting thoughts of the past, the present, or even the future. Daniel groaned and shouted Calla's name before collapsing on top of her, his elbows supporting his weight and keeping her from being crushed.

Afterward Calla lay in his arms, her hands unbound, the garland a pile of glittering gold on the floor beside her. She gazed up at the Christmas tree, bright with lights and gleaming ornaments.

"It really is pretty, isn't it?" she said softly.

Daniel turned her so he was staring into her face. He stroked her cheek. "It's beautiful, Calla. Just like you."

* * * * *

The tree was finished, bright with lights and balls and garlands and topped with a golden star. Nestled in a blanket on the couch, Calla lay in Daniel's arms, half asleep, watching what he'd called one of his favorite Christmas movies on the television.

She couldn't remember ever feeling so warm and contented before. Or loved.

The movie ended and Daniel rose to shut off the TV. He stretched and looked at the window. "Day is coming. I hate to say it, but we're going to have to go to bed."

Calla's happiness faded a little. "So soon?"

"I don't control the sunrise and wherever I am I fall asleep when it comes up. I'd rather be in my own bed."

He went to the tree and pulled a small, decorated box out from beneath the branches. "This is for you."

Calla sat up. "But you already gave me the clothes...and I haven't given you anything."

Daniel smiled but she thought it was a sad one. "You've given me a wonderful holiday, Calla."

She opened the box. Inside was a small golden star-shaped pendant on a gold chain. It struck her as familiar and then she remembered where she'd seen it before. The memory chilled her. "Mira has one of these. You give these to your companions."

His face turned guarded. "You met Mira? I thought I'd smelled Albert earlier."

"They delivered the clothes and she gave me her card. She said I should call her once you were through with me."

He winced at her wording. "Mira was my guest about thirty years ago."

She simply stared at him. "You've been doing this that long, having a companion only for a few days a year? That's your ghost, isn't it? That you don't like to be alone this one night. Why?"

For a moment she wasn't sure he was going to answer her. "My sister died Christmas Eve."

"Your sister?"

"Most of the time our families don't accept it when a loved one converts, or the nightwalker hides it from them, but that only works for so long...eventually they realize you aren't aging. My sisters were different. They accepted my change...my youngest sister, Abigail, even insisted that the family move all of the celebrating to the night of Christmas Eve. We decorated the tree that night and opened presents after midnight. She did it so I could enjoy the holiday with them."

"How wonderful, Daniel."

He looked away. "Yes, it was. I loved them so much, especially Abigail."

"What happened to them?"

"They were mortal, Calla. One by one they grew old and died. Abigail was the last. I offered to make her like me I don't know how many times but she said she preferred to live the way she did. She wouldn't even let me make her a companion. She lived in this apartment with me until she died...I think people thought I was her grandson. We still celebrated Christmas though, until she died...it was her favorite holiday. That's why I find it better to have a guest that night, someone I just met."

"You celebrate it with a stranger every year. Why not be with someone who loves you?"

"Only to see them die? Nightwalkers live a long time, Calla and it is so hard to see the ones you care about pass on. I've been through it many times already."

Calla stared at the necklace in her hand. It was true then, he intended to let her go. "So you simply stopped caring, or wanting anyone to love you?"

Daniel looked at her. "We just met last night, Calla. We've shared some special moments but that's far too short a time to really fall in love."

"Is it?" She faced the tree, the lights dazzling her eyes...or was it tears making the miniature lights dance? "Are you so sure? I know that I love you."

"Don't say that Calla," he said, his voice hushed.

"Is it really that hard for you to hear?"

Daniel took hold of her arms. "Calla, I don't want to hurt you. Tomorrow, when I take the marks off, you'll go on with your life."

She was quiet, her heart breaking. "Why wait until then?"

"What?"

Calla stared at him. "Why not do it now? That way I'll be gone before you wake up and you won't have to face me at all."

"But I thought..."

Suddenly she was angrier than she'd ever been. "You thought I'd let you fuck me tomorrow, drink from me, then discard me like you have all the others? If you're going to remove the marks, do it now. You're right—I should get on with my life."

Daniel's eyes narrowed and his jaw clenched. "Very well." He bent his head to her neck, sinking his fangs into the marks he'd left on her neck. She flinched, but he held her firmly to him. He didn't take much, just enough to open the wounds to clear them. Then he licked them clean, leaving no trace that there had ever been marks on her neck.

Once they were gone Calla felt the link between them dissipate. He whispered. "You are no longer my companion. Go with my blessing."

He rose from the couch. "There's a suitcase in the spare bedroom to pack your clothes in. You said Mira gave you her number. Go ahead and call her now and she'll set up whatever you need."

"That's it then?"

For a moment she thought he wouldn't answer her.

"Goodbye, Calla. I'll always remember you," he said, but the words sounded bitter and he didn't look back as he exited the room.

Chapter Six

Daniel woke with the sunset, and the sound of the automatic lightproof shutters in his room slowly sliding apart. The twilight sky greeted him, but his bed felt cold and empty. Empty because Calla wasn't in it and hadn't been at all.

Odd how he missed her even though she'd only shared his bed once. He'd never even had a chance to wake up with her and now she was gone. By now Mira would have collected her and Calla was probably far across town.

Daniel pulled on sweatpants and made his way to the kitchen. Most likely his serum supply had been replenished, as well as his weekly staples of bagged blood. He'd get some living blood later tonight to supplement it, but a glass of O positive would be fine for now.

He warmed the blood in the microwave to just body temperature, took a tentative sip and couldn't resist a sigh. There just wasn't any comparison with the taste of Calla, but it was nutrition.

Sitting in the breakfast nook, he wondered what she was doing, but the phone interrupted his dinner.

"Daniel, is Calla there?" Mira's voice sounded concerned. "She called this morning and said she'd call again when she was ready to be picked up, but I haven't heard from her."

"No...I thought she'd gone with you. Maybe she's still asleep." Carrying the handset, Daniel moved through the apartment to the guest bedroom. A suitcase sat on the bed, partially filled with Calla's new clothes, but the bed was made.

The box with her necklace sat on the top, next to the green blouse she'd worn last night. Without thinking, Daniel picked it up and sniffed her delicate scent on the fabric. "Her clothes are still here."

"Then she's probably still there somewhere." Mira paused. "Daniel, she didn't sound right last night when she called. If she is there, you should find her."

Daniel turned off the phone and returned to the living room. It was as he'd left it last night, miniature lights glowing and shining off the ornaments and garlands. No sign of Calla, although her scent lingered in the room, and the couch and throw were still warm from where she'd probably spent the day.

He took in the scene and alarm sped through him. Just like her mother, he'd abandoned her in a room full of Christmas cheer—the long-ago painful experience that had plagued her all her life. What effect would his thoughtlessness have? Surely she wasn't suicidal anymore, but...

He reached out with his mind, hoping even without the link he'd somehow find her but there was no trace of her in the apartment. Even so, maybe she was still somewhere in the building.

Daniel went back to get the green blouse and sniffed it hard, filling his nose with her scent. Perhaps he wasn't quite a bloodhound, but he had a far better sense of smell than any norm. He didn't bother with shoes but grabbed his jacket before leaving. Walking around his building bare-chested would get him talked about.

Leaving the apartment, he discovered her smell was fresh and strong near the door to the stairwell that led to the roof, and terror gripped him.

The roof? Fifteen stories above the street, a long enough drop if oblivion was what she was looking for. Oblivion for her—a lifetime alone for him.

Daniel took the stairs three steps at a time, a silent prayer in his mind. *Help me find her in time...* It was too far past the full moon for him to fly to her rescue this time.

When he arrived, he breathed a sigh of relief, then concern. Calla was there, alive and well, but she sat on the low wall that edged the roofline, her feet dangling over the street below.

Daniel froze, afraid any move he made might send her off. He couldn't stand that, if he were the reason for her death. Not now, not when...

His heart ached with sudden knowledge of the truth. Somehow in the past two days he'd fallen in love with her. If Calla died, it would be like losing Abigail again and that ghost would haunt him forever, worse because he knew he was responsible.

The air was chilly, but she wore the warm jacket he'd purchased for her. Daniel clutched his own closer around him. As a nightwalker he didn't feel the cold as much as a normal human, but he still felt the bitterness and it was more than the air that chilled him.

He couldn't lose Calla now, not to death—or to anything else he realized. It was more than just Christmas that haunted him. He didn't want to be alone anymore at all.

Daniel took a cautious step forward. Maybe he could grab her and pull her back?

Are you going to stand there all night, or are you going to come sit with me? Calla's gentle mental voice broke his thoughts. It surprised him to know how strong she'd gotten, to bespeak him without the link, but then again many things surprised him about Calla.

Daniel moved to the wall, sitting gingerly on the edge as she did. Calla glanced at his bare feet dangling next to her boots and he felt her amusement. *Didn't have time to dress?*

I wanted to find you...

You were afraid I was going to jump off the roof. Calla sighed and spoke aloud. "I told you before that suicide wasn't the answer."

"I know...but I thought maybe..."

It's all right, Daniel. I can live with myself now.

She lapsed into silence. As the sky darkened, lights twinkled to life along the rooflines and balconies of the nearby buildings.

"Why are you up here?"

"I wanted to see the lights, Daniel. They are beautiful, aren't they?"

"Yes." He had to know what she was thinking. "Why didn't you go to Mira?"

"After I talked to her I realized I didn't really want another nightwalker taking care of me. Being with you has taught me I'd rather stand on my own two feet—I don't need rescuing anymore. I wanted to tell you that before I left and I didn't want to leave things the way they were between us."

How strong she'd become—it took his breath away. "I've been thinking too. You were right... I was afraid to let someone get close. But somehow you've gotten to me anyway. I want you to be my companion again."

She glanced at him cautiously. "Until when—Christmas next year?"

"I was thinking more about Christmas in 2205."

Calla turned to face him and he rejoiced at the hope in her eyes. "Two hundred years from now? Do you think that's long enough?"

She laughed and Daniel laughed briefly with her. "In a way, I've been running away as well...from love and what it would mean."

"You lost your loved one on Christmas."

"And now I've found someone else to love, and to love me back."

Calla watched him steadily. "I'll still be mortal."

"I understand that. But companions live a very long time."

"Two hundred years?"

"Sometimes." Daniel reached for her cheek and stroked it. "But it doesn't matter how much time we have so long as we're together."

Very well. I'll stay. She swung herself back over the wall, and mock glared at his bare feet. "And as my first act as your soon-to-be companion, I insist you get into the bathtub and warm up."

"Only if you come with me and let me mark you again. This time for good."

Calla smiled, and it was the best Christmas present Daniel had ever been given. He stood and pulled her into his arms and their lips met in a kiss that left him too breathless for speech.

Fortunately he could still talk mentally. *After that I'm taking you to that parafolk party tonight and making it clear to everyone that you belong to me and me alone.*

She laughed. *Now that sounds like fun!*

"Merry Christmas, Calla!"

"Merry Christmas to you too, my nightwalker love."

About the Author

Cricket Starr lives in the San Francisco Bay area with her husband of more years than she chooses to count. She loves fantasies, particularly sexual fantasies, and sees her writing as an opportunity to test boundaries. Her driving ambition is to have more fun than anyone should or could have. While published in other venues under her own name, she's found a home for her erotica writing here at Ellora's Cave.

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Also by Cricket Starr

Divine Interventions 1: Violet Among the Roses

Divine Interventions 2: Echo In the Hall

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Ellora's Cavemen: Legendary Tails I

Hollywood After Dark: Fangs for the Memories

Hollywood After Dark: Ghosts of Christmas Past

Holiday Reflections *anthology*

Memories To Come

The Doll

Two Men and a Lady *anthology*

If you are a fan of Cricket's Hollywood After Dark vampire stories, be sure to see the first in the series, *All Night Inn*, at Cerridwen Press (www.cerridwenpress.com), written under the name Janet Miller.



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