

Christmas Cookies



Noel, No Way
MARDI BALLOU

Changeling Press

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Bah, humbug. For vampire Carlie, Christmas is a time to bury herself in archives and do research while everyone else parties. She wants to distance herself from the celebrations so she can forget the time Vincenzo made her his Christmas bride. Three nasty spirits come along, determined to get her attention and change her mind. Along the way, they drag Carlie, kicking and screaming, into the past, the present and the future.

Vincenzo got it right when he picked Carlie as his bride. Not knowing the full power of their bond and all it entails, he messed up. Now time is running out for him, unless Carlie opts to save him. Can the spirits open her heart in time for another Christmas miracle -- or is it too late?

Chapter One

Bah, humbug! Carlie Pierino had managed to get all the way to Christmas Eve without letting any fool entrap her in seasonal stupidity -- and she wasn't about to let anyone mess with this year's perfect track record.

"I can't believe you're being such a Scrooge." The pain-in-the-neck formerly known as Carlie's best friend and condo mate Tracey had even tried blackmailing Carlie to waste her time at the usual insipid *holiday* parties.

"More like *screwed* if I blow this deadline." Carlie watched Tracey pile on the makeup for tonight's gathering.

Tracey put down her lipstick and rolled her eyes. "The only one setting those deadlines for you is yourself. Working Christmas Eve. You're worse than Scrooge mated with the Grinch."

"*Moi?*" Carlie asked, her voice a tad snide. "That's so not true. Unlike those two misfits, I love Christmas. It gives me a clear shot at using the research library without having to wade through the typical cast of idiots who clog up the facility. My Christmas present to me. I'll finish my damn research and get my current chapter drafted in time to toast in the New Year."

The other woman raised an eyelid heavy with glitter shadow and glared. "Right. Knowing you, you'll find some other research to do that night, too." She waggled her mascara wand at Carlie. "I'm onto your tricks, Ms. Anti-Social. We all are."

"Whatever. I'm outta here." Carlie managed to move fast enough to shut out the rest of Tracey's ongoing commentary. Sheesh. Why did everyone think they knew how to run her life better than she did?

* * *

It had friggin' snowed. Not completely a surprise in Upstate New York in the winter, but Carlie hadn't dressed for it. Fortunately cold and ice weren't real problems for vampires. That didn't mean she liked the cold, messy white stuff, but at least it didn't slow her down much. Now everyone would be carrying on about their *White Christmas* crap. With any luck there'd be a blizzard and she'd have nights of peace and quiet while they were marooned in the halls they'd decked with tinsel and holly.

Carlie had practically had to sign in blood to get access to the rare vampire archives at the university. Slight exaggeration. But she had had to suck up to the chief archivist. *Suck up* -- vampire humor. To think, Tracey accused her of having no sense of humor. Once she completed her research, Carlie would show them all her sense of humor when she had the last laugh. She, Carlie Pierino, was writing the definitive history of vampires. Everyone -- even people who'd forgotten she existed -- would buy her books and marvel at her brilliance. She could see it now. All she needed was another century or so without distractions to get it done to her standards...

Though the locked door would not have kept her out, Carlie had convinced the custodian to entrust her with the key. The inside of the library was gratifyingly dark, though maybe a pinch too cold. Hell, she had the run of the place. She turned up the heat, got the carton of documents she was currently working her way through and settled into her favorite carrel.

Before digging into the box, she took a moment to savor the almost quiet of the deserted building. With her sensitive hearing, having to work with a crowd was crazy making, and this library was almost never empty. Now she heard the whirr of the heater fan and a few random squeaks, but she could deal.

Carlie took the lid off the box and put it carefully aside. She lifted the fragile copy of Viscount Vladimir's Journal, took her thermos of B positive -- Tracey had done the blood bank run last week -- and settled back to sip and read. Yeah, the archivist would have a fit if he saw Carlie drinking near the material, but she knew what she was doing. The snow had started coming down again, turning her thoughts in a direction she did not want to pursue.

She needed to get to work, but the snowflakes fell in a hypnotic pattern, drawing her away from her book and into a cold icy blackness.

* * *

Carlie must have lost several minutes. When she came to, she realized she was no longer alone. "Who's there?"

Silence. The nape of Carlie's neck prickled as the something that shouldn't be there in the library crept up behind her. Not that she was scared or anything. Who or what could hurt her?

She summoned up her coldest, most vampiric tone. "You're not supposed to be here. This library is closed."

A burst of bright light. "Then why are you here, Carolina Magdalena Teresa Pierino?"

No one knew her full name. Hearing it stunned Carlie more than the light and the presence of an intruder. "Who the hell are you? Why are you here?"

Chains rattled. Carlie's heartbeat sped up as the sound brought back memories of Vincenzo. She gasped. "Vincenzo?" Surely that wasn't *her* voice wobbling. Silence. Besides, she knew it couldn't be him. He was gone from her life.

Something completely shrouded -- male, female, animal, vegetable, mineral? -- swirled into view and cackled. "Vincenzo is not here." It held out a skeletal hand. "Come with me now. I'm to take you to him."

Sheesh. Carlie relaxed fractionally. She couldn't believe even Vincenzo would come up with a trick like this. Not that she'd seen him in... Could it be decades? She shivered with remembered passion. It couldn't have been so long since they'd last -- She swallowed hard, which didn't even start to dissolve the hard lump in her chest. She'd heard he'd burned up, gone in a heap of ash after they split. Not that she'd cared. Much.

A bony claw clamped around her arm. "Come with me now."

Carlie could easily have freed herself from the creature's clutches but curiosity had set in. Still, she didn't want the creature to feel it was in control. "You can let go of

me now and tell me exactly where we're going. I know it can't possibly be as you say, to Vincenzo."

It cackled, which got on Carlie's nerves. When she went to wriggle free, the deceptively fragile thing didn't budge. A frisson of fear, long unfamiliar, wafted through her. "I don't want to go." Her words fell impotently around her as the creature propelled them both up into the cold darkness of the winter's night, the snowfall now heavier.

So much for her unimpeded night of research. Carlie hurled every curse she knew at her captor and the night sky, to no effect. She hated the silence, usually her friend, even more than her unaccustomed helplessness as this thing's prisoner. What if this creature meant to harm her, and life as she'd known it was over?

"I mean you no injury. The only force I will exert is that which is necessary to guide you." It now spoke in a raspy sound, definitely not human nor any other creature she could identify. Carlie's inner researcher started to take mental notes, and then everything went black.

* * *

Thousands of candles burned, casting light from sconces above and one huge, ornate candelabra on a table in the center of the mansion's great room. Carlie gasped as awareness returned. She knew this room. She started to say so to her captor, who vehemently urged silence. "Watch and feel. All will be clear soon."

The past had come to life. She and Vincenzo sat thigh to thigh on the black damask loveseat, and he was raising a gold goblet in toast. "To you, *cara mia*, in deepest appreciation for joining me in this frozen wasteland."

"Nothing can remain frozen with you present." In the vision she now witnessed, her eyes had gleamed with youthful exuberance and expectation.

He slightly inclined his head in agreement, and the candlelight picked up glints in his black, black hair. Then he bade her drink wine from the goblet, after which he drained it of the ruby liquid.

"You have promised me a very special Christmas gift to tempt me up here. I chose to be here over going to my friends' parties." What was he going to give her?

His full, sensuous lips turned up in a smile as his large, charcoal eyes bored into her. "I love it when you're greedy," he whispered. He nipped at her lips, a tease of a kiss. "Now you'll just have to be patient."

Carlie shivered deliciously as a spiral of desire seized her. Just looking into his eyes made her cream, but, until now, he'd never focused on her. Vincenzo di Liberti always had an entourage of women -- what some called his harem. Carlie never wanted to be part of a group, but she sure as hell wanted him.

Then he invited her to his Upstate retreat for Christmas Eve -- the two of them alone. They'd had a feast prepared by unseen servants and now sat before the magnificent fire, drinking wine. A huge Douglas fir laden with the most extravagant baubles dominated a corner of the room, and Carlie couldn't help noticing the beautifully wrapped presents beneath. Were more guests coming, or were they all for them? Vincenzo had it right -- she was greedy. She liked that about herself.

He took her hand and led her to the fireplace. "Come. Let us fully enjoy this magnificent fire." With great care, as if posing her for a painting, he lay her down before the hearth and stretched out behind her. Carlie's heart hammered in quick rhythm from the intimacy of being with him like this, a scene out of her most erotic dreams.

"Lovely Carlie, you have no idea how long I've waited to have you here with me like this." His voice caressed the back of her neck, now bared because she'd worn her long blond hair in the topknot he'd requested. With his powerful arms he drew her tightly to him, and she wiggled her ass against his very gratifying erection.

"Why did you wait? Did you think I would refuse you?" So much for playing hard to get. She had no patience for stupid games, not when she finally had a chance to get up close and personal with Vincenzo's legendary package.

He ran his hand down her side, just brushing her breast before he claimed her waist, hip and leg. Her clit throbbed, and she wanted more than anything to open her legs to him.

“Anticipation.” He drew the word out like an oral aphrodisiac.

Enough with the anticipation already. She wanted him in her. Glad now that she hadn’t bothered with a bra beneath her ivory lace camisole, Carlie turned fully to him and gave him a full frontal press.

He laughed and licked her ear with his tongue. Carlie whimpered. “I want you.”

“And you shall have me.” In promise he pressed his full arousal against her cunt, teasing her through the layers of clothing still draping them both before turning her back around.

“Subtle was never my style,” Carlie panted, now regretting the hundred or so tiny buttons fastening the back of her silk dress and trying in vain to turn back.

“I like that in you.” Vincenzo nibbled on the back of her neck as he made short work of the buttons. A light breeze cooled her back for about two seconds before Vincenzo was all over her with his hot, eager mouth. And then he turned her around so they were face to face.

* * *

Memories of searing desire clawed at Carlie, who floated now in the cold darkness, entrapped in the creature’s vise. “What have I done to make you bring me here? Why do you torture me with this vision of the past?” Carlie demanded.

The creature’s teeth clacked as it once again tittered a high, tinny parody of a laugh. “You regard this as torture? We’ve only just begun.”

Chapter Two

Vincenzo kissed her slowly, making a thorough exploration of her mouth with his tongue, his lips and his teeth. Carlie savored his hot breath on her and in her as warmth suffused her. To think, outside snow and ice paralyzed the world with cold, but the heat level inside rose like lava in a wakening volcano.

Carlie longed only for him to possess her completely, to ravage her with his tight sultry strength. She wanted to touch him there, to feel his pulsing prick with her hand before he plunged deep into her. As he feasted on her breasts, licking her nipples until they ached, she fingered his erection and elicited a growl. "Not yet," he muttered, scooting back out of reach.

But two could play at that game. "Girls just want to have fun," she sang, now circling the sensitive head of his aroused prick with her fingers.

"You are an irresistible minx," he protested. "I see it's time to get serious."

Her pussy clenched at the prospect until she saw he'd reached beneath some furniture and brought out a red and green silk scarf. "What's that?" Stupid question, but her mind had ceased functioning somewhere between the second and third courses of the dinner neither of them had eaten much of.

"Christmas wrapping, my lovely. Give me your hands."

"No." She thrust her hands up, she thought out of harm's way, but that position evidently was exactly what Vincenzo had in mind.

"Perfect." He seized hold of her wrists and bound them in their raised position with the silk.

"That's too tight," she complained, though it wasn't.

"Give it a few minutes. If you still want me to loosen the scarf, I will." With his mouth on her breasts and her belly, she quickly forgot about anything but her desire.

Then he began to feast on her eager pussy, sucking her hot, wet folds and fucking her with his tongue. Carlie screamed and whimpered as her climax drew her into a vortex of sensation. Closer, tighter, harder she writhed and tossed, wanting him everywhere. He lapped her up like a cat with a bowl of cream as, crying out her wonder, she came for him.

Pleased, he leaned back and raked her with his eyes. His cock looked about ready to burst. Even though she'd just come, seeing him like that got her hot for him again. Still.

"Do you want me, my pet?"

She licked her dry lips and swallowed hard. Never before had she considered an orgasm part of foreplay, but with Vincenzo, everything changed. She strained to get her hands free of the restraint, but she couldn't budge it any looser.

"Say the words for me." He stroked her, his big hands covering most of her petite body.

"I want you." She sounded hoarse and raspy.

"Again." He nudged the taut flesh of her thigh with his prick.

"I want you." This time she howled out the words.

"Music to my ears. I can resist no more." He lay down flat and maneuvered her to straddle him, her pussy pressed intimately to his pulsing cock. With a whimper, slick from desire, Carlie slid down him. His large, tight balls nudged the crack of her ass while her hands remained bound in a gesture of victory.

Gripping his sides with her thighs, Carlie bit her lip in an effort to control her wild ride. She wanted to savor him slowly, drawing out the erotic sensation of having Vincenzo deep within her, but restraint did not come easily. To temper the sheer pleasure of his cock stimulating her most sensitive spots, she lowered her arms so she could look away from him.

Christmas lights festooning the tree flashed, bathing the room in crimson. Forever forward she'd associate the color red and the scent of Douglas fir with the

Christmas Eve she spent in Vincenzo's arms -- surely the best Yule holiday she'd ever known.

Wasn't it like her to let such melancholy reflections haunt her at the pinnacle moment of her love life? She had Vincenzo now, and he'd made it more than clear that tonight would be extraordinary for them both. The way he drank her in with his eyes as they fucked -- no, as they made love -- convinced her just how special it had to be for him.

"I love the view from down here, seeing your tits dance as you caress my cock. You are so beautiful."

Yes, she was -- at least at this moment. "I want to touch you," she murmured. "I want to squeeze your balls with my hand while my cunt squeezes your prick." She waggled her ass to bring home her point.

"Talk about an offer I don't want to refuse." He grasped her ass and hoisted himself to a sitting position, his muscular thighs under her spread legs to keep them both upright while his cock stayed inside her.

"Thank you," she whispered in his ear as he untied her. Now she could let her hands wander. Though she couldn't get her hands on his balls, there were many delightful detours along the way. Before long, she knew she'd get her chance to play down there, too.

For now, they stayed where they were, locked in a kiss that mirrored their intimate joining below. Carlie's breasts nestled against his hard chest as his hands got even busier than hers. Far too soon the urge to move seized them both and Vincenzo pulled her down on top of him again. At last she got to fondle his balls.

"*Cara mia*." He groaned and began to move faster and harder, thrusting himself into her with stepped-up fervor.

Carlie, floating somewhere in the stratosphere, came to alert as her climax took hold. "Vincenzo." She repeated his name in a dazed litany, weighting the syllables with all her pent-up desire and her hunger for this overwhelming, mysterious man.

He caressed her side with one hand and fingered the crack of her ass with the other as they both flew to completion together. Throbbing with the force of her release, Carlie sobbed his name as he whispered the words of his passion. They both came and came and came as the crimson light glowed and a distant bell tolled.

Afterward, they lay together, cocooned in shared emotion. Carlie could have been content to be with him, like this, forever. As if he read her mind, he said, "Forever is exactly what I want to give you this Christmas."

Carlie blinked rapidly, trying to take in what he meant. "Forever?"

"Yes, my beautiful one. Tonight I want to give you the gift of forever, to make you my bride in the most intimate of bonds. As the clock strikes midnight Christmas Eve. Will you accept this gift?"

Her mind whirled. There'd been some speculation, of course, as to exactly who or what Vincenzo di Liberti was. She ignored that sort of gossip, which went totally counter to her academic nature. Now, though, she had to admit to being intrigued as well as totally turned on. Vincenzo appealed to a side of her she'd neglected, more like ignored. Only he saw the passionate woman beneath the academic's tweeds.

Insane as it was, she burned to be that passionate woman -- and he held the key. With him, she could be fully herself at last. But she couldn't totally ignore the academic. "You can't just make an announcement like that without telling me more."

His eyes penetrated her even more intimately than his cock. "Yes, I can. It's near to midnight, and we must act now or lose the most precious moment." His deep voice caressed her, seduced her. "Tell me yes. Accept my invitation. I will open vistas to you beyond your wildest imagination. No other chance of this kind will come your way again."

A tiny chill of apprehension lost its way in the heat of her hunger -- and, always, her curiosity. "Yes," she whispered, her heart hammering as if she'd climbed a cliff.

He kissed her. "You will never regret this." Then she caught sight of his fangs and a sensation flashed through her -- regret, maybe, but something much more.

She hadn't properly realized his strength before. Now he held her in a superhuman grip as he lowered his mouth to her neck.

After a momentary shock of pain, Carlie rose to a plateau of pleasure that made her earlier orgasms pale in comparison. Bliss radiated through her as if she'd swallowed a star as she and Vincenzo united in fierce erotic intimacy. Nothing and no one could ever break their bond as the bells rang out the midnight hour and the crimson lights flashed brighter.

When he drew away from her, Carlie gasped at the jolt of separation. But then he came right back, holding his wrist to her lips and urging her to drink. She did, sipping his substance like a nectar that coursed through her, bringing her more of the addictive pleasure.

"My beautiful bride." Vincenzo again toasted her, this time not with wine. "Now tell me, how do you like my Christmas gift to you?"

Carlie threw herself into his arms to express her appreciation.

As promised, new vistas opened for Carlie immediately. She and Vincenzo spent the first of many nights entwined together, making love until they could scarcely walk.

* * *

"Do you recognize those beings?" the skeletal creature hissed.

"Of course, as you well know," Carlie huffed, not at all ready to show her captor how the memories of what once was stung. "I still don't understand why you made me witness that scene. It's none of anyone's business, what happened between me and Vincenzo. Most of all, it's gone, pffft. Just like I wish you would be."

Another cackle and then a startling roar. "Slow to learn, eh? Fear not. Your lesson is not complete." The thing latched on to Carlie and dragged her back into the cold night.

What next?

Chapter Three

A second skeletal creature, one that made the first one look plump and jolly in comparison, took hold of Carlie as if she were the wand in some sort of bizarre tag team relay. Imprisoned in its grip, Carlie was dragged through the night air back to the library. Well, good. Maybe they'd leave her alone after all so she could finish her work. But Creature Two didn't appear to be going anywhere.

"Okay, I've learned my lesson," Carlie lied. "You can go home and tell whatever sent you mission accomplished."

Suddenly Creature Two grew in size until it nearly burst out of the deserted library, causing Carlie to flinch away. Carlie wasn't one to cower, but the weird actions and the thick sulfurous smell the thing released threw her off balance. "Don't you even think about lying to me." It swept massive bony fingers against where its chest should have been.

Though she was accustomed to other vampires reading her mind, having this creature do it unnerved Carlie. She bowed her head and braced herself.

First she saw herself in the library, hunched over her work as she'd been before. "Right. That's what I should be doing. What's the point?"

No response. Then the scene shifted and she saw a large, glittering crowd at a party. Bright lights and a load of Christmas baubles and a massive floor to ceiling tree at least two stories tall decorated the huge room. Lots of familiar faces, some she didn't know. "That's the party Tracey went to. She wanted me to go with her."

"Yes, and you turned her down."

"I have work to do."

"So you turn your back on your friends."

Tracey didn't seem to be feeling any pain. "Look, she's talking to a friend and drinking vintage blood."

"Let's listen to what she's saying to her friend."

"Uh, I'm not in favor of eavesdropping on private conversations."

"Nobody asked you."

If only Carlie could turn down her super-sensitive hearing. She winced listening to Tracey's words. "She's getting worse and worse. Vincenzo was the only one who could drag her away from her books and the archives. I'm worried about her. If she doesn't get a life soon, she'll start growing mold." *Mold?*

Tracey's friend said, "You've done enough. I'd say you should just declare Carlie a lost cause and find someone else to be your condo-mate. Even another night's too long to hang out with a Scrooge Diva. She practically ruined your Christmas, and that's not acceptable."

Tracey actually wiped a tear away from her eye. "You know me, I hate to give up. I don't want to declare her hopeless, but I'm getting really depressed."

Carlie shook her head. Talk about a meddler. "I've told her to lay off. Hey, I'm a big girl, and my life is none of her business."

"You think that will stop her worrying?"

"Not my problem. Are we done yet?"

"I'll tell you when we're done."

Against her will, Carlie's head turned to take in another sight. She gasped. Vincenzo, whom she'd thought dead. Instead he lay buried beneath his mansion, suspended between life and death, his vibrancy extinguished, his eyes shut tight in the weirdest of slumbers.

Several moments passed before Carlie could speak. "Why is he there, like that? I thought he was gone forever."

The thing emitted a series of guttural snorts. "This is your gift to him, your response to his gift of forever."

"How could this be? I accepted his vampiric kiss, the eternal life he offered. Now I've even risen in the vampire world. I am in a position of great importance."

"At what price? Vincenzo bestowed his gift at Christmas, endowing you with the magic of the holiday. How have you honored this uniqueness?" The creature rattled a chain.

"You're not pulling the Christmas crap too, are you? Yes, Vincenzo told me all that lore the very first night. He said something about a Christmas ritual. We were supposed to get together every Christmas from that first year forward." She waved a hand and almost struck the creature. "Honestly, like I could ever be bothered after the first fifty or sixty years." Especially after she found out that she and Vincenzo had much different definitions for the "f" word -- fidelity. After a while, his wandering had even stopped hurting.

"No matter how your neglect hurt Vincenzo and the others."

The smell of sulfur was so strong Carlie had to struggle not to hide her face in her hands, but she was not about to cave. "I had my reasons."

"Perhaps so. But did you give him a chance to explain?"

What did creatures like this one know about pride? Carlie felt no need to reply.

"Prepare for your final lesson." It shook a finger at her like some preternatural school marm as it faded away.

Great. Now Carlie would have to deal with another skeleton hurtling her way. Not. A large purple squid with long, thick tentacles grabbed hold of Carlie next.

As a vampire, she wasn't scared of most any creature, but Carlie had always found squids revolting -- and that was just from seeing them at a distance. Up close and personal, this one was excruciatingly disgusting. In addition to looking like a slime ball with legs, it smelled like an unholy mix of rust and ammonia.

"Leave me alone." Carlie put her fists up in a classic defensive position and bared her teeth.

In response it tightened tentacles around her legs and arms -- the landscape of her most hideous nightmares.

"Mind who you call hideous," it bellowed with a Cockney accent.

The fact that it could speak jolted Carlie worse than the slimy tentacles.

"Not slimy. Of course I can speak. I just believe actions speak louder than words."

"What are you doing with me?"

"Consider yourself lucky. After all, how many beings get to glimpse the future while there's still a chance to change it?"

She had no intention of letting this slithering monster change anything about her existence, but it wouldn't let her go until she'd gone along for the last stage of the ride. "Whatever. Bring it on."

A flash of light and they were back to Vincenzo's mansion. Carlie figured they'd see him again, suspended in his endless sleep. But when they burrowed underground, she instead saw a pile of ash. "Where is he?"

"There, in the ashes, soon to mingle with the earth below his home."

"But why? Did he never waken? How could he just disappear like that?" Carlie wouldn't let herself cry, at least not yet. But knowing that Vincenzo had still been alive and then disappeared like this... All the emotions she'd so successfully suppressed for years threatened to spill forth. Not in front of the squid, oh, please, goddess of Christmas, not in front of the squid.

Of course the beast read every thought and glommed onto Carlie's psychic energy. She had to still her mind so she could think. Hadn't the squid said something about this being the future? She could still do something to save Vincenzo. She wanted to save Vincenzo, her dear and only love.

Carlie and the squid now hurtled through space despite her protests. "You will see one more scene."

What could be more horrifying than seeing Vincenzo gone? There she was, in another library, standing in front of a shelf loaded with books that had her name on them. It would take multiple volumes to complete the annals of vampire history. This was good, this was what she wanted in her future.

She looked good, dressed as a distinguished professor. No hint of the sexy woman she'd been in Vincenzo's arms. All right, so she was alone with her shelf of books, and it was very cold in the room. Everything was okay except, oh, what was that smell coming off her?

Mold -- all over her, all over the shelves of books. She hated the smell of mold more than the slimy feel of the squid's tentacles, but there she stood in her future -- with moldy clothes and moldy books, seemingly oblivious to the green stuff and the sickening odor. Could it be? Would the mold take hold of her and start to cover her like some statue in a park?

"I heard that."

Goddess, she had to turn off her mind so this thing would no longer have access. But that was the least of her problems. "Spare me. Please, I don't want to see anymore. What can I do?"

The squid at last loosened its hold. "You are fortunate. It is still Christmas Eve. You must go to Vincenzo. Now. Time is fleeting. If midnight chimes before you avert your fate and his, your chance will be gone."

With nary a backward glance to the archives and the deserted library, Carlie flew to Vincenzo's mansion. "Let it not be too late," she prayed as bells tolled the hours.

Chapter Four

As she floated on the wind, Carlie grappled with tonight's visions. How could she have come to this? When had her life taken such a disastrous direction?

She and Vincenzo had been so close for a time, and then they'd both gotten caught up with their separate lives. Sure, he'd had a thing about being together for Christmas, but she hadn't paid any special attention after the first few years. She'd figured he'd gotten caught up in the same sentimental hoopla all the other fools had.

Cold and tired, she had to fight despair by the time she reached Vincenzo's darkened mansion. How different from the candlelight and fireplace, the crimson lights and extravagant décor of their first Christmas together. She couldn't take the time now to review these painful memories. Guided by her senses, she dug down to Vincenzo's lifeless body.

Thoughts swirled through her mind, and, as usual, she wanted to spend time to examine them. Later. Now she had to bring Vincenzo back, for, suddenly, the prospect of losing him scared her worse than an eternity entrapped by a squid's slimy tentacles.

Eleven bells tolled. "Vincenzo." The wind howling around them bore away her whispered plea.

She was so cold, and he must be, too. Taking him into her embrace, she began to chafe his arms, his face, trying to bring warmth back to him. He lay stiff and unyielding. She remembered when *stiff* had been a good thing, when his mighty erections brought them both to ecstasy. Now his penis lay as lifeless as the rest of him.

Not lifeless, merely in a suspended state. She wouldn't allow herself to consider him lifeless. Surely some senses must still function, even in his coma-like sleep. "Vincenzo, I am here. Carlie. It's Christmas Eve, and now it's my turn to give you a special gift."

She kissed his full, cold lips. Was it her imagination, or had he just stirred, even ever so slightly? Her heart began to fill with possibility. With her hands slipped under his suit jacket to caress his back, Carlie kissed him again, harder.

No, it wasn't her imagination. He definitely moved, returning her kiss. "Vincenzo," she moaned.

He put his arms around her and ground his sudden erection into her belly. "Carlie," he roared before sinking his fangs into her and drinking deeply.

He's back, he's back, he's back. Carlie's heart thumped out the refrain as he fed from her. Fed quite deeply, almost too deeply, until she had to push him off. Now his eyes were fully open and his pallor gone. "Carlie, oh my love. You've returned to me."

"Vincenzo. What happened to you?"

He wiped a hand across his mouth. "So much. I have so much to tell you. When you did not come to me at Christmas... But how about we go somewhere more conducive?"

Lying in the dirt together did have its limits. She eyed his erection. "We could take care of your risen friend first." Her pussy clenched with lust.

He looked down and passed his hand over his fly. "There's plenty more where that came from." He eyed her. "You're not going anywhere, are you?"

She took his hand. "I'm your Christmas present. And future, I hope." With a shudder, she told him about her adventures as they walked.

By now they were back inside the cold, dark mansion. "No Christmas warmth yet, and the Eve is almost past."

"It's not too late." She'd learned that tonight.

They managed to light a fire. One candle and one crimson light lay on a dusty side table, ready for use.

After they'd both cleaned the dirt off them, they stretched out before the fire, at last able to get warm. "What is it about the Christmas gift thing?" she asked.

He stroked the side of her face. "I wanted to turn you the minute we met. I'm not one to wait, *cara mia*."

The affectionate name he'd called her resonated in her heart, and she squeezed his hand.

"But I wanted you to be my Christmas bride. Every vampire is allowed only one for eternity. Once two vampires are bound this way, they must spend every Christmas together to renew the vow or risk losing each other and even their lives."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

Vincenzo kissed her. "It is not supposed to be spoken. The bride must join the groom each Christmas Eve of her own free will, not because she's been told the consequences."

Carlie withdrew slightly, chilled by her failure to understand without this explicit explanation. "But then, why are you telling me now? Does this break the magic?"

He kissed her. "Your story of the creatures. As they directed you here, I have dispensation to tell you the truth. You see, we have just received a second chance. You and me. This is the spirits' Christmas gift to us, one of the greatest any beings can hope for." He reached for her.

She drew back. His explanation sounded like a miracle beyond any she'd allowed herself to wish for, but one part of the past remained as a barrier between them. "Not so fast. If I meant so much to you, why did you turn to other women?" The words burned her as she said them, but she had to know.

"I would like to claim innocence, but I cannot lie to you, not ever again. In those days I was stupid, thinking myself above the rules. I found you before I had the wisdom to appreciate you and know the true meaning of being with one's soul mate. Can you find it in your heart to forgive me -- to be like the spirits and give me a second chance?"

Her eyes fluttered as she took in his proposal, and the last resistance inside her heart melted. Now she could at last admit her own passion. She couldn't wait any longer to take his gorgeous, huge, throbbing cock into her, but first, she had to know. "A gift like that? What do we have to do?"

He opened her legs and massaged her more than ready clit. "We have three requirements. The first is to treasure our second chance, the second is to share the gift of forgiveness with those we love and the third is to honor the beloved, always. You think you can handle those tasks?"

"Think?" she asked, her eyes crossing as he buried his very engorged dick deeply in her.

"*Cara mia*, if only you could know how often I longed to be with you like this again. Buried in the earth, scarcely having the strength to think, my sole moments of consciousness were of my desire for you. And my deep regret for losing you."

"Mmm. I may not have been buried in earth, but I might as well have been," Carlie whispered. Vincenzo slowly thrust into her, arousing her far too long dormant pussy as he stretched her, stroking the sensitive places she'd tried to forget. Though she didn't want to alter their rhythm just yet, she couldn't resist tightening her sheath and exciting his gasp of pleasure.

Her hard nipples pressed into his powerful chest, and she had to move, to feel the skin-to-skin stimulation. The way her blood pulsed she would have to feed soon, and she could sense his hunger for her grow. Though they'd always fed as part of their post-coital intimacy, urgent needs could not be lightly dismissed.

Though he still filled her with his dick, Vincenzo plunged his fangs into her neck in an ecstatic bite. Carlie whimpered as the double pleasure took control, whipping her into an erotic frenzy. She bucked and rode on the bliss of his giving to her and taking from her, leading her to a climax that would transform her world forever.

Still hard, Vincenzo bestowed the healing kiss and turned them over so she straddled his throbbing cock. Now at last she fed from him, taking in his vibrancy as she sucked from him and rode his cock. She reached the pinnacle of sensation, coming from his touch and his taste, his scent and his sound. In moments he exploded within her and pledged his eternal bond.

Collapsed together in a throbbing sprawl, neither could at first speak. When their breath returned at last, they lay together sharing the wonder of what they'd found

together -- with words, with kisses and with their bodies entwined in the fiercest of embraces.

Epilogue

From that time forward, Carlie and Vincenzo became famous for their Christmas spirit. In coming years many vampires and were-folk of all persuasions made the Upstate mansion their Christmas destination. Tracey, who could finally take a break from worrying about Carlie, had her own room at the inn.

Tempted as Carlie and Vincenzo were to get caught up in the festivities of the season, the two lovers never lost sight of joining together in the most profound intimacy to celebrate their special union.

Carlie even managed to find the right balance between work and play to enjoy life and complete her comprehensive history of vampires. To her gratification, her books spent many months in the top ten of the most influential alternative best-seller list -- and forever remained free of mold. Something else to celebrate.

Mardi Ballou

Writing books is a dream come true for Mardi Ballou. Multi-published in erotic and mainstream romance, Mardi lives in Northern California with her hero husband, a knight in shining armor who provides both tech support and expert massage. No, she doesn't share. Mardi loves to travel, racking up frequent flyer miles to visit her family in England and her native country, New Jersey. She wishes she could live in a structure big enough to house all the books and quilts she covets, and have enough time to enjoy them all. She's still waiting to achieve her second major dream -- winning an Oscar in some yet-to-be-created category she might qualify for. If you know how to make this happen or just want to schmooze, drop in on Mardi at MardiBallou.com.