

**Changeling Press Presents
Hot Toddy #2
Dark Callings: Home for the Holidays
Elizabeth Jewell**

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Chapter One

"This is the place."

Roarke looked up at the high ceiling -- beyond rare in a basement apartment -- then let his gaze sweep over the generous living room, the smallish kitchen. It felt new, yet welcoming. Homey.

"It's fifty dollars more a month than what we worked out."

Roarke had expected this protest from Riordan. That didn't stop him from rolling his eyes at the other man. "Do you like it?" he asked.

Riordan nodded, and Roarke could tell from his expression that he was wavering. That he really, really liked this apartment, but couldn't bring himself to come out and say it. It was the same expression he wore sometimes when they were making love.

Smiling, Roarke shook his head. Riordan was a pain in the ass, but at least he was consistent. "Then we should get it," he stated. "Fifty dollars a month isn't a big deal."

Riordan regarded him dubiously, but somehow hopefully. "You can pick up the difference?"

"Of course I can." He draped an arm over Riordan's shoulders and kissed his temple. "With pleasure, even."

Sighing, Riordan looked around the living room, as if he were afraid he might get too attached. "Yeah. Okay. Let's do it."

A muffled whoop from the other room confirmed Roarke's suspicion that their Realtor, Shelly, had been eavesdropping. He grinned and squeezed Riordan tighter. "You've made us both very happy."

Wry, almost embarrassed, Riordan smiled.

* * *

Decision made, they returned to the real estate office, where Shelly collected papers from Steve, her assistant. The office was strewn with holiday decorations -- tinsel garland hung over the edges of the desks, cardboard Santa Clauses on the walls. The bright patches of shiny tinsel caught Riordan by surprise. He was so out of touch with the "real" world he'd forgotten Christmas was right around the corner.

Shelly arranged the lease papers in a neat stack and grinned at Roarke. "So, fellows, how about dinner? To celebrate?"

Riordan looked to Roarke for guidance, unsure if the vampire would be comfortable in that kind of a social situation. He was dead sure he wouldn't.

To Riordan's surprise, and admittedly also to his disappointment, Roarke smiled politely and nodded. "That would be nice."

Shelly grinned. "Excellent."

An hour later, they were taking seats in a booth at a swank Italian restaurant not far from the real estate office. Roarke's pleasant demeanor hadn't diminished. Riordan, by contrast, was becoming progressively more uncomfortable.

"Is it true about garlic?" he mumbled to Roarke, while Shelly flirted with the attractive waiter.

The waiter flexed his pecs, trying and failing to be subtle about it, and Riordan almost missed Roarke's reply.

"No. Garlic is fine. Parmesan gives me indigestion, though." He looked at Riordan with a sly wink. "Go figure."

"So you can eat? This stuff, I mean."

"Yeah." He frowned. "I haven't? In front of you?"

"No." It struck Riordan suddenly how odd that was. Never a sandwich or a fried egg or a stolen French fry. Beer -- he'd drunk beer. That was liquid, though.

Nodding, Roarke glanced back at Shelly, who was discussing the merits of cheese ravioli versus stuffed shells. "Interesting."

"Why is it interesting?"

"I drink blood in front of you but I don't eat pasta. What does that say about me?"

"That you don't like pasta?" Shelly's attention shifted then, and Riordan dropped the conversation, focusing intently on his menu.

"You don't like pasta?" she said to Roarke, sounding hurt. "You should have said something."

"No, I'm fine," Roarke reassured her. He gave the waiter a look -- the kind that would have had Riordan on his back with his legs up in the air -- and ordered chicken fettuccini Alfredo. Arguably the most garlicky thing on the menu, Riordan noted. Then he noted that the waiter, retreating from their table, looked a little uncomfortable.

Riordan grinned. "You gave him a woody, my friend."

Shelly frowned. "Damn. You think he's gay?"

* * *

The meal proceeded with surprising smoothness. Riordan liked Shelly -- she was bright and personable and had been incredibly patient with them through their tedious hunt for a new apartment. Roarke seemed to like her, as well. She gave them a rundown of the high points of their new neighborhood -- good places to eat, good places to shop, the nearest movie theaters -- and even managed to subtly slip in the locations of the most popular gay bars in the area.

It was all useful information, but not for the reasons Shelly undoubtedly had in mind. Good places to hang out for humans meant good places for vampires to hang out, as well. Riordan made a mental note of the locations, particularly the theaters and gay bars. He and Roarke could cruise the places as soon as they got settled, and see how many vamps they could rout out and stake.

They had just finished ordering dessert when Shelly said, nonchalantly, "Melinda asked about you today."

Riordan stilled, waiting for the spear of pain to fade from his chest. "How is she doing?" he finally managed.

"She's fine. I guess you know she was sick for a while, but she's doing great

now.”

Riordan did, indeed, know. Melinda had been bitten by a vampire a few months ago. Riordan still blamed himself. Roarke blamed himself, as well, but in reality it had been a complicated situation.

“That’s good to hear,” he said.

Shelly regarded him sympathetically. “I’m sorry. Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“No, it’s okay.” A hand closed on his knee, under the table, and he looked at Roarke. “I’m glad she’s doing well.”

“Did she want anything?” Roarke said. The question surprised Riordan. He started to speak, but Roarke squeezed his knee.

“I got the impression she might want to talk to Riordan about something. I’m not sure, though.”

“Oh.” Riordan didn’t know what to say.

Roarke’s hand moved, sliding a little farther up Riordan’s leg, onto his thigh. “Tell her she can give us a call as soon as we get settled.”

Shelly nodded. “All right. I’ll do that.”

Riordan nodded, not trusting his voice to remain steady if he tried to say anything else.

Later, Riordan walked with Roarke down the dark sidewalks, heading for one of the sex clubs where they often hunted vamps. There were Christmas decorations here, as well, turning the lamp posts into giant candy canes. Memories drifted by, of his last Christmas with Melinda.

“I wonder what Melinda wanted,” Riordan ventured. He shifted a bit as he walked, so that his shoulder bumped Roarke’s. He tried to make it look like an accident, but he wasn’t sure he succeeded. Roarke shrugged. “I guess you can find out when she calls.”

“Yeah.” He fell silent for a few steps, then sensed Roarke’s attention on him. He stopped walking. “What?”

“You still love her?” Roarke’s voice was soft.

Riordan shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Roarke regarded him for a moment, then leaned in to kiss him, deep and warm. Riordan hesitated at first -- they weren’t alone on the nighttime sidewalk -- then let himself respond, devouring Roarke’s mouth. He tasted good.

After a moment, Roarke stepped back, then steered them toward the front of the club. “Ready to kill some shit?”

“Always.”

Chapter Two

Riordan seemed off tonight, Roarke thought, watching him shove a stake through the chest of a female vamp. They'd found her in one of the club's back rooms, practicing an interesting variation of the standard blow job on a very unwilling participant. The man had run as soon as Riordan and Roarke had moved in, obviously in pain and thoroughly embarrassed at the blood soaking the crotch of his jeans.

Riordan took a step back as the she-vamp imploded, squinting at the sudden flash of light. A sheen of sweat covered his forehead. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Ready to go home?" he asked.

Looking pointedly at Riordan's crotch, Roarke said, "Any time you are."

Riordan gave him a feral grin. He was hard under his jeans; Roarke could see the thick ridge of his erection straining the denim. "Then let's go."

They barely made it back to the apartment before Riordan ripped Roarke's shirt open, buttons flying across the living room. He hadn't even managed to close the apartment door behind them. Roarke lunged toward it, managing to slam it as Riordan leaned into him, kissing him, hands jerking at his fly, pulling his jeans open.

He seemed more frantic than usual. He always needed sex after the kill -- they both did, but Riordan more so -- but there was an edge to him tonight. Maybe it was because of Melinda.

Or maybe not. Maybe it was more. It occurred to Roarke that it had been a long time since Riordan had been forced to indulge in his natural but rare blood craving. Maybe the sudden sexual intensity meant something was happening to him physically.

He jumped, musings dispersed, as Riordan's hand closed on his cock, squeezing the shaft. Roarke knew from the roughness of the touch that he was going to be on the bottom tonight. He didn't have a problem with that.

Riordan surprised him, though, dropping to his knees, pulling Roarke's jeans down with him. He pumped Roarke's cock a few times, then sucked him into his mouth. He was rough and almost frantic, his teeth dragging over the sensitive skin of Roarke's retracted foreskin. Roarke closed his eyes. It hurt. He didn't care.

Moving with Riordan, he thrust into his lover's mouth, feeling the head of his cock bump against the back of Riordan's throat. Riordan swallowed with the contact and Roarke moaned as the muscles tightened on his glans.

Fingers digging hard into Roarke's buttocks, Riordan worked him hard. Roarke grabbed the other man's hair and pumped into his mouth until suddenly, with a harsh jerk and a growl, he let go. He heard Riordan gag, but then he made a softer, needier sound, gulping down Roarke's ejaculation, the muscles in the back of his throat tightening again and again on the sensitive tissues.

God, but it was good. Words of desire rose to Roarke's lips, in a language he'd forgotten he knew. His whole body pulsed with the ripping, powerful orgasm.

He hardly had time to enjoy it, though, before Riordan pushed to his feet, kissing Roarke, hard enough to be awkward. Roarke clasped his shoulders and moved him back a little.

"What do you want?" he asked, in the small space between Riordan's lips and his own.

"You," Riordan managed. He was harsh, eager, needy, ripping at Roarke's shirt.

Roarke stepped out of his pants and guided Riordan toward the sofa. Riordan seemed oblivious to Roarke's maneuvering, focused as he was on kissing, sucking, biting, ripping at clothing. A button made a small sound as it hit the wooden floor.

It wasn't the first time Riordan had taken control, but there was something different. Roarke let himself be loose and passive as Riordan shoved him back into the couch. Whatever was happening, Riordan needed it to happen. So Roarke would let it.

He settled back into the couch, sitting up, and had barely adjusted his posture against the cushions when Riordan grasped his knees, lifting his legs and bending them back. He opened Roarke's thighs, exposing him completely, making him vulnerable.

Roarke looked into his eyes and reached up to cup his face.

“God...” Riordan’s voice came out on a harsh breath, and Roarke saw the all-too-familiar, all-too-frustrating expression of self-loathing on his lover’s face. He was beginning to understand; the lust was just too much tonight, too much for Riordan to contain.

“Riordan,” he said, his voice firm. “Just take what you need.”

How many times did he have to offer himself? How many times did he have to make it clear to Riordan that he was okay with this? That he didn’t mind these times when Riordan had to fuck the hell out of him just to hang onto his own sanity?

Gently, he trailed his fingers down Riordan’s face. “It’s okay.”

Riordan made a strangled sound of protest, or disbelief, his face falling. It was so hard for him, Roarke knew. He wished he could make it easier. His voice soft, almost a whisper, he added, “I love you.”

Before Riordan could look away, or close his eyes, or otherwise negate Roarke’s words, Roarke leaned up to kiss him. The lube was at the ready, abandoned between couch cushions last time they’d made love here. Roarke found it, opened it, squeezed some onto his fingers and reached down to prepare himself for Riordan’s entrance. Then he reached up to unfasten Riordan’s jeans. As he slid denim and cotton down Riordan’s thighs, he slicked his cock with the other hand, feeling his lover tremble as his fingers slid along the velvety, tumescent flesh.

Finally, Riordan gave in to the need and thrust inside him. Heady lust filled Roarke’s head, and he let out a harsh, strangled gasp. No gentle preparation, but he didn’t really need it. He knew how to release the tension, how to loosen his body, and Riordan slammed in, one shallow thrust, a deeper one, and by the third, almost frantic lunge, he was seated to the hilt.

Roarke grabbed at his shoulders, trying to slow him down, just a little, just enough that he could truly feel every slick, burning invasion, but Riordan was lost. He thrust hard, harder, fucking Roarke blind. Roarke moaned, feeling his fangs prick his gums and slide free as his body tightened with hot spirals of arousal.

Only a few harsh, solid thrusts and Riordan came, his body bucking violently into Roarke's, a grating howl rising from his throat. But he didn't stop. He kept going, his cock still rock-hard inside Roarke's body, pounding and pounding until Roarke wasn't certain even he could take it anymore, the harsh burn, the overload of sensation, as Riordan speared into him. Then he climaxed again, hard and straining, one hand groping toward Roarke's. Looking up, Roarke was surprised to see tears on Riordan's face.

"Riordan," he murmured. "Love, let it go."

Riordan's body lurched and clenched. It felt to Roarke as if he orgasmed three times, maybe four, before he finally let himself wilt forward into Roarke's arms, sobs wracking him now.

"I can't," he said. "I can't."

Unsure what he meant, Roarke cradled his head, stroking him. "Shh. Bedtime, love. We'll talk about it after sunset."

* * *

Riordan woke hungry. More than hungry -- ravenous. His stomach aching, burning, with the all-too-familiar craving.

It hadn't haunted him in a long time, and he'd hoped it might not come back. He should have known better.

He needed blood. He'd needed it for a few days, but had fought the urge, knowing even as he did so that it was a pointless struggle. Sooner or later, he would have to give in.

The burning sensation in his stomach suddenly lurched up into his throat, making him retch. He started to roll sideways out of the bed and found to his surprise that he couldn't, that he was shaking too hard even to shift his weight, much less haul himself to the kitchen. His hands trembled and jerked, and he seemed to have nearly lost control of his own body.

Light still seeped in through the bedroom door. Full sunset was a few minutes away, and Roarke wouldn't be awake until the sun had gone completely down. He was

on his own until then.

Good. He didn't want Roarke to see him like this.

Idiot, a vague voice said in the back of his mind. He'd seen Roarke in worse straits, and Roarke had seen him nearly dead, bleeding out all over a warehouse floor. They'd seen each other naked, seen each other come, been inside each other. There wasn't much left to hide.

Except this.

Sitting up gracefully was not an option, so instead he lurched sideways, rolling ignominiously off the bed to land with a *thunk* on the carpet. There was no response from Roarke. He was dead to the world, in his daytime coma. Nothing would wake him at this stage, not even a couple of fingers up the ass. Riordan knew this from experience.

An inch at a time, he peeled himself up off the floor, just enough to move forward. Inch at a time, fingers clawing into the worn, dingy carpet. His body betraying him, shaking, trembling with every attempt to move. He was almost certain he was drooling on the carpet, but he couldn't actually feel it.

It seemed that hours had passed when he finally clawed his way onto a wooden surface. The living room floor. One more room to cross, eight, maybe ten feet to the kitchen, then somehow to open the refrigerator door...

He fought, clawed, and at some point lost track of what he was doing, where he was. Maybe he blacked out. He wasn't sure. The next thing he was aware of was the feel of warm porcelain against his lips, the sweet smell of blood in his nostrils.

"Riordan?" Roarke's gentle voice seemed to brush over his skin, a soft, warm, living thing.

Riordan lifted a hand to clasp the mug and found Roarke's hands instead. He clung to them, gulping down the blood. It was thick and warm in his mouth, sweet-metallic, and there was nothing in the world, at that moment, that he could possibly need more.

* * *

"You should have told me."

Sitting now at the kitchen table, Riordan looked at Roarke, chagrined. The vampire's eyes glinted with an anger he was obviously fighting hard to keep away from the rest of his face.

"Sorry." He didn't know what else to say.

"Why did you fight it? You knew it wasn't going to go away."

Riordan settled the bridge of his nose against thumb and forefinger. He said nothing.

"Or is it just another of those things you refuse to admit to yourself?" Roarke's voice had gone brittle. Riordan lowered his hand and looked at him, knowing full well what was coming next. "Like the whole, 'I'm not gay,' mantra you're so fond of?"

"I'm not," Riordan said flatly.

Roarke sighed. A good, hearty sigh of frustration. Riordan had heard it a lot lately. "At worst, you're bi," Roarke said. "At best, you're mine. Give it up."

"I do." Riordan allowed himself a small smile, relieved that Roarke had lightened the mood a little. "Rather often, point of fact."

The smile that curved across Roarke's mouth was strained. "Yeah." He pushed to his feet, regarding Riordan with what appeared to be the last shreds of his patience. "I'm going out."

"Give me a minute to get ready."

"Don't bother." He grabbed his coat. "Not in the mood to get jerked around right now."

Riordan flinched as if he'd been slapped. Roarke left, the door slamming shut behind him.

* * *

Four in the morning. Riordan stared at the clock. A couple of hours, yet, before Roarke would be in danger from the sunlight. He knew the vampire could take care of himself in any case, but he was still worried.

More than worried, he was hurt. Hurt that Roarke had left him the way he had, so abruptly. In anger.

Four twelve. He was pacing. He needed more blood. His first instinct was, again, to ignore the craving. But he remembered the harsh flash in Roarke's eyes, and he went to the kitchen and heated up a mug.

The flavor had become less appealing and more cloying. He wouldn't need much more, and then the cycle would begin again. He would be fine for a while -- there was no way to know how long -- then the need would return.

Like his need for Roarke, which he still tried to deny sometimes, even knowing how Roarke felt about him. He just couldn't bring himself to fully acknowledge those feelings.

And why? He'd never had any trouble telling Melinda he loved her. Why should it be so hard to say those words to Roarke? Just because he was a man? He could blame his lover's vampiric nature all he wanted, but what it came down to was that, in spite of the time he'd spent balls-deep in Roarke's ass, or vice-versa, some part of him was still a raging homophobe.

Four twenty. Riordan sighed. He could go out himself, try to find Roarke, or just hunt. But if he hunted, the body lust would return, and without Roarke to slake it with... He didn't want anybody else. The realization felt like a slap in the face. Cold water, an unwanted revelation.

He hoped, too, that Roarke wasn't out looking for a quick fuck to slake his own thirst after the kill. The thought made him angry, made him taste bile at the back of his throat. He didn't want Roarke to want anybody else, either.

Four twenty-four. He went back to the bedroom, stretched out on the bed, and waited.

* * *

He woke to a touch, a hand cupping his ass, fingers kneading. A soft moan rose from his chest and he started to roll over. "Roarke --"

But Roarke pushed him back to the bed, face-down, silent. He spread Riordan's legs, opened him up. His touch was rougher than usual as he slathered Riordan with lube, then entered him, slow but firm, with little preamble and certainly no foreplay.

Clawing into the mattress, Riordan pushed back toward Roarke, then away, not sure which direction he wanted to go. Roarke's rough treatment had caught him by surprise, and he wasn't sure whether to protest or accept it. Roarke, though, thrust into him, one long, hard stroke after another, silent.

"Roarke?" Riordan ventured again, but Roarke, still wordless, made one last, deep, stabbing thrust and came. His teeth clamped into the back of Riordan's neck, and Riordan cried out in soft protest.

"Shit," he muttered, but held still, letting his lover finish. When Roarke finally rolled away, Riordan turned to look at him. "What the fuck?"

Roarke turned over and went to sleep.

Chapter Three

Following the demands of his not-quite-vampire constitution, Riordan normally slept during the day. Today, though, he lay awake, listening to the vague, nearly nonexistent sigh of Roarke's breathing.

He still hurt. Not so much physically, but emotionally, though Roarke's rough taking of him had left him burning. He didn't clearly understand what had happened, why Roarke had done what he'd done. Wasn't sure why Roarke had left, and was even less sure why he'd come back.

Eyes closed, he lay still in the bed for a long time, aware of the shifting levels of light outside the blackened window. He thought about the new place, how much more open it was, how friendly. It would be a good place to live. With Roarke. Not alone. And he'd fucked it all up but good.

The doorbell rang. He glanced at the clock on the wall. It was ten a.m. -- he was never awake at this hour so he had no idea if a ten a.m. doorbell ring was normal or not. Probably worth checking into, even if it did mean getting out of bed.

A postal worker stood in the hallway, in uniform. She had a small box in her hand.

"It didn't fit in the mailbox," she said, frowning.

Riordan took it. "I didn't even know we had a mailbox."

"You don't get mail?"

"Have you delivered any?" He countered her question a bit too harshly, then pressed his lips together, wishing he hadn't been so brusque.

But she just tilted her head to one side, considering. "Now that you mention it, not really. What are you, the Unibomber?"

"Not this week." He gave her a twitchy smile and gestured with the small,

wrapped box. "Thanks."

"Of course." She headed back up the stairs, and he closed the door.

Mail. It was such an odd concept he wasn't sure what to think of it. They never got mail. The landlord handed them their bills, and they didn't have a phone. Nobody sent Christmas or birthday cards. Riordan didn't have a credit card to run up a bill on -- he just didn't get mail. Not even junk mail, which, upon reflection, was something of a preternatural miracle.

The small box didn't have a return address -- another confusing piece to the oddly developing puzzle. He took it into the kitchen and sat down with it at the table.

He felt odd, being awake at this hour. Dazed, almost, as if he were on some kind of drugs. A mild hallucinogenic, or just something with enough strength to muddle his sensory perception. Everything felt strange, as if he were unfamiliar with his surroundings. An effect of the sunlight, he thought, though very little of it managed to seep into the apartment, and he wasn't actually being exposed to any of it at the moment. Slowly, not sure it wasn't a dream, he opened the little box.

Inside was a small, silk packet, made to hold jewelry. It closed with a small snap. He ran a thumb over the smooth, brocaded material, understanding now why there had been no return address.

Melinda had sent the package. He recognized the little packet -- he'd given it to her a few months before he'd left her -- for Christmas, ironically enough -- along with the pieces of jewelry he knew would be inside. Blinking, he gathered himself, then unfastened the snap and looked inside.

There was only one ring. He'd expected two. But she'd only sent him his half of the pair. He drew it out and looked at it, frowning.

It wasn't an engagement ring, or anything nearly so formal, but for Christmas that year he'd bought them matching silver bands embedded with a round of turquoise. He'd intended to propose to her for her birthday, but a week before the planned date, he'd been bitten, and he'd changed.

With a sigh, he laid the ring down on the table. Why had she sent it? And why

had she kept her half of the set? He picked up the envelope and looked inside, in case the other ring was there, and he'd just missed it.

It wasn't there. But a small piece of paper peeked out at him, folded and settled at the bottom of the tiny pouch. He fished it out with a finger and unfolded it.

Mark. Thought you might want this. Remember me always. Merry Christmas. Love, Mel.

He folded the note back up, thoughtful. For a few minutes he just sat at the table, looking at nothing in particular. Then he got up and went to the door.

The sunlight outside was blindingly bright. He hadn't seen full daylight in over two years, and its intensity took him by surprise. The door to his apartment was shaded, though, by the porch area of the apartments above. So was the pay phone on the other side of the courtyard. The problem was the courtyard itself, open to the daylight. Ten yards, maybe, between his front door and the phone. He could make it. But, just to be on the safe side, he went to the bathroom and grabbed a towel. Then, taking a deep breath, he steeled himself, and ran to the phone.

* * *

Roarke woke alone. This didn't surprise him. He'd treated Riordan like shit that morning. It wouldn't even surprise him if Riordan were completely gone, and there was a "Dear Roarke," note on the kitchen table.

He rolled over, staring at the ceiling. The big, familiar water stain stared back down at him. So much for the new apartment. So much for a warm body to curl up against in the evening, when he was still not quite awake.

Sighing, he closed his eyes again.

Then realized he wasn't alone. He heard voices from the kitchen. Riordan and... Shelly? Slowly, he sat up.

His stomach sank. They were negotiating how to unload the apartment he and Riordan had just agreed to rent. No other explanation for Shelly's being here. But the tones of their voices seemed too happy for that. He tuned in more closely, letting his acute vampiric senses take over.

“That’d work. Makes sense, even.” This was Shelly, and Roarke heard the flipping of pages. The ruffling sounded like her day planner. “I’ll go ahead and write that in, and I can make the phone calls for you.”

“I’d appreciate that,” said Riordan. “I can use the pay phone, but it gets awkward sometimes.”

Shelly chuckled. “It’s no problem. And they’re all local calls, so no big.”

Roarke got up and pulled on a pair of pants before traipsing blearily into the living room. He had a raging hard-on, but there wasn’t much he could do about that at the moment, unless he wanted to risk having Shelly overhear him whacking off.

“What’s up?” he asked, walking toward the kitchen.

Riordan jumped a little and quickly closed the date book on the table in front of him. “Nothing,” he said.

Shelly gave Roarke a sly smile. “Not a thing.”

“Oh.” Roarke had a feeling his pants were tenting, but he didn’t dare look down to check. “All right, then,” he said, and went back to bed.

* * *

Riordan finished his business with Shelly, then slipped quietly into the bedroom. He was almost certain Roarke was awake, but didn’t want to disturb him on the off chance that he wasn’t.

Roarke was awake. Very. He lay on his back in the bed, lounging against the pillows, eyes closed, jacking himself off.

Stopping just inside the door, Riordan held his breath and watched. Roarke’s big hand curled around his thick, erect cock, working the foreskin expertly up, over the head, back down, the glans peeking out, then disappearing behind the thin sleeve of skin. His body was tense, his back arching with each slick movement of his hand. Pre-come slicked the glans.

He paused in his stroking to cup his balls, pressing and rolling them. His head rolled back a little on the pillow and he moaned.

Riordan felt his face go hot. Not with embarrassment as much as raw need.

Surely Roarke had heard him come in. He was a vampire after all, with acute vampire hearing. So he had to be aware he was being watched. He certainly wasn't acting like it, though, stroking the backs of his balls, tracing a finger down his perineum, rimming his own ass with a gentle touch.

Riordan couldn't help it. A moan escaped from his own lips. The only response from Roarke was a slow, almost leisurely turning of his head toward the door, a vague curve of a smile.

Clearing his throat, Riordan took a step closer. Roarke opened his eyes. The smile faded, and he watched Riordan with a smoldering challenge in his eyes.

His big hand moved back to his cock, sliding in slow, even strokes. Riordan's breath quickened. But for the first time since he'd met Roarke, he didn't know what to do. Didn't know if he'd be welcome if he climbed onto the bed and let his hand or his mouth take over for Roarke's hand. So he just stood there, uncertain, progressively uncomfortable.

"No," Roarke said abruptly, and only then did Riordan realize his hand had strayed to his own crotch, fingers tracing his erection through his jeans. He pulled his hand away.

"No?"

"No." Hand still languidly slipping along his turgid length, Roarke looked pointedly down at Riordan's bulge. "Don't touch it."

Just the weight of Roarke's attention was enough to arouse him that much more, his cock straining painfully against his zipper. He wiped his hand on his thigh. "What do you want me to do?"

Roarke's gaze rose again, his eyes locking to Riordan's. "What do you want *me* to do?"

Riordan opened his mouth, then closed it again. "What..." He stopped. Cleared his throat. Then said, hesitantly, "Circles. One finger. Around the head."

Roarke smiled a little and did what he was told. "It's your tongue," he said. "What would it do next?"

Suddenly barely able to breathe, Riordan closed his eyes for a moment. "Lick... along the rim... then inside just a little, into the slit, in and out..." He stopped, opening his eyes again. This was unbearable. Not just thinking about what he wanted to do to Roarke, but watching him enact the shaky directions on his body. The blunt tip of Roarke's finger toyed now with the slit of his cock. Just that little bit, just that small invasion. Catching his breath, Roarke pushed his head back, eyes glazing a little.

"Up and down the shaft. My mouth on the head... my hand on the shaft..." He swallowed. His own cock ached and twitched, and there was nothing he could do about it. Roarke had said so. He watched Roarke's hands shift again, one toying with his glans, the other sliding up and down the shaft as ordered. His gaze never drifted from Riordan's, the challenge still adding steel to their gray depths.

"What do you want now?" His voice was almost a whisper.

"I want... I want you to come in my mouth."

Roarke smiled. "Then come here."

He hesitated, unsure, then took a step forward. Roarke pumped his cock a little faster, his smile curling deeper at the corners. "Do you want it or not?"

"I want it." Riordan's hands were shaking.

"Then come here."

He took another step forward, then gave in and closed the distance to the bed, going to his knees on the mattress, practically falling onto Roarke, finding his lover's full, erect cock, drawing it in, tasting it, sucking it down.

Roarke made a growling sound deep in his chest. His fingers dug into Riordan's hair, clawing into his scalp, pulling him closer. Riordan almost gagged as the hard cock shoved down his throat, but caught himself, swallowing instead. The soft flesh of Roarke's glans moved slickly against his palate. Familiar flavors filled Riordan's mouth -- skin, salt, bitter pre-come. God, it tasted good.

He moaned, the sound far too needy, and reached for Roarke, desperate to touch him, to feel his cool, firm skin. One hand met Roarke's, their fingers weaving together. He clenched the long, slim fingers tight, tight enough to break a human's hand, but

Roarke just squeezed back.

He felt... ripped open. From heart to balls, almost, like something had been removed. Like only having Roarke inside him, deep and thrusting, could make it go away. He sucked hard on the familiar cock, feeling Roarke's body tighten and arch under him, feeling the long, strong fingers dig into his scalp, pulling too hard at his hair.

"Riordan..." Roarke's voice was thready, strained, and suddenly his hips bucked and Riordan tasted orgasm at the back of his throat. He swallowed hard, caressing Roarke with the motions. His own body clenched, and he reached down to stop the inevitable, too late. His own climax tore through his body, seeming to unwind from his groin to spread to every inch of him, all the way to the tips of his fingers, spilling over his hand, soaking the sheets beneath him.

Roarke's breathing was harsh and labored, his hands groping over Riordan's body. "Riordan... God, Riordan..."

Riordan moved carefully, rising off Roarke to kiss him, trying to hide the fact he'd come all over the sheets. The sated vampire seemed not to care, pulling Riordan down to him, kissing him thoroughly, as if trying to recover his own taste from the depths of Riordan's mouth.

After a long moment, he drew back, looking directly into Riordan's eyes. The emotion there was so raw he almost couldn't look back. But he forced himself to hold Roarke's gaze.

"Riordan," Roarke said quietly, almost hesitantly. He reached down, fingers tracing over Riordan's stomach, through the wetness there. "Do you love me?"

Riordan swallowed. He didn't want to answer, wanted to hide, retreat from the feelings he'd been denying for so long. But he remembered the moment when Roarke had walked out, and the hours afterward, not knowing if he was going to return.

He looked right into Roarke's eyes.

"Yes. I love you."

Chapter Four

They moved into the apartment the week before Christmas. Riordan was surprised at the number of boxes. It didn't seem like they'd had that much stuff to pack, until it came time to unpack it.

They sat across from each other, unloading a box full of knick-knacks. Most of them seemed to be Roarke's -- Riordan had never seen many of them. He'd found an old box of Christmas ornaments, though, and on a whim had decorated the mantelpiece. It looked more than pathetic now, he thought, pulling a crystal cat out of its protective wrapping. All they needed now were a couple of ratty stockings and a Charlie Brown tree to complete the picture.

Roarke studied him as he wiped the cat with a soft cloth. "You don't have to say it again," he said.

"What?" Riordan asked, then looked abruptly away as he realized he knew the answer. *I love you*. He'd actually said the words. "Might want to," he mumbled.

He could hear Roarke's smile in his voice. "That's good to hear."

"I'm sorry." It was hard to say, but not as hard as the other. He still didn't look up, though, until Roarke laid a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"It's okay."

Riordan nodded. He turned toward Roarke, and held him.

* * *

Christmas Eve at dusk was dark and damp, with no sign of snow, but with a dreary drizzle that threatened to turn the sidewalks to ice. Riordan, rolling out of bed naked with Roarke's touch still echoing on his skin, walked to the high window in the living room, pulled back the tight blinds, and looked out. He frowned.

Roarke came up behind him, wrapping his arms around Riordan's waist. "Come

back to bed," he said. "I'm cold."

Drawing his lover's arms closer around him, Riordan said, "You're a vampire. You're always cold."

Lips brushed softly against his neck. "That wasn't nice."

"Just stating the obvious." Headlights swept across the slick parking lot, and a car pulled into a space in front of the window, the lights reaching for a moment inside the apartment. He turned in Roarke's arms, moving them both back toward the bedroom. "Freezing. Need to get dressed."

"Why? Fuck me warm. You know I like that." He trailed after Riordan.

"I know. Later, I promise. If that's what you want for Christmas, that's what you'll get." Grabbing a sweatshirt from the closet, he jerked it on over his head, then grabbed jeans and struggled into them, walking back out to the living room at the same time.

Roarke stared after him, perplexed. Then there was a knock at the front door. What the hell? He groped in the closet for his own clothes, dragging on a shirt and pants. Voices rose in the living room; a lilting, female laugh. Shelly again. That made sense, at least. Probably bringing by a housewarming gift. He straightened his shirt and went to join them.

"Hi, Shelly," he began, but just then there was another knock at the door, and Riordan went to answer it. Roarke blinked, surprised, then looked back at the Realtor, who was grinning.

"Merry Christmas," she said, and handed him a bottle. He took it. It was Bailey's Irish Cream, with a big, red ribbon tied around the neck.

"Thank you." He looked toward the door, where Riordan was ushering in Steve, Shelly's assistant from the real estate office.

"Steve," Riordan was saying, more than a little awkward, but trying. "I remember. Thanks for coming."

"We're having a party?" Roarke asked, perplexed.

"It's a combination Christmas party slash housewarming," Shelly told him.

Steve moved past him, smiling, and put a Tupperware container on the kitchen table. "Dip," he said. "I hope somebody else brought chips."

"I bought chips," said Riordan.

A hand brushed Roarke's shoulder, and he turned to face Riordan, who looked smug and uncertain at the same time.

"We're having a party." The words sounded strange even as Roarke said them. Then he grinned suddenly and grabbed Riordan, kissing him, not caring who might be watching.

Riordan kissed him back, somewhat to Roarke's surprise, and when he drew back he was smiling. "Thought you might like it."

"I do like it. Who else is coming?"

Clearing her throat, Shelly took a step forward. She looked a little flushed. Roarke wondered if it was a reaction to the kiss. "Um... just us, apparently. Sorry. The weather's not the greatest."

"It's okay." He smiled warmly at Riordan. "It really, really is."

Not quite able to hold Roarke's gaze, Riordan went into the kitchen to retrieve the chips. "So we have chips and dip. I could make sandwiches."

Shelly strode purposefully after him. "Oh, please. You sit down. I'll cook."

A gaping stare at Roarke told him they'd had the same thought -- the blood in the fridge.

"Wait," Riordan said, intercepting her on her way across the kitchen. "I need to check, be sure nothing's moldy or rotten. You know."

She chuckled. "Of course. Couple of guys in an apartment -- of course there's going to be fuzzy alive stuff in the fridge. I'll just get a drink, instead." Finding the wine rack in the corner, she headed that way.

Roarke watched as Riordan hurriedly rearranged the fridge, making a show of throwing out several things, though Roarke knew he was only hiding the bags of blood in the back of one of the produce drawers. Shelly extracted a bottle of white zinfandel and began to fill glasses she retrieved from the kitchen counter, where they sat waiting

for someone to put them away after the day's earlier unpacking.

In the living room, Roarke settled into a chair with a smile. He took his glass from Shelly and lifted it toward Steve.

"Merry Christmas," he said.

Steve smiled, not looking entirely comfortable. "Merry Christmas," he said.

* * *

An hour later, they all sat eating a casserole Shelly had thrown together with random ingredients gleaned from fridge and pantry. Steve still seemed a little uncomfortable, Roarke thought, but he had a feeling the discomfort would pass as long as he and Riordan didn't kiss each other again.

As far as Roarke was concerned, Steve was just going to have to stay uncomfortable. Riordan looked particularly good tonight, and Roarke doubted he was going to be able to control himself much longer.

He was finishing up his casserole, scraping the last of it off the plate, eating with the gusto Roarke was accustomed to, rather than the anemic reluctance he'd displayed during his recent episode of bloodlust. He should have pressed, he supposed. He'd known something was wrong. But he'd wanted Riordan to trust him enough to tell him.

Smiling a little wistfully with remembered regret, he watched Riordan take his empty plate to the sink. His ass was delectable in those tight Levi's. Had they not had company, Roarke might have taken him right there in the kitchen, bent him over the counter and fucked the hell out of him. Hell, he might do it anyway.

Riordan paused there by the sink, setting his hands against the edge of the counter. Abruptly, he pushed back, left the kitchen, and crossed back into their bedroom.

Wondering what he was up to, Roarke set his nearly empty glass on the table. A questioning glance at Shelly yielded only a shrug in return.

He could wait. He was good at that.

After a few minutes, Riordan emerged, carrying a small, flat box. He stared at it as he crossed the room, as if reluctant to meet Roarke's gaze. Which made Roarke think

the contents just might be significant.

Riordan held out the box, and Roarke reached out to take it.

"Merry Christmas," Riordan said hesitantly.

"Thank you."

"You haven't opened it yet." He made a vague gesture. "Open it."

Slowly, Roarke untied the ribbon. The wrapping was a bit cockeyed, the bow not quite straight. Riordan had obviously wrapped it himself. Picking the tape loose, Roarke eased the paper off, then opened the flat, gold-toned box.

Inside were two bracelets, made of jute and small stone beads. They, too, had a handmade quality about them. The beads were green gemstones -- colored quartz of some kind, or possibly agate -- three beads to each bracelet. Roarke fingered the smooth stones reverently, then looked up at Riordan, acutely aware that Shelly and Steve were looking on.

"One for you," Riordan said quietly, "and one for me."

Silent, Roarke lifted one of the bracelets toward him, and Riordan took it. He seemed paralyzed for a moment, unsure, probably far too aware of the audience, but held still as Roarke took the rough-made jewelry and tied it around his wrist. Then he took the other and returned the favor for Roarke.

"Merry Christmas," Riordan murmured as he finished the careful knot.

Roarke looked up at him and smiled, then came to his feet. "Is there mistletoe?"

Shelly laughed. "Oh, kiss him, anyway."

Steve sighed. Roarke chuckled. Riordan started to flush, but Roarke kissed him, anyway.

Merry Christmas

Elizabeth Jewell

Elizabeth Jewell is the author of a growing collection of paranormal and contemporary erotic novels and novellas. She's been writing since before she could read, and has given in to the fact that she's completely addicted to the process of composing fiction -- especially hot, steamy, paranormal fiction.

Elizabeth lives in Colorado with her kids and far too many animals. She's looking for a full-time job and a date, but given her sudden penchant for gay fiction, we're not sure what kind of date to send her.