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The Christmas Chapter

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Holiday eBook Freebie

The Christmas Chapter
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Solstice, three days before Christmas, Sedona, Arizona...

"He couldn't wait to get away from me," Lena Douglas told her cousin Kira. A mixture of anger, frustration, and a small amount of hurt was stamped on her lovely heart-shaped face. "He grumbled the entire plane ride about the 'good-for-nothing, ineptness of witches'. And he didn't seem to care that Riana might hear him. The minute the car stopped he was out and running, changing to wolf in mid-run."

Kira Douglas Calhoun nodded her head. "I heard his howl as he passed the French doors." Her brother-in-law obviously wasn't in the best of moods, considering he hadn't even taken the time to come inside after being away for so long.

Lena exhaled a long sigh. "The entire time we were with Grandmother and the Coven, he hovered over Riana like some growling guard dog, and was rude to everyone. He made sure they knew he didn't trust them and that he would be watching everything they did to Riana."

Kira grinned. It was just like Gavin to show his wolf side every chance he got. "I'm surprised Grandmother allowed that."

For the first time since arriving home, Lena smiled too. "She did threaten to turn him into stone, once. The look on his face then was priceless."

Kira's lovely features suddenly creased with concern and she glanced toward the open doorway of the family room they were sitting in. Aiden had helped Riana to her room, and as the minutes passed she was getting more worried. She looked back at Lena. "How is she, Lena?"

"The same. The Coven tried everything, but nothing worked. I'm sorry, Kira."

Kira's blue violet eyes glowed with sudden tears. "Gavin has every right to hate us," she said quietly. "Riana's condition is our fault." Not even her extraordinary, healing skills had been effective in restoring her sister-in-law, and now even the Coven had failed.

Lena frowned at her. "Stop right there. We aren't responsible for what my father did, and you had no choice in your action but to try and save her *any way* you could. Riana is the first to defend you, Kira. She doesn't blame you. And despite the disappointment, she's still the same sweet, forgiving person."

Before she could reply, Aiden Calhoun glided into the room, his strides smooth and cat-like. He greeted Lena and then walked over to where Kira sat in a chair. He lifted her in his arms and then sat down, holding her in his lap. Kira cuddled close and rested her head on his broad shoulder.

A longing, a relentless and all-too familiar ache of need hit Lena hard as she looked at them. Would she ever find a love that incredible, that passionate?

Aiden murmured against his wife's bent head, "Riana wants to see you when she gets settled. She's fine, kitty-kira, I swear. She knew this might not work so she wasn't as disappointed as you worried she'd be. She's strong, sweetheart. And I want you to be the same. You need to do that for each other."

Kira nodded her head and then placed a hand on her stomach. And that was when Lena noticed the small bump across her slender waist. She gasped aloud. "Goddess! Kira, is *that* what I think it is?" She practically ran across the room to them. "Leave you two alone for four months and look what happens."

Kira laughed and sat up straighter in Aiden's lap. She shot him a warning glare because as soon as Lena was close enough to touch, he'd instinctively growled under his breath.

Lena laughed at him. "Stop it, Aiden. Your show of protectiveness is a bit unnecessary, don't you think? Oh, this is the best news I've had in ages."

"It was confirmed yesterday," Kira said, her smile radiant, "Perfect timing on Solstice Eve. Marissa is claiming 'it' as an early Christmas present for us all. She's determined it *has* to be a girl."

Lena shot a mock look of warning at Aiden and muttered, "Don't bite," before she gently placed her hand over Kira's stomach. A witch of mostly-dormant-yet-strong powers, she had the unique ability to discern certain things. Kira's stomach was warm against the palm of her hand, *really* warm. She smiled knowingly. "Hmm. How do you feel about a cougar-boy baby?" She laughed at Aiden's proud expression. "Let's just hope he has most of the *sweet* Douglas traits."

Aiden growled, but the sound was less fierce. "Funny. Four months around Gavin and you'd think you would have learned tolerance towards Shapeshifters."

Lena stuck her tongue out at him. "Now who's being funny? The words 'tolerance' and 'Gavin' do *not* belong in the same sentence."

Aiden glanced at the French doors. "I heard his howl as he passed. He sounded angry. Let me guess. You two kept up your battle the entire four months." He frowned at her. "I'm sure that didn't help Riana any."

It wasn't my fault! But if she were honest, she'd have to admit she hadn't really made the effort to be nice to Gavin. The man was every bit the wolf he changed into. *And he never –for one moment –let me forget that.*

The tension that had always been there between them from the first time they'd met had grown stronger over the four months they had stayed at the Douglas Coven in Montana. Close living arrangements, and working around the clock with trying to heal Riana, there wasn't enough time to be apart for any beneficial time-outs. Gavin never left his sister's side, and it took every ounce of patience the Coven witches had in order to tolerate the growling shapeshifter's constant presence. There had been times when Lena was ready to beg her grandmother to follow through and turn the aggravating –*okay-she-admitted-it* –too sexy shifter into stone for just a short while. Just long enough for her to build her defenses up again.

But the animosity between witch and shapeshifter wasn't exactly centered on a trust issue. Lena knew Gavin was as aware of that fact as she was. There were times when she'd caught his unguarded expression as he looked at her, and she could feel the *heat* in his stare. And that heat had scorched her. Deliciously so. Gavin Calhoun was a man of immense passion, and it simmered just below the darkness that he kept caged. It would take a strong woman to tame this wolf.

She couldn't help but wonder if *she* could be that woman. *How crazy is that? He'd chew me up and spit me out before I even realized what was happening.* No, it was definitely better to be scorched at a distance. Much, much *safer* for her heart.

Kira's soft exclamation distracted her from her dangerous thoughts. She looked up as Aiden walked to the doorway carrying Kira in his arms. Kira was protesting about being carried and Aiden was ignoring her. His possessiveness and protectiveness toward Kira had been passionately strong from the first moment they'd met, and apparently had become even stronger since they had married. Lena caught herself sighing, her heart suddenly aching. *I want that.*

She shook her head when Gavin's face popped in her mind. *No. No. No. Not in a million years.* She cringed. Oh Goddess, who was she kidding?

The next day Gavin stood in the shadows of the library door watching the three women as they decorated the large hallway with Christmas decorations. His sister Riana was having as much fun as Kira and Lena. She looked fragile, and he didn't like that. His frustration ate at him every time he looked at her. He and Aiden hadn't been able to help her, and neither had those damned witches they'd spent the last four months with. But despite the disappointment, Riana

was determined to go forward. Christmas was her favorite time and she wasn't going to let anything spoil it.

He couldn't stop his grin when he saw Aiden silently glide down the stairs, suddenly pounce into the chaotic merriment and snatch the sprigs of mistletoe from Kira's hands. He held it out of her reach and growled in mock-menace at her with the demand, "*Who* the hell do you think you're going to get a kiss from besides *me*? You're placing some unsuspecting man in danger, kitty-kira, by hanging this, and it's not a nice thing to do." Kira's sweet laugh rang through the hall. But it was Lena's that struck at Gavin's heart.

He shook his head. His brother was completely besotted with his wife and didn't bother hiding it. Aiden didn't keep his feelings hidden. Not like he did.

Damn. That thought made his gaze instantly zero in on the sole object of his attention. Lena was surrounded by rolls of red, green, and gold streamers, half of them strung out on the floor and some of them tangled around her slim body as she tried to sort the colors. She was wearing her strawberry blonde hair in a loose ponytail and the style never failed to make him notice the sweet, soft lines of her heart-shaped face. He had memorized every inch of that lovely face and saw it in his dreams every night.

His gaze perused her slim body. He grinned again. She was as bad as her cousin in constantly wearing skin-tight, hip-hugging jeans that effectively emphasized every curve and made a man's thoughts stray to erotic images he had no business thinking about. He growled under his breath. Let some other man think those thoughts and he'd rip his throat out.

Aiden heard his growl and looked up, catching his gaze. His brother lifted a brow in question. Gavin frowned darkly at him. He knew Aiden was aware of his feelings for Lena but that didn't mean he had to talk about them to him. He deliberately turned away and closed the door. It was bad enough he could acutely smell Lena's sweet scent but he didn't have to stand there and *drool* while watching her and let anyone else notice.

He took a deep breath and released it slowly. It took more willpower than he'd like to calm his body and thoughts. Damn. She was driving him crazy! It had been sheer torture having to live with her at the Coven for four long months. And now Aiden had invited her to stay here at the mansion until she could find another home in Sedona. His conniving brother had stated it was because Kira wanted her there and he wanted Kira happy, but Gavin knew Aiden *and* Kira had ulterior motives.

The library door opened and Gavin turned with a snarl, thinking it was Aiden coming to 'talk' about Lena. When he saw who it was, he coughed in embarrassment and apologized. "Sorry, sis. I didn't mean to snarl at you."

Riana smiled at him. "Aiden started this way and I stopped him, so you owe me, big brother."

"I'm not so sure," he told her as he studied her determined expression. "You're worse than he is." He growled under his breath. "Let it go, Riana. I don't want to talk about it."

"Fine. Then let's talk about Christmas. It's only two days away. Marissa wants a pony. Not a shifter, but the real deal. Kira is afraid she's too young and so our little niece has begged for our intervention. Got any ideas how we're going to convince Kira a pony is safe?" She sighed. "Poor sweetie. Even after marrying Aiden and finally coming to terms with all of us being shifters, she still has that lingering fear of most animals."

Gavin heard the sadness in his sister's voice when she hesitated over the word 'us'. It was hurting them all that Riana's shifting abilities had been drained from her during that final battle with Lena's sorcerer father. Kira had drained Riana's bear essence in order to save her life, but hadn't been able to restore her once it was all over and Warren's evil had been destroyed.

Before he could answer her original question, the library door swung open and Lena and Kira came hurrying in. Lena purposely ignored him as she moved to Riana's side. He caught

himself staring at her in mesmerized fascination. When she got excited her entire face glowed with an inner fey beauty.

"I told you to believe in Christmas miracles, Riana," Kira said softly. "Jared just called and he says he spoke to his father. The old shaman has heard of situations like yours. There's a chance something can be done. We have to leave now. Jared wants to try something before the moon is full tonight."

Gavin looked from face to face. "Who the hell is Jared?"

Kira smiled and his heart stuttered at the slightly guilty look on her lovely face. "Oh. He's an American Indian, a...close friend of...Lena's from way back. He just moved back to Sedona while you all were in Montana. His father is a Shaman, and very powerful."

A *friend* of Lena's? Jealousy reared its ugly head and Gavin swallowed another growl. "Riana doesn't need another *witch* trying useless spells on her. She's been through enough."

"It's not your decision," Lena snapped at him. "Jared went out of his way to talk his father into helping. Riana deserves the chance to see if he can help."

This time he did growl. "I'm going with her." He'd check this Shaman out thoroughly before allowing him near his vulnerable sister.

Lena stomped over to stand in front of him. She poked him in the chest. "You are *not*. And if you growl at me one more time I'm going to turn you into a toad. I'm tired of your attitude and I'm tired of the growls. You're more bear than Riana –and at least *she's* sweet. You just have to play alpha and control everything, don't you? *Not* this time, wolfie-boy. Back off."

After a stunned moment of disbelief that she'd dare talk to him that way, Gavin didn't even blink as he muttered softly, dangerously, "Kira, sweetheart, I think you'd better leave the room now. I don't want to risk you getting upset or having Aiden tear me to pieces if you do."

Kira made a little gasping sound and he wasn't sure if it was in fear or if she was actually swallowing a giggle. "You really won't hurt her, will you?"

Gavin grabbed Lena by the shoulders as realization from his words sank in and she made a move to run. "That depends on her," he answered Kira. "Riana, take her out. Close the door behind you."

He smelled Lena's fear and anger as she sputtered, "Take your hands off me, you beast. I swear, I'm this *close* to turning you into something *less* than a toad."

Enough was enough. They had battled for too long. A man could only take so much restraint before he cracked. And that time was now. He was going to show the little witch that her threats were nothing more than a weak weapon she was using to keep him at arm's length.

"Just how *close* were you and this Jared?" He purposely kept his tone rough and low. He groaned. *I must be some kind of pervert to enjoy watching her react like this.* Every time she scrunched up that adorable nose and narrowed those pretty sky-blue eyes in fury at him, he wanted her more than the time before.

"Close," she answered, her voice too sweet. "We dated. In fact, we might have eventually got married if he hadn't had to leave when he did."

"Little witch," he warned softly, "You're really pushing my buttons right now."

"Ah, but they're so easy to push. You're not the big bad wolf you make others think you are. I'm not afraid of you, Gavin." She poked his chest again despite his snarl. "I never have been, and I never will be. So, do your best...you can't scare me."

It was just the lead-in he wanted. He slowly moved his hands down from her shoulders and grasped her small waist. With a hard tug, he pulled her flush against him. He grinned, purposely showing his teeth in a hungry snarl. "I don't want you afraid. *I want you screaming.*"

He didn't give her a chance to respond. He swooped in and claimed her lips in a kiss so possessive, so rough she cried out and he caught the sound with his mouth. He drank her like a desperate man starving –and abruptly realized that was exactly what he was. He'd craved her

for so long, wanted her, needed her, his soul had reached the point of stark starvation from the forced restraint.

He expected her to struggle. She didn't. It shocked the hell out of him. And it forced every ounce of restraint in him to finally break free.

He forced her mouth open wider and shoved his tongue in to dance with hers. She tasted like the sweetest nectar imaginable. If he kissed her a million times more he didn't think he'd ever get enough of her sweet, intoxicating taste. She lifted her arms and wrapped them around his neck kissing him back with all the same abandonment he was experiencing. Everything around them disappeared and nothing else mattered but holding her, touching her, kissing her.

And claiming her.

She'd been his own personal temptation too long, and for one brief moment Gavin feared his control wouldn't be strong enough to hold back his wolf. The primal beast wanted free to claim his mate.

A low, possessive growl rumbled up from deep within him. Lena somehow managed to break free from his kiss and she murmured teasingly against his seeking mouth, "Okay, I admit it. I love it when you growl."

His heart nearly burst and his wolf self howled in triumphant possessiveness. He tangled his hand in her hair to hold her head still. Before claiming her lips again he muttered,

"Good to know. Because I plan on doing a lot of growling where you're concerned." He kissed her hard. Then he released her long enough to swoop her up into his arms and carry her over to the sofa. "I plan on growling. Biting. Licking. Kissing. Claiming. You've been tempting me and bewitching me for too long. Time to surrender, little witch."

Lena reached up to tangle her hands in his hair as he came down over her and settled his body against hers. She smiled. Gavin couldn't help but notice her smile was more than a little triumphant. He chuckled.

"Surrender?" She kissed his chin and he moved his head to catch her lips again. "I think it's you who has finally surrendered, Gavin. And it's about time. I've been waiting forever."

"Not as long as I have."

They surrendered together. Body, Heart, and Soul.

It was exactly one minute past midnight, and officially Christmas morning. The mansion was asleep. Four year old Marissa Calhoun ran into her uncle Gavin's bedroom –and showed absolutely no surprise to find her cousin Lena in bed with him –announced that Christmas was here *'and you just have to see this'*, then bounded out to race down the hall to her uncle Aiden and aunt Kira's room to wake them and tell them the same thing.

Kira cuddled her niece close and tried to get her to settle down. "It's too early for you to be up, sweetie. Why don't you lie back down with us and go back to sleep for awhile?"

Marissa shook her head, her curls bouncing just as she was. Aiden gently admonished her to be careful while sitting in Kira's lap. She giggled unrepentantly. "I'm too excited." She wrapped her arms around Kira's neck. "Thank you, Aunty Kitty-Kira, for the pony! Uncle Gavin said it would take a 'Christmas Miracle' for you to give in and let me have one."

Kira kissed the top of her head. "You're much too young but yet I know you'll be safe. Your uncles have promised me they'll keep you safe and teach you to ride."

Aiden touched Marissa's chubby baby cheek and kept his voice soft but stern. "Are you admitting, young lady, that you have been outside and that's how you knew about the pony? What have I told you about leaving the house at night, or by yourself?"

Marissa refused to be repentant. "I didn't go outside. I just remembered Uncle Gavin saying *that* about the Christmas Miracle. *And there it was*, so I knew my pony had to be here somewhere too."

"What are you talking about, honey?" Gavin came into the room with his arm around Lena's waist and both of them were yawning. "What Christmas Miracle?"

Marissa jumped from Kira's lap and raced to the bedroom door. "Come on," she squealed happily. "Come see the Christmas Miracle."

The four confused adults followed her downstairs and to the family room. The first thing they noticed was the warm and glowing fire in the huge fireplace casting shimmering light and making all the silver and gold ornaments on the Christmas tree sparkle.

The second thing they saw was the Christmas Miracle.

Curled up by the fireplace and directly under the tall Christmas tree, sleeping peacefully, and snoring delicately, was a beautiful, cinnamon-brown bear.

"Riana." No one knew who said it; maybe they all uttered her name in stunned surprise. All they knew was that *somehow* Riana had been healed. She was whole again. Her bear counterpart was once again a part of her Shifter soul. The Shaman had performed a miracle and given her true soul back to her. There were so many questions but no one wanted to disturb the sleeping bear. There would be time for answers later.

It was indeed a Christmas Miracle.

Lena leaned into Gavin and whispered teasingly, "Aren't you glad I knew Jared?"

Gavin smiled then growled low. "At least I can stop contemplating ripping him to shreds now. I owe him."

Kira smiled at them, her heart overflowing with the love surrounding them all. Everything was perfect in her world now. She was married to Aiden, madly in love with him, expecting their first child, and was surrogate mother to her precious witch-shapeshifter niece Marissa. Gavin and Lena were *finally* together.

And the Christmas Miracle she'd prayed so hard for –*thank the Goddess* –had come true.

"Merry Christmas, Riana," she whispered softly to the sleeping bear. The star on the top of the Christmas tree suddenly sparkled brightly, lighting the room for one reverent moment.

"I just love Christmas miracles," Marissa said as she jumped into her uncle Aiden's outstretched arms. "Can we have one *every* year?"

Author Biography

Kari Thomas is a multi published author writing in the Paranormal Romance genre. Her first published book, *TEMPTATION UNLEASHED*, received rave reviews from readers who thought her unique way of mixing Witches with various Shape Shifters was very different from the norm. A confessed "Book-a-Holic", Kari owns over 3,000 books and continues to buy more! She plans to be writing for many more years to come as she has a very active imagination and can't think of a better way to use it! Visit her website at: www.authorkari.com

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