

A Very Vampire Christmas

The author of the Sookie Stackhouse series, which inspired TRUE BLOOD, serves up shoes, shopping, sex—and a little blood and gore, too. (What do you expect? It's a vampire story!) Consider these five pages our gift to you.

BY CHARLAINE HARRIS



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AHLIA LINLEY-CHIVERS

had been walking the earth since before there was the celebration known as Christmas, so she regarded the modern December holiday season as a passing fad—an annoying and expensive one. To Dahlia's disgust, even the vampires in her nest in the upper Midwestern city of Rhodes had begun giving gifts to one another on December 25, despite everything she could say to discourage the practice. The only person Dahlia really liked to shop for was Dahlia.

Tonight she was visiting a shopping mall at the insistence of her friend Taffy. Taffy (whose original name was Taphronia) had been considered a giantess in her time. Even now, at 5'7", Taffy was perhaps eight inches taller than diminutive Dahlia. Taffy was also generously curvaceous and much more relaxed in her attitude to life—and, well, just about everything—than her best friend.

Dahlia's human birth name was almost unpronounceable by a modern tongue, and she'd adopted Dahlia Linley-Chivers when she was living in England in the 1940s and had needed an identity change during the Blitz. She'd had many *Continued on next page* ♦♦

aliases and learned many languages in her long life. She spoke American English perfectly—maybe a little too perfectly.

As they browsed through the bras at Victoria's Secret, Taffy said, "I had my name legally changed. In a human court."

"To what?" Dahlia was considering a pale pink brassiere decorated with black lace and black polka dots. It would be a bore to learn to call Taffy something else, but she'd make the effort. Nesting vampires, who lived together in a large house under the guidance of a territorial leader called a sheriff, had to work together. Taffy had just changed her name from Taffeta, the moniker she'd used during her stint as a music hall performer. Surely that was only a short time ago?

Well, maybe 80 years.

TAFFY LOOKED a little self-conscious. "Taffy Swiftfoot," she said, and became unconvincingly interested in a zebra-striped negligee.

"I changed my *last* name."

"Swiftfoot?" Dahlia said, her arched brows drawing together.

"My husband's name," Taffy said.

Taffy's husband, Donald Swiftfoot, was a werewolf. Though Taffy wasn't as old as Dahlia, over the centuries she'd been married more than once, and Don was her favorite mate. Werewolf-vampire unions were held in some contempt by both supernatural groups, so Taffy had fought a few battles—and Dahlia had backed her up all the way, not because she was so impressed with Don, but because Taffy was her friend.

"Taffy Swiftfoot is a good name," Dahlia said, after a long pause. "And we've looked at this lingerie long enough. Time to get to work! What gifts do you need to purchase?"

Taffy rooted around in her large, expensive hobo bag and produced a long list of names on a torn envelope. Dahlia's list (on a pale green sheet of notepaper headed "Dahlia" in ivory cursive) was much shorter, but it included what might be termed Dahlia's soft spot. Dahlia had decided to find something nice to send to 34 Company, the workstation of the human firefighters who had rescued her when the vampire hotel called the Pyramid of Gizex exploded the year before, blown up in a hate-crime attack. The firefighters had pulled her out of the depths of hotel debris,

and over the months she'd gotten to know them all. "They all eat meat," she told Taffy. "Maybe I should send them a butchered cow?"

Taffy bit her lip and turned away.

"I'm amusing you?" Dahlia asked frostily. She saw nothing humorous in wanting to give the firefighters what she thought was a practical item.

"Let's stop by the Hickory Farms stall," Taffy suggested. "I believe their meat is already processed and ready to ship. Perfect for your...little human pets."

Dahlia's back stiffened until she looked at least an inch taller. "You're the one who goes to bed with a dog," she muttered, but she stalked on her ridiculously high heels toward the stall. Dahlia's scowling paper-white face clearly frightened the attendant, who whipped a cross out of her blouse. For a moment Dahlia thought the girl would cut and run. She smiled slightly in anticipation. Dahlia was impressed and a bit disappointed when the young woman faced the two vampires with a brave stance. And after Dahlia took out her long shopping list, the girl abandoned her chin-upraised heroism for the more prosaic task of taking a truly huge order. She was smiling by the time Dahlia put her credit card back into her Prada bag.

After Dahlia marked Engine 34 off her list with some satisfaction, she and Taffy began the search for a suitable gift for their new sheriff, Joaquin.

The Rhodes nest had changed since Joaquin had taken over. Cell phones were now permitted—laptops, too. Every Saturday night, 20 volunteer blood donors came to the mansion, anticipating the blissful high of being bitten. Naturally, restraint was necessary—it took years of practice to learn how to leave them enough blood to survive—but no vampire would turn down a free meal. Living in the Rhodes mansion had never felt so modern.

But Joaquin had rules about public conduct, too. Though they were now legal citizens living in the open, discretion was necessary. None of the Rhodes vampires were permitted to make themselves conspicuous—unless they had the opportunity to save a crippled baby from a crashed car or something equally noble and newsworthy.

Joaquin's memo the previous week read: "In a season humans regard as religious, take special care not to cause or permit a

situation in which those of the supernatural community harm or upset the breathers. Ignore my words at your peril."

Unless Dahlia was much mistaken (and Dahlia never thought she was mistaken), such a situation, the very kind Joaquin had warned against, was brewing right at this moment in the Rhodes Marketplace Mall.

While Taffy had been eyeing some silk pajamas she hoped Joaquin might fancy, Dahlia had been scanning the crowd in the mall's center court. Christmas tunes were pumping out over the sound system, the whole area glittered with holiday decorations, and children and their parents thronged Santa's Workshop to see the human impostor dressed as Santa Claus and his little helpers.

"Taffy," she said very quietly. "Stop looking at those pajamas."

"Why?" Taffy said, turning from absorbed attention of blue and white stripes to raise a quizzical brow.

"Look—are those elves?"

"Yes," Taffy explained patiently. "Americans have this insane idea that elves are cute little sexless workers for Santa Claus. Weren't you listening during the briefing the humanology expert gave last week?"

"Real elves," Dahlia breathed.

"Oh, no!" Elves would eat anything, but they preferred fresh flesh. As in, still-breathing fresh. There was a reason elves weren't seen very often; in the supernatural world, vampires were encouraged to kill them on sight, though killing them was notoriously difficult. Taffy hunched her shoulders as if she suddenly wanted to be inconspicuous, but the attempt was doomed to failure. Even in a sophisticated city like Rhodes, a tall, busty vampire with big blond hair and a white, wide-cheeked face stood out, especially if she was with a tiny, busty. *Continued on page 219* ➤



"Taffy," she said very quietly. "Stop looking at those pajamas."

black-haired vampire in four-inch heels and a skintight skirt.

"Do they know we're here?" Taffy breathed.

"Maybe," Dahlia said. "Who can tell how the air currents move in a place like this? No matter how much Bulgari perfume I wear, I smell like a vampire."

Santa had six little helpers. They weren't so little, Dahlia realized now that she focused on them.

"How are they able to be out in public?" Taffy said.

"They're wearing some sort of cheap magical spell," Dahlia said. "It works on humans but not on us. Maybe they bought it off a demon or a rogue fairy."

As Taffy peered at the elves, Dahlia said, "I beg your pardon," to a well-dressed woman hurrying by.

The woman stopped. "Yes?" she said, visibly nervous to be talking to the undead. She glanced at Dahlia's Prada bag and relaxed a bit.

"Do you see the elves helping Santa?" Dahlia asked.

The women replied, "Yes, aren't they darling?"

"Um. How do their teeth seem to you?" asked Taffy.

The woman gave Taffy a very odd look. "Just like...teeth. Even, white, teeth." She hurried away.

Dahlia and Taffy exchanged glances. They saw teeth that were at least an inch long, needle-sharp and crowding the mouths of the little darlings.

"Are you seeing what I'm seeing?" said a quiet voice. Katamori was lithe and handsome, his skin a strange pale gold now that he'd been out of the sun for so many decades, his hair inky black. He was also a tireless and limber lover, as Dahlia knew from a great deal of experience. Matsudo Katamori, who had once investigated crimes for the shogunate in nineteenth-century Japan, didn't live in the Rhodes nest. He had his own apartment. Dahlia was a frequent visitor.

"What shall we do?" Taffy said. "Should I call Don?"

"What for?" Dahlia asked. "Surely, since it calls for some subtlety and finesse, this is a job for vampires."

Katamori smiled very slightly. "Yes, I agree. What do you think their plan is?"

"Maybe they're planning to kill the Santa Claus," Dahlia suggested. "He smells old and slow and sick. He's big enough to be a meal for the six of them."

"Posing as holiday elves seems unnecessary to corner one old man," Katamori said. "I think they've found younger, more tender prey, and plenty of it." He nodded toward the waiting line of children at the entrance to the workshop being led up a ramp to pretend Santa on his fake throne.

"Whatever the elves intend, it'll be bloody," Dahlia said. "We should leave. If we stay, we'll be blamed for this disaster."

"That would be the smart thing to do," Katamori said. Without further discussion, the three vampires split up, each heading in a different direction. Dahlia glanced back to see that some of the elves were tracking her departure, their round faces impassive. Others watched Katamori and Taffy.

Walking briskly to the nearest exit and emerging into the cold air, Dahlia felt a niggling doubt that leaving the children to their predators was the best thing to do. Doubt was not a feeling that sat easily in Dahlia's gut. Her decisions had always been based on her chances of survival, and she carried those decisions through. That was why she'd lasted as long as she had.

And yet. Dahlia tossed her purchases into the car and slid into the driver's seat. While she didn't have the exaggerated reverence for the sanctity of children that prevailed in modern society, she did feel a bit uneasy about leaving so many prey creatures at the mercy of killers they were too ignorant to fear. Until vampires had come out, elves would never have dreamed of appearing in public. With the success of the vampires' emergence, other, more secretive races were beginning to peer from the darkness that had concealed them.

Still, she was one vampire alone. Admittedly, she was a great vampire, Dahlia thought: strong, quick, brave and resourceful. But one vampire against a herd of elves—the outcome might not be in her favor. She fumed. Stupid humans!

Stupid humans who had saved her life after the Pyramid explosion. Stupid humans who'd taught her to play Grand Theft Auto at the firehouse. Stupid humans who'd posted pictures of their children all over their lockers, pictures she saw every time she visited.

"Effing *breathers!*" She jammed her purse under the seat, tucked the keys in her bra, left the car and marched toward the entrance before she could reconsider.

"After all," she said out loud, "if a group of children and parents vanish, who's to say the vampires won't be blamed anyway?"

Though Dahlia felt like an idiot for going

after the elves by herself, at the same time she felt a frisson of sheer excitement. One thing she missed about the old days was that she didn't get to kill too many things anymore. Dahlia loved a good fight.



ACK IN THE warm mall, she stopped at a store that had the dreadful spraying women at the entrance. She permitted

one of them to blow perfume over her to mask her scent. She approached the central court carefully, using Christmas decorations and shoppers to stay out of the elves' sight.

The mall would be closing in less than an hour. There was a flow of people exiting, laden with shopping bags. Oddly, the crowd around Santa hadn't diminished at all. The line of children and parents was just as long as it had been.

There was no way for Dahlia to take out the elves without causing a very public uproar, which she'd been forbidden to do. She couldn't make eye contact with everyone there to compel them to do her will; vampire glamour worked only one-on-one. She stared at the elves in frustration. They hadn't noticed her yet, but it was only a matter of time.

"Here," said a voice, and someone thrust a child's puffy purple coat and a pair of black patent leather Mary Janes into her hand.

"What?" Dahlia said, and looked up to see a transformed Taffy: her face made up to look almost human, a knit cap pulled over her blond hair, a woolly scarf wrapped around her neck.

"I saw you getting sprayed while I was being transformed by the miracle of makeup," Taffy said, deadpan. "I made a few impulse buys. You'll be my little girl."

Dahlia understood instantly; Taffy had come back to help the children too, but they'd need disguises to do it. She pulled off her heels, stuck them behind a pillar and put on the Mary Janes. Taffy held the coat for Dahlia and stuck a matching purple beret on Dahlia's head. "You look adorable," Taffy said, struggling to sound serious. "Way too pale, but cute as a button."

"Whatever that means."

"Let's get in line," Taffy said. "Come on, sweetie. You know you want to see Santa."

In a moment they were within the circle, and one of the *Continued on next page* ➤

elves was motioning them forward. The elf's eyes were on a tot in overalls sitting on Santa's lap, and he was trying so hard not to drool that he didn't give the newcomers the once-over he should have.

"Say cheese, sweetheart!" called a happy voice, and Dahlia glanced over to see Katamori standing outside the picket fence circle, a camera held to his face. She smiled, Taffy beamed proudly, they both waved, and the camera flashed.

I'll rip out his throat if he doesn't delete that photo, Dahlia thought, her smile never wavering.

Dahlia didn't know much about kids, but she did have the benefit of centuries of observation, and she'd never seen such a calm crowd. The line crept forward, but none of the children complained or wept.

Then an elf slapped a sucker into her hand; Dahlia accepted it, though she kept her face down as if she were bashful. She was tall for a child of an age to see Santa, and she didn't want to press any more alarm buttons. She could tell the elf had gotten a whiff of the vampire smell; he was looking around suspiciously.

Taffy scooped her up easily. "I'm going to tell them you're disabled," she whispered. "They won't look at you as hard."

"Here, honey, let me carry her," Katamori said cheerfully from right behind them. Taffy handed her over to him.

"Eat your candy, little girl," said an elf, noticing the still-wrapped sucker.

Dahlia obediently unwrapped the candy and held it up so she could sniff it.

"It's drugged," she whispered in Katamori's ear. "Explains how quiet they are."

"The parents, too?"

"Maybe they're just exhausted."

That seemed more than likely. Some of the families were stumbling out of the workshop after their kids had their turn with Santa. But selected children were shoed into a little herd by the largest tree.

"If you stay, you get a special gift when Santa's finished," a female elf said persuasively. She patted a little girl on the head, and when the mother turned to lead the child away, the hunger in the elf's eyes was absolutely chilling.

Dahlia compared those urged into the herd with those allowed to walk away. She noted that the escapees—who had no idea how lucky they were—were the skinny kids, little bags of bones. Michelle Obama could have included this deterrent in her campaign against childhood obesity: "Stay slim or you may be eaten by elves."

"There are six of them," Taffy said. "Six cute little elves."

"We get two apiece," Katamori said, still carrying Dahlia in his arms. Taffy adjusted the purple beret on Dahlia's head, and Dahlia glared at her.

"None of them can survive," Taffy said, planting a quick kiss on Dahlia's cheek.

"Not a problem," Katamori whispered, a whisper almost imperceptible to the human ear. "And I don't think there'll be many witnesses, if we can glamour the parents. Look around."

The central court was almost empty, the few remaining shoppers scurrying out with their purchases, the shopkeepers locking up and departing. Dahlia began to hope that they could delay their attack on the elves until only a few families remained. But when they were two parties away from Santa, they were discovered.



ONE OF THE ELVES had been edging closer and closer to the three vampires, perhaps smelling them out or alerted by Dahlia's pallor. The elf bared his glittering teeth at Taffy, who grabbed him with hands as swift as lightning. The human mom in front of them screamed, especially when Taffy gripped the elf's head with both hands and swung him around like she was snapping the creases from a sheet.

When she dropped him, you could see the creature as he really was: no sweet child, but a red-haired, yellow-eyed adolescent elf with teeth as sharp as ice picks. "Oh my God," a mother shrieked. "Get them away from the children!"

The remaining elves, their disguise blown, yanked off their jingling hats and green coats and began grabbing as many children as they could. Dahlia leaped out of Katamori's arms and dived for the nearest one, who had tucked a cherubic toddler under one arm and was trying to tear a baby from its mother with the other.

Elves are combative, but this group hadn't come prepared to fight anything more formidable than humans. Dahlia shoved the baby and its mother out of the way and tackled the elf, wrestling the toddler from his muscular arms and tossing the child to safety. Pinned down by the elf, Dahlia tried to squeeze her hands around his neck, but he snapped at her and she heard a bone in her arm crack. The pain

was terrible, but she'd felt worse, and she would heal quickly. The elf made the mistake of loosening his grip momentarily, and Dahlia leaped into the air, landing hard on his skull. The crunching sound was music to a warrior's ears. Her Mary Janes, however, might never be the same.

Dahlia heard a clang. Through the throng of panicked bodies, she glimpsed a female elf with rough black hair opening a drainage grate in the middle of the court. She was holding a plump little boy in her arms, and he was shrieking with terror. The elf and her captive dropped down into the black opening.

The boy's father, a muscular guy with a shaven head wearing a Chicago Bears jacket, jumped down into the dark hole in pursuit, but Dahlia didn't imagine he had a chance against an elf. The child's scream came up from the darkness. Dahlia plunged in like Alice in Wonderland following the White Rabbit—though Alice, if Dahlia remembered correctly, hadn't landed on an irate human. Dahlia's abrupt descent knocked the wind out of Bears Guy, and in the moment of silence that followed, Dahlia said, "I'm here to get your son back."

Off she took, moving as silently as possible through the dark tunnel. The flat Mary Janes were turning out to be unexpectedly convenient, though she would never admit that to Taffy. And then she ran full tilt into something solid.

"Oof," the elf said, and then said a lot more in her whistling, popping native tongue. Dahlia felt the elf's sharp fingernails stab into her chest. *Going for the heart*, she realized, and grabbed the elf's bony wrist and thrust it away from her with all her strength. Her leg brushed against something in the awful, snarling struggle. She thought it was the little boy.

After what seemed like an hour, Dahlia had smashed all the bones in the elf's hand, and the elf was making pain noises. But Dahlia was growing tired, and the elf was still disconcertingly full of fight. Suddenly Dahlia was startled to feel someone human moving up behind her. From his scent, she could tell Bears Guy had arrived.

Dahlia said, "Get the child and go," in her most commanding voice. Instead, a warm hand felt her face, then traveled down her arm to fix the location of the elf. Dahlia smelled the gun and knew what was about to happen. The explosion was terrible in the confined space.

The elf howled and before it could make another move, *Continued on next page* ➤



"I don't see a gift," Dahlia said. "I suppose I have to search you to find it?"

Dahlia ripped its head off. She collapsed to the floor beside the body.

After a second's rest, Dahlia made herself sit up against the wall. "Do you have the boy?" she asked wearily.

"Yes, I have Darryl," Bears said, his voice so incredibly relieved and tender it was all even Dahlia could do not to weep.

"Good you were armed," Dahlia said. "Though of course I would've beaten her."

"No doubt of that, sister. I'm an off-duty cop. I'm always carrying."

Dahlia had lost a lot of blood. When she tried to stand, she almost crumpled back to the floor, but she knew it would be twice as hard a second time. She followed Bears, who was carrying Darryl. They made their way through the dark tunnel and toward the stream of light where the entrance was located and where all kinds of noises were pouring through the hole.

Dahlia felt absolutely grumpy at the prospect of being seen so disheveled, wearing the awful puffer coat, shredded and bloodied. The wounds were beginning to heal, though not as fast as they might. She needed blood, and she needed it soon.

Dahlia passed Bears to leap through the hole. She reached down behind her to pull him and Darryl up. When she straightened, she found five guns pointing at her.

"Put those things away," yelled Bears. "My kid'd be dead if it wasn't for this lady."

Dahlia looked so small and so injured that it was maybe a little easier for the police officers to believe him.

There were dead elves—in whole and in part—littering the entire floor of the center court. Santa was on a stretcher with an oxygen mask strapped to his face. Families huddled in semihysterical clusters, talking to men in uniforms. Things had moved swiftly while Dahlia was underground. She turned to find her friends.

"Wait," said a deep voice, and Dahlia paused in midstride. Bears stepped in front of her. "Darryl wants to thank you." The little boy held out his arms. He wanted Dahlia to pick him up.

With the police watching, Dahlia had no option but to take the child. Her mouth started watering immediately. Darryl smelled so good, and she was so hungry. Her fangs popped out. She smiled with a closed mouth and didn't try to say a word.

"Cold," said the little boy, touching her cheek. She nodded. She was always a little less than room temperature. "Thank you," the child said, and then he was more than ready to go back to his father. "You smell funny," he told Dahlia when he was safe in his father's arms, and though Bears looked appalled, she knew it was true. She smelled like vampire and blood and elf and the dreadful purple puffer coat. She pulled the garment off and dropped it on the floor, since the mall court could hardly get any messier. She felt much more like herself. She wondered if she could find her heels.

She saw Katamori and Taffy. Katamori held his arm up, and Dahlia crept under it, surprised and pleased at the gesture. His sleek black hair was still in place. There was only one small stain on his trousers. He was a quick and neat killer, and Dahlia admired him very much.

"Are all the children OK?" she asked the police officer.

"Yep. One of the dads got bitten by one of those things, but other than that—good guys six, bad guys zero." He grinned.

"Nice to be included in the good guys," Taffy said. The three vampires did their best to look benevolent.

AT THE NEST later that night, Dahlia took a quick shower and was in her favorite black negligee when someone knocked on the door of her bedroom. When she answered it, to her not-so-great surprise, Katamori stood in the doorway.

"You never asked me why I was at the mall," he said. Katamori stepped forward, shut the door and locked it behind him. "I went to buy a present for you."

Dahlia was genuinely astonished. "Really?" Then she smiled. "I found a gift for you, too, though not at the mall."

It was his turn to be taken aback. "Truly?"

"Yes, here it is." Dahlia presented him with a beautifully carved wooden box. Katamori opened the antique box very carefully, and inside was a glowing book, perhaps a century old, of the most inventive and exquisite Japanese pornography.

"You take my breath away," Katamori said, raising his eyebrows at the first picture in the book. "We will have a wonderful time with this." That was exactly what Dahlia had hoped for.

"You didn't ask me what I got for you," Katamori said, turning the pages slowly.

"Oh, you found something?"

"Yes, I was successful."

Dahlia eyed him from head to toe. "I don't see a gift," she said.

"I've hidden it. It's very small."

"Well," Dahlia said thoughtfully, "I suppose I have to search you to find it?"

"I happen to be free for the rest of the night," he said, "so you can take your time."

Later, when they lay twined together on Dahlia's bed, she admired the delicate golden chain with its beautiful jade pendant. The pendant lay between her breasts, a sight Katamori found entrancing.

"Why did you come back to the mall?" she asked. "Taffy returning didn't amaze me; Taffy has a soft heart. But you don't."

"I certainly hope not," said Katamori. He looked away. "But I knew you would come back, and I could not let you do that alone."

They lay in silence for a few minutes. Katamori was waiting for Dahlia to speak. His proud lover might not take his words as a compliment. He wondered if the pendant would have to go back to the store. He wondered if he'd have to remove it from some part of his anatomy first. "What are you thinking?" he asked, finally.

"I was wondering how you would look in a Santa Claus costume," Dahlia said. She laughed when Katamori pounced on her.

"I'll try it if you'll dress like an elf," he said, and Dahlia rolled on top of him.

"We've had enough elves," she said. "But I'm up for reindeer antlers...oh!" After that, there was no more conversation.

A week later they passed Christmas night together very happily. They'd perfected the position in the ninth picture by the time the sun came up. ■

Charlaine Harris' next book, *The Sookie Stackhouse Companion*, is out in February.