



WHEN LOVE SURVIVES

By

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"I'm late!" Reggie stared at the alarm clock. "I can't believe this is happening to me!" Pulling her wet, red hair into a sophisticated bun, she ran down the stairs of her apartment building. She never liked her hair.

The postman slipped the mail into the boxes. "Hey you, Regina O'Malley?"

She stopped. *Crap! I'm going to lose the best internship in the city and maybe a chance of a great job when I graduate.* "Yes."

He handed her an envelope from Alaska. **Read Immediately** was written in large letters, so she ripped it open.

Dear Reggie,

We can't get through on your cell, and your father and I have been worried sick. We're sending our love and protection. We've held off telling you this, but it's time you know. Remember how you always made a joke that your father was a leprechaun and your mother an elf? Well, sweetheart, I hope you're sitting down, because it's true. Call us as soon as you can. We have a lot to tell you. We love you, and please, be careful.

Love,

Mom

Mom's letters were always strange but this one took the cake. If what her mother said was true, it explained all the weirdness in Reggie's life. Giggling nervously, as she usually did to cope, she folded up the letter and put it in her pocket before rushing out the door.

Damn! The bus is at the corner. Reggie ran. It pulled away from the curb into traffic. She screamed, but it didn't stop. Why would it? The city drowned out her

screams. That was life in New York. You screamed and mostly people didn't notice.

Exasperated, she looked at her watch. *Damn, I want that job.* She flagged a cab.

The cost from Brooklyn to Manhattan would be a mint, but an internship with a good brokerage house was worth its weight in gold. Reggie tried to think happy thoughts. That's what her mom had taught her. And when she got home, she'd have to find that cell phone.

The ride was nerve-wracking. Her mind kept dwelling on things she couldn't change. She thought the pale gray suit would make the best impression. Maybe she should have worn the pink, low-cut crepe blouse instead and not this blue, silk one. Reggie lifted her fingers to her mouth and immediately put them down again. The last thing she wanted to do was waste a perfect manicure. *Oh, God, Mr. Holmut is going to be so angry.* Her academic advisor at NYU had worked hard getting this paid internship for her.

The cab stopped and it wasn't for a light. They were in Manhattan. Reggie looked around to see if she could figure out her location. The World Trade Center was only four blocks around that corner at the most. After paying the man, she leaped out of the cab.

She was almost there, pausing only to catch her breath in front of the coffee shop before the corner. A tall man opened the door, pulled her inside, and shut the door behind her.

"What the . . ." Reggie stared up into the bluest eyes she'd ever seen. His handsome, sculpted face was framed by thick, dark hair. She was dazed and confused.

Then everything shook. Coffee cups jingled. The customers in line fell into each

other. Donuts and pastries slid on the rack. People screamed in the streets. Fire trucks maneuvered through traffic.

Reggie turned to go out, but the man put his hand on her shoulder. "Don't go outside. Please." It was the way he said it that captivated her.

A man covered with soot ran into the shop. "The World Trade Center's on fire!" Some people hurried out to look. Others rushed out the doors in the opposite direction. Reggie collapsed into the seat of an empty booth. Her head ached, then throbbed, then changed to a pain past describing. She raced for the restroom and upon entering fell on her knees in the first stall to violently puke. Hundreds of screaming voices filled her head. She'd been in the city for two years and had never heard the thoughts of New Yorkers, but now their horror crashed down on her in deafening, unceasing, agonizing waves.

Someone held her hair, which had fallen out of the bun. Then Reggie puked again. Totally devastated, the physical and emotional pain held her captive. She collapsed on the floor and curled into a ball. When Reggie looked up through tear-filled eyes, the same man reached for her. She couldn't stop shaking. The very instant his hand touched hers, the voices stopped. *Oh, what sweet relief.*

He helped her sit in a small chair beside the sink. "What happened to you?"

"I don't know." Reggie blinked back tears. "What's happening to the world?"

"People are coming in saying there's a fire in the North Tower." He shook his head in dismay.

"I was supposed to be in the North Tower. I was late for my internship." She couldn't stop shaking. He had let go of her hand, and the voices in her skull grew

stronger with each passing minute. When Reggie slid off the chair, he reached for her again. Sitting on the floor, he enclosed her in his arms this time. Everything in her should have been repelled, but he was like a sanctuary. In his arms, the world of pain didn't exist. Did she enjoy his touch because he sheltered her from this torment, or was it the blue eyes, face sculpted like an Adonis, and strong arms that made every fear melt away?

"I was in the North Tower. I work there, and I hate the office coffee, so I left to get everyone coffee and donuts on me just so I could get my coffee here at Phil's." Even though a wave of sadness radiated out from him, Reggie felt his calming strength.

"What do you do for work?" she asked trying to sound somewhat together.

"I'm an investment advisor. You?"

"I'm a NYU student majoring in finance." Reggie trembled violently, and he hugged her more tightly. "What's your name?"

"Gregor Vasiliev."

"I'm Regina O'Malley."

"It's a pleasure meeting you, Regina. What year are you in?"

"The beginning of my senior year."

"So you're . . . twenty-one?"

She laughed. In the middle of disaster, possibly death, he was fishing for her age. Reggie didn't know what she'd do if he asked for a date. She definitely was eligible, and he was really sweet. He saved her life by pulling her into the shop. She knew that now, and it frightened the guts out of her that the world might be dying all around them. She might still die. As if to run in protective mode, her mind clicked into a normal track.

Reggie wanted to enjoy whatever minutes were left. "I'm twenty."

"I'm twenty-nine. I'm going to be thirty next month. Have you lived in the city long?"

"Three years. You?"

"Seven years. It's all right but sometimes I miss home."

She looked up into his eyes. *Oh, he has the kindest eyes.* "Where's home?"

"Maine. You?"

"Alaska."

"Wow. Do you have a lot of family in Alaska?"

She felt so comfortable with him. *With my luck, he's probably a serial killer.*

"No. Just my parents. Do you have a lot of family in Maine?"

Gregor's low and rumbling laugh tickled her. He smiled. "I have five brothers and one sister. They all still live near my parents." He paused a moment. Reggie could see thoughts crossing his face like clouds in the sky. "What are two woodspeople like you and me doing here in the big city?"

She laughed. A scream erupted in the outer room; they rushed out. Everyone was crowded around a small television set on the counter that showed footage of a jet plane crashing into the tower. They could clearly see the tower in flames. Suddenly a rumble shook the shop. The news correspondent switched back to live coverage. A separate plane had hit the South Tower. People were afraid. Some too frightened to leave the shop, while others ran out. Some people stayed glued to the television as if that was the only thing making sense. Tears fell down her cheeks, and Gregor's hand settled on her shoulder. He took the large, white bag on the counter and started passing out donuts to people. Then they made their way to a booth, and he gave her a cruller. Reggie just looked at it, uncertain whether her stomach would be grateful. He left and

brought back some tea, placing it in front of her. Slowly the voices came back, and she trembled. Gregor reached across the table and took her hand. His touch was enough to silence them, but she knew they were still there, waiting. All those voices of the dying--- she felt them all in her heart. Reggie couldn't help but wonder if she heard them because she was half leprechaun and half elf.

"Maybe it's too soon to offer you something to eat. I could get you crackers. That might help." He left before she could say anything.

The voices stayed away. He came back with a lot of crackers. Reggie sipped the tea and nibbled. After a few minutes, she felt somewhat better.

"You live around here?"

"No. I have an apartment in Brooklyn."

"I live a few blocks away. I've been waiting for a house to open up around Battery Park. I want a view of the Statue of Liberty."

"That has to cost big bucks."

"Hmm. I've saved. I don't have many expenses."

She began to feel a lot better. Perhaps the power of his touch had a cumulative effect on her. *This experience is too bizarre for words.* "Do you ever wish you were back in Maine?"

"I was beginning to until today."

"I would think today would be even more of a reason."

"Today I met you."

Reggie felt the color rising in her cheeks.

An ear-splitting sound rumbled through the shop. Only a few patrons were left now, the others fled. One couple plunged under the table. They did the same. Several

minutes passed before it stopped. Plumes of white dust filled the air, and people ran down the street shrieking. Phil, a short man with a fringe of gray atop his head, unplugged the TV and held it, while he and his few workers hid under a table in the kitchen. When the thundering and shaking ended, Gregor checked on them. They tried to plug the TV in, but nothing happened.

Phil sighed. "It must be my generator finally giving up the ghost."

Reggie knew exactly what to say. "I'm very mechanical. I could have a look at it."

He looked surprised but agreed. "Sure. Sure. Come this way." They followed him into the back room of the shop. The generator sat in the shadows of the room off to one side. Reggie examined it and the two men hovered over her.

"I can't work with people watching me."

"Okay," said Phil. "I'll be in the next room. Call me if you need anything." He left. She turned back to the machine and tried to remember. When she was a kid, a funny thing happened where she accidentally recharged some batteries by rubbing them in her hands. Since then, Reggie never had to buy new batteries. Maybe she could do the same thing for his generator. She could try. Rubbing her hands along the sides of the outside, her fingers began to spark then keep a steady glow. The generator hummed to life and applause came from the other room.

"Very good."

Reggie nearly jumped out of her skin. Gregor stood beside her. *How did I not notice that he hadn't left the room with Phil?*

"So what are you? A witch?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I know a Nat when I see one." Gregor's words weren't accusatory, just matter of

fact.

"What's a Nat?"

"A super natural. A being with powers. That's what the super naturals in the city call themselves. I'm a Nat, too. I'm a shape shifter. Now you know what I am, so what are you?"

Reggie couldn't believe it. She hadn't even admitted it to herself yet, and here she was going to proclaim her secret to a stranger. "I'm half leprechaun and half elf."

He grinned. "That would account for you being so delicate looking and lovely."

Oh, God. Her cheeks were hot again, but that wasn't all. Something about him was definitely getting to her.

Then the world trembled. Thunder exploded over their heads. She fell into Gregor, but he held her rock steady. Reggie couldn't help shaking. Coming out of the back room, they saw nothing but white dust in the air beyond the coffee shop windows. The small TV showed footage of one of the burning towers falling down.

While some people ran past the coffee shop, most walked as if in a daze, all of them covered with white ash and dust. Reggie felt compelled to go outside and walk to the corner to see with her own eyes. Gregor held her back, "Please, don't go out there."

People rushing through the door nearly knocked her down, but Gregor pulled her out of the way and into a booth. Phil handed out coffee and pastry to everyone. He wasn't charging anymore.

One woman sat at the table across from them and cried. She looked at Reggie and said, "I kept following the fireman down and through a broken window on the main floor, only it didn't look like the lobby at all." She drank the coffee. Then she asked, "Do you have a phone? I left my phone on my desk. I've got to call my husband."

Gregor handed her his cell, and she made her call. When she was done, she gave it back and he handed it to Reggie. "Shouldn't you call your folks? Won't they be worried?"

She gratefully accepted, since she'd lost her cell phone somewhere in her apartment. The call was picked up on the first ring.

"Hello?" Her mom's voice sounded fearful.

"Mom, it's Reggie." As soon as she said the words, she felt her mother's relief. "I'm okay. I was late for work."

"Harry, it's Reggie. She's okay. Oh, thank God. The caller ID says 'Gregor Vasiliev.'"

"Yes. That's a friend of mine. I'm using his phone. Mine's at home."

"What are you going to do now, dear?"

I didn't know. "I'm in a coffee shop. I guess I'll wait until everything calms down and go home."

"On the news it says that the bridges and tunnels are closed, because it's a terrorist attack."

"Then I'll stay here for a while. Don't worry, Mom."

"What, Harry? Honey, your dad would like to talk to your friend Gregor."

"Um." Reggie tried to think of some excuse but couldn't. Why did it feel like her date for the junior prom meeting her dad? "Um, Gregor, my dad would like to speak with you. Would you mind?"

He raised one eyebrow and then smiled. "No problem." Then he took the phone. "Mr. O'Malley, this is Gregor Vasiliev." She watched him nod and grin. Then he said, "I agree with you. Yes, I will. Good bye." He snapped the phone closed.

"What did he say?" She could just imagine.

"He said he thought it best that we sit tight for a while. He also asked me to watch over you."

Tears clogged her throat. Sometimes her parents felt so far away and she missed them. Reggie should have been angry at her father for obligating a stranger like that, but Gregor didn't seem to mind. "I'm sorry he did that to you."

"Hey, that's the way parents are."

He appeared amused by the whole thing. Then his eyes widened. "Oh, my parents!" Immediately he pressed a number and held the phone to his ear. It was a wonder he could hear with the TV being turned up all the way, the sound of emergency vehicles outside, and all the frightened voices inside. He said, "Hi, Mom," and after that he kept saying yes. She laughed. He held up one hand as if there was nothing he could do. But he was smiling, so they must have been happy to hear from him. Reggie chewed on some more crackers. Behind him, the television news announced that the country was on alert and the airspace closed.

"Well, you know me, Mom, I need my coffee." He laughed. "I'm just sitting here, waiting everything out with my friend Regina. Yes, she is. I've got to go now, Mom. I'll call later. Give my love to Dad and everyone." He paused. "Bye." Reggie sat there as he called his company's headquarters to tell them he was alive. He quietly listened for a long time then closed the cell. She tried to study his face to tell what he was thinking. He stared out the window at the endless parade of people moving through the white dust. His eyes misted over but he shook himself as if shaking off a negative thought. Gregor forced a smile and turned to her.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm the only one from the New York office that's called in."

"Oh, um, well, that doesn't mean anything. They may be walking home and calling headquarters would be the last thing on their mind."

He nodded but she could see the pain in his eyes. Reggie reached across the table and touched his hand. This time his smile was genuine. "So what are your plans for the rest of the day?" he asked.

Phil came to the table. "Regina, would you mind looking at the generator again? It keeps going on and off."

"Sure." She got up to walk through the kitchen doors and then into the back room. Gregor followed.

Being away from the onslaught of people was a relief. Hearing them was bad enough. Seeing them was worse. Reggie rubbed her hands together briskly and then placed a hand on each side of the generator. She could feel the machine revving up, and the lights came on. But then the generator automatically shut off and the lights remained on. Cheers came from the other room.

"Huh? What happened?"

"The power was restored, so the generator turned off."

"Oh." The voices were building in her head again, and she felt dizzy. Then she stumbled into Gregor. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." He held her close.

One moment he gazed into her eyes. In the next, he possessed her lips. His mouth pressed gently at first. Then his lips demanded, and she complied. His kiss became a million, small kisses caressing her lips, taking a taste of her each time. Heat

rose in Reggie's body and awakened a fiery need to have him at any cost. Gregor wouldn't part from her, as his lips and now his tongue continued their exploration. If he hadn't been holding her, she would have collapsed. He remained a gentleman with his hands, but his tongue was a wanton pirate imitating what another part of him wanted to do. Of course, she didn't know that for sure. She could only guess. Then Gregor moaned into her mouth. *Yes, he wants me too and badly.* He tilted her head back to go deeper, and she gasped. Retreating only a little with his tongue, he parried with hers, subduing it.

When Reggie couldn't breathe, he withdrew, contenting himself to kiss and lick her upper lip and then her bottom. She opened her eyes, his were closed. Reggie couldn't help admiring the shape of his eyes. She closed hers again to languish with him, to surrender to the singular beauty of that moment. *I know I should protest, but being in Gregor's arms feels so right.*

His kiss moved from her lips to her forehead. She looked up at him feeling a little woozy but glad. She trusted him. Phil opened the door and then closed it again.

Gregor moved slightly away. He looked down into her half closed eyes and smiled. "Would you like to go back and find a table for a while and sit? Or . . . I live a few blocks away. We could wait it out there."

Reggie didn't respond, not sure what to make of his suggestion. Was this all a ploy to get her into bed?

"Actually I was thinking of going over to the World Trade Center and volunteering?"

His eyebrows went up. "That's a dangerous idea, Regina."

"Life is dangerous."

He chuckled. "I guess. What would you do there?"

"I won't know until I get there, but I know I have to help."

Gregor stood there holding her in his arms. At first, he frowned. Then his expression grew thoughtful. Finally he nodded. "I'm going with you."

"You don't have to do that."

"I promised your father that I'd watch over you. When I make a promise, I keep it."

Everything about him overwhelmed her. When they went back into the dining room, it was packed with people. Many were in a daze, and Phil handed them coffee. They were all transfixed by the TV on the counter.

"If you'll excuse me, Regina, I'll be right back." Gregor left her alone in that crowd of desperate faces.

Reggie needed to help. Hearing the dying without responding made her ache. People were trapped underground. If she could hear them, she could find them.

Turning, she walked out the door. To be here at this point in time meant something. Meeting Gregor had been sweet and wonderful. Maybe she would be able to keep him, maybe not. But she heard the dying for a reason. She was made aware of her magic for a reason. Of course, Reggie was going in the wrong direction. Ash covered people walked mindlessly past her, as if in a horror movie. This was real life. It wasn't the Manhattan she knew.

Reggie rounded the corner and stopped because the scene four blocks down so jarred her, it caught her off guard. A tall pile of rubble smoked sickly, twisting white plumes into the air. The World Trade Center was gone. Oh, she had seen it on TV, but

that image seemed unreal. Reggie couldn't connect. Now she could, and the dying called to her.

Emergency crews moved throughout it with breakneck speed in an effort to find survivors. Reggie knew she could help and started to run.

Gregor raced after her. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to help." She ran, and he followed until they reached the site protected by a perimeter of police.

An officer stopped them. "I'm sorry. Please, go home. It isn't safe."

"I'm a search and rescue specialist."

The cop frowned, and then he looked past her. "Hi, Greg. Glad to see you weren't in your office today." Reggie noticed a silver shimmer in the man's eyes, which disappeared before she could say anything.

"Thanks Mike."

With pain surging through her skull, Reggie turned toward the desperate screams invading her head. "There," she shouted. "There. The earth moved. Someone's there."

Immediately, workers hurried to the place she indicated and in a few minutes a severely injured woman was put on a stretcher and on her way to an ambulance. Mike raised an eyebrow to Gregor. They exchanged a nod. "Okay."

Search dogs worked with their trainers. Where they used their noses, Reggie used her ears, and all of them raced against time to find anyone alive. Time was not a friend in this endeavor. More and more workers uncovered the dead and parts of the dead. If it wasn't for Gregor's steadying hand, Reggie wouldn't have been able to continue. His touch gave her short reprieves from the pain, but then she had to concentrate to listen again, to hear the screams and muffled cries. Hours passed as they

dug through the unstable debris. When Reggie felt hope draining from her, she looked to Gregor, who unceasingly shoveled for hours, his strength seeming endless. He wouldn't give up. Neither would she.

Reggie climbed a mound tracing a sound that disappeared as she reached the top. The cry stopped. The heartbeat disappeared.

"Here."

Gregor frantically dug, but they came up empty. His face etched with concern. "What happened?"

"It disappeared. It's right here...maybe deeper."

A wrong move sent her careening over the edge. Gregor caught her hand and pulled her up. Cautiously they descended the mound together, his arm securely around her waist. When she stepped away from him, there was that cry again.

The day stretched into night. Finding anyone alive became harder. Debris mixed with parts once attached to people, a foot wearing a black Gucci pump, a man's hand wearing a wedding ring. A tear fell down her cheek. Reggie couldn't help it. She heard the anguish of the workers and the rest of the city echoing through her head. But the voices of the trapped and dying grew quiet.

Mike came up to them. "Guys, it's getting dark and another crew is coming on. Go home."

"I don't want to leave yet." Reggie kept thinking that someone might die because she wasn't there to hear them.

"At least get something to eat."

Gregor nodded.

Reluctantly, she agreed. It was after 9 p.m. The site's silence and melancholy

washed over her. Reggie figured her sad expression got to Gregor, because he gently pulled her along.

Once they were off site, he asked, "How are you feeling? You look pale."

She didn't want to admit it. "Maybe I could do better with something to eat."

"Would you like to go some place in particular? I'm buying." He grinned.

Even though she laughed, Reggie was bone tired and needed to be away from people as much as possible. She knew that they were trapped on the island. "How far is your apartment?"

He perked up. "About six blocks."

"Do you have any food in your apartment or do you go out to eat all the time?"

"Actually I enjoy cooking, so my kitchen's stocked. Come on."

He took her hand and they walked past sculptured buildings with patio gardens only a few blocks from Battery Park. Six men approached then, and she gripped Gregor's hand. They passed by. Then one turned around.

"Gregor?"

They turned.

"David!" Like two old friends meeting again, they shook hands and patted each other on the back. David was tall, handsome, dark-haired, and had the most haunting dark eyes.

"Regina, I would like you to meet David Hilliard."

Reggie took the man's hand. It was cold. He looked directly into her eyes, and she found herself burying all thoughts behind a wall in her mind. He chuckled.

"I see you've found yourself a lovely elf girl." He leaned toward Gregor and

whispered.

"You're so right." Gregor held Reggie closer and frankly she didn't mind. Even though his friend was irresistibly attractive, there was something disturbing about the man.

"The boys and I have volunteered for the night shift. We hope to find a lot of survivors."

"We found a few," she chimed in.

He smiled at her, but Reggie noticed it was a guarded smile that showed only the slightest hint of teeth. Then David waved and rejoined his companions.

They continued down the fairly empty street. When they were a distance away, she whispered into Gregor's ear, "Vampires?"

"Yes."

"But why are they . . .?"

"Some vampires don't hunt humans. They exist on animal blood or subscribe to blood banks. They're going to listen for survivors, the same as you."

"Where did you meet your friend?"

He chuckled. "I met David a year ago at the Supernatural Council. We're both delegates. He's a good guy. Believe me. He's not going to hurt anyone. There's quite a few Nats at the site already."

Reggie slowed her steps. "There were other Nats besides us and Mike?"

"Yes. I didn't think it polite to point them out. It would have distracted you from your work. You figured out Mike, huh?"

"His eyes shimmered. Werewolf?"

"Close. Werecougar."

Gregor's gray, stone building was quietly elegant. An interior designer created the lobby in creams and browns with dramatic sculptures in bronze surrounding a circular reflecting pool. The doorman came out of a little room. "My apologies, Mr. Vasiliev, we have no power. Everyone's evacuating."

"Do we have to evacuate, George?"

"Well, um, no sir. I just thought you should know. Sir, please, take this flashlight."

"Don't you need it?"

"I have several, sir."

"Thank you." Gregor led her down a hall. "I hope you don't mind the stairs. I'm on the seventeenth floor."

"It's good exercise."

As they entered the stairwell and closed the door, Gregor handed her the flashlight. "I can see in the dark."

"So can I." Reggie turned off the flashlight. She'd thought it was another quirky thing she could do as a peculiar human kid. Now knowing she wasn't human, so many things from her past made sense.

Around the sixteenth floor, Reggie stopped to catch her breath. He waited patiently.

When she started to climb again, he added, "We're almost there." He unlocked the stairway door with his key and held it open. They walked down the wine red carpet to 1717. His door was the gateway to a perfectly peaceful sanctuary in various tones of green, as if he meant his home to be a forest retreat. Reggie walked up to the potted

hibiscus; it was fake. So was the bamboo.

"Why do you have fake plants?"

"I'm never home long enough to care for them. I'm always out. It didn't seem fair to have plants only to neglect them." Even in pitch darkness, her eyes made out every detail of the large, olive sofa and chairs and the hunter green walls.

"Where can I clean up?"

"Oh, this way." He showed her to the bathroom. It was green too. "Before you start, let me get you some jugs of water from the kitchen. I'm afraid with the power out, the water won't be running."

Reggie opened the shower door and looked at his faucets. "Let me try something." Putting her hands on the metal fixtures, she closed her eyes, and tried to picture the machine that pumped water for the building. He stood in the doorway watching. She moved quickly out of the shower and turned the knobs. Water gushed forward.

"Well, that's a handy talent."

"I've really ruined this suit. Do you have anything I could wear?"

"I do have the clothes I bought for my sister's birthday. You look around the same size."

"I don't want to take your present."

"It's all right. I'll get her something else. I can give you a pair of my pajamas. You'll swim in them but . . ."

"That would be fine." She smiled and he stood in the doorway for a moment as if stuck in thought then left.

Quickly, Reggie stripped off her suit and underwear then hurried into the shower.

The hot water soothed every aching muscle. She used some of his vanilla scented body wash and shampoo. A moan of delight escaped her lips.

"Are you sick again, Regina?"

Reggie hadn't heard the bathroom door open. "Oh no, Gregor, I'm just enjoying your hot water."

He chuckled. "That's good. I have some towels and a robe here, and I put everything else on the bed. As soon as you're done, I'd like to jump into the shower too."

A part of her really wanted to say, "Why not now?" But she didn't. All day long whenever he touched her it was more than his essence being a sanctuary, there was a feeling. When Reggie heard the door close again, she grabbed her bra and panties to hand wash them and hang them over the side of the glass door. After she turned the water off, she climbed out and towel dried her hair. His dark blue robe was huge but so soft. Walking out, she went to get him.

Reggie found Gregor fussing over a casserole dish in the kitchen. "Oh, good, you're here. I was wondering if you would touch my oven." Suddenly the lights went on. They laughed. "It looks like you're out of a job. The power's back." He set the temperature and timer and placed the casserole inside.

"What did you make?"

"A scallop casserole. I bought scallops yesterday, and they'll go bad if we don't eat them."

"The big, fat ones or the little ones?"

"I only love the big, fat ones." He grinned.

Oh, God, a man after my heart. Should I tell him he could get so lucky tonight

by making me a scallop dinner? She hadn't known Gregor for an entire day and already she wanted to sleep with him.

"I haven't had fish since I left Alaska."

"A real seafood girl, huh?"

"Yes." They stood staring at each other. "Um, I'm going to change now." This man was seriously obsessed with green. Thank goodness, it didn't spill over into his wardrobe. She went to his room. His sister's clothes worked out nicely, but she would save them for tomorrow. His pajama top fit like a dress instead. Reggie threw the robe on, since she wasn't wearing panties.

Then she walked over to the window and peeked at the city through the heavy drapes. The rescue site was all lit up for crews working through the night. She thought of the vampires and hoped they found a lot of survivors. Gregor's touch remained with her, so she couldn't hear them now, but her heart broke for them anyway. Pressing her head against the glass, Reggie cried. The delicious fragrance of his scallop casserole teased through her pain override.

When large hands settled on her shoulders, Reggie turned and sobbed into Gregor's chest. He too wore pajamas and a robe. His strong arms enfolded her. His kiss against her forehead brought her further into his embrace.

After a few minutes, he led her out of the room and into his dining room, which was a little different. The gold chandelier flickered a gold, diamond pattern of lights across his bamboo wallpaper. Black lacquer furniture engraved with gold accented the room. The scallop casserole melted in her mouth, and she closed her eyes savoring each morsel.

He sat directly across from her. Reggie sighed from the deliciousness of the meal

and stretched out her legs under the table, accidentally rubbing against his. He smiled and then she felt his foot rubbing on hers. She didn't mind a bit. After the meal, Reggie helped clear the table then wandered into the living room.

"Do you want to watch some television?" He sat on the sofa and clicked the remote.

"I guess." She sat a little bit away from him.

The news came on showing the disaster, from the moment the planes struck to Ground Zero, as they called it. Reggie couldn't hold it in. Tears rolled down her face, and Gregor swept her into his arms and onto his lap. "I guess . . . I can't . . . watch . . . that . . . right now." She shook from sobbing. He wiped her face with his hand.

"Reggie, I could tell you not to cry but it's healthy to get all those feelings out. Everything I feel is trapped inside, like those people trapped in the debris. While you were in the shower, I called my company's headquarters in Jersey again. I'm the only one alive. They're all gone. Just like that. It feels strange."

He looked so sad. Reggie took his face in her hands and kissed him. They melted together in that all-consuming kiss, soaring on currents of air. She opened her eyes and pulled away from him. Everything . . . everything was moving so fast. "Why did you call me Reggie?"

"It just came out."

"My parents call me Reggie."

"If you don't want me to call you that, I won't."

"No, it's kind of nice." Her heart wouldn't stop racing, and she felt a little dizzy. Imagine all that from a kiss. "I think I need some sleep. Which bedroom should I use?"

"You'll use my bedroom, and I'll sleep in the guest room. The bed in my room is

so much better, and I want you to get a good night's sleep."

"I don't want to take your bed."

"You've been ill today, remember? Don't argue with me." He looked so adorably determined that she just nodded and got up. Reggie went into the bedroom and climbed into bed. He walked to the window and pulled the drapes closed. Then he turned on a nightlight in the master bathroom. "I know you can see in the dark, but I'm leaving it on for you anyway, so you don't have to search in case you wake up disoriented being in a strange place. I've put a new toothbrush in here." He opened the cedar chest at the foot of the bed. "There are extra blankets in here if you need them." Then he came and sat on the bed, leaned over and kissed her, lightly brushing her lips. "Good night, Reggie."

"Good night, Gregor. Are we going to set the alarm? I'd like to get back to the site early."

"No." He smiled. "We need sleep. I'll leave my door open. If you need me just call." Then he left. Somehow she hadn't expected him to leave.

Her body ached all over and Reggie couldn't tell if it was from all the physical and emotional exertion of searching or just wanting him so badly. She hopped out of bed, did her bathroom routine, threw the robe on a chair, and locked the bedroom door. His bed was divine, one of those feather beds. Even the pillows felt like they were down. She should have floated away in seconds, but desperate whispers tore at her heart.

The reality of the thousands who died and more on the edge of dying overwhelmed her body. She heard each one screaming in fear, begging for life, gasping for one more second to touch a loved one. Reggie was privy to each secret agony. All

their voices filled her head until it was splitting. Uncontrolled rivers of tears convulsively choked her. She screamed. The pain wouldn't stop. The voices crashed down on her like thunder.

Gregor pounded on the door. "Reggie, are you all right?"

She couldn't answer. Torrents of pain wracked her body.

"Regina, answer me. Are you all right?" His frantic shouts bordered on fear.

She couldn't eke out a word let alone go to the door to unlock it.

There was a squeaking, crunching sound, as Gregor ripped the door off its hinges. He rushed to Reggie, pulling her into his arms. "What's wrong?"

"I hear them all." She struggled to speak. "Their pain." She sobbed and trembled. "They need . . ." Unable to finish, Reggie cried for hours. Gregor didn't say a word. He climbed into bed and held her, stroking her hair.

When she finally fell asleep, Reggie heard him whisper, "I'm here, Reggie."

She didn't sleep long. Her mind dwelled on the edge, totally possessed by the glorious feeling of his warm, strong embrace. Turning she met Gregor's gaze, his serene face highlighted by eyes as blue as a perfect summer day. His smile warmed her right down to her core.

"How are you feeling?"

Reggie blushed from head to toe. The door leaned against the wall, the doorframe splintered.

"I'll pay for your door."

"Don't be ridiculous." He caressed the side of her face. Then his hand rested there. They lay together looking into each other's eyes. She felt his pulse quicken. Reggie closed her eyes a moment. She was almost breathless.

When she opened them again, he was nearer. With one arm he pulled her against him. Reggie could see his intent in his eyes.

His lips gently possessed her mouth. Heat rushed through her body, as he continued kissing, pausing to brush his lips against hers then pressing harder with more urgency. Total exquisite surrender. That's what she dissolved into. Reggie didn't want to fight him or reason it out. She wanted to join him in every possible way.

When he moved away, she gasped for air trying to balance out her dizzy world. He kept her in a tight embrace. His heart raced beneath her fingers on his chest. He panted, too.

Moving her hand to caress his lips started the whole thing over again. Using her fingers to play, Reggie stroked his massive chest. Then she moved to his back, hands kneading and caressing his muscles as she worked her way down to his waist.

He scooped her more directly beneath him, every part of her lay against every part of him. Heat pooled between her legs. *I've never wanted anyone the way I want him.*

Gregor pushed his tongue between her lips. She chewed a little not willing to let his tongue escape, and he made a low, satisfying rumbling sound. Reggie opened her eyes, staring directly into his which twinkled.

He leaned up on his elbows. "I'm in love with you, Reggie."

Overwhelmed by his declaration, she hadn't counted on this happening so quickly or him being so straightforward.

"I'm not any good at love."

"What? Why do you think that?"

"My ex-boyfriend said that . . ."

"He sounds like a prick that wanted to hurt you."

She teared up. "Yeah, I guess you're right."

He kissed her cheeks then tasted her lips. "Reggie, I don't say I love you when I don't mean it. I've never said it to anyone . . ., well, other than family. I love you and I'm not going to hurt you."

Closing her eyes, Reggie tried to figure out how she felt. Opening them again and gazing into those amazing blue eyes of his, she said, "I don't want to hurt you either. I'm just very confused right now. I don't know if what I feel is love, or if I just feel safe with you. I've got to be honest. You know how I can hear them and my head starts to split with pain?"

He nodded.

"When you touch me, you protect me from the agony of the thousands like a sanctuary. I don't want to say I love you because of this. When I say I love you, I want to be sure."

"Okay, so what do you want to do?"

She took a deep breath. "I need to go back to sleep. Will you hold me?"

"Yes." He turned her, scooping her close against his chest. "Go back to sleep." He kissed her neck. *Gregor is warm and strong and sweet, and I should kick myself a million times for not shouting out that I love him. We could be making love right now.* Annoyed with herself, Reggie listened to his steady breathing and closed her eyes to sleep.

The dreams caught her unawares. In the first, she was in a cave with Gregor. They were entwined naked. His hands caressed and rubbed every part of her and she

whimpered. Reggie breathed in the heady scent of sex in the air and chewed on his ear. "Please," she whispered. "Take me now. Gree, please." His mouth moved down to her breasts, licking, sucking . . .

Just as quickly the dream faded. The next took an ominous turn. Reggie raced past the coffee shop and made that turn for the World Trade Center. She went into the lobby of the North Tower and headed straight for the elevators getting on one with only a few people. Floors flashed by with each numbered button. Then the elevator stopped. A sound like thunder enveloped them. The walls felt hot. Fire! They were burning. Smoke. Their lives would be snuffed out. Reggie realized that the timeline had changed. If she was in the elevator, then Gregor was in his office. He hadn't gone out for coffee and donuts. "No," she screamed. "No, Gree, where are you? Don't die, Gree. Please, don't die."

She realized someone was shaking her, when she heard a voice calling, "Reggie." She opened her eyes.

"Reggie, honey, you're having a bad dream."

"What?" Then she looked at his face.

"I thought I blocked out all those voices for you?"

"You do. This was different. It was a dream about us. We were on a different timeline. You weren't in the coffee shop to pull me inside and I died in an elevator in the North Tower. Only when I was dying somehow I remember this timeline and I was afraid for you. It doesn't make any sense."

"Yes, it does. Only my family calls me Gree."

He pulled her closer into a kiss; his tongue burst into her mouth. Then he sucked on her tongue. Reggie couldn't stand it any longer. Her hands reached between them to

his strong, furry chest and made their way down to the drawstring pants. She pulled to release that string.

His mouth released her. "I'm going to make love to you. If you don't want to, you say 'No', and I'll stop."

With one hand she managed to slide inside his pajama bottoms against his firm, lower abdomen and took possession of his erection. With the other hand, she caressed his face. "Gree, I want you. I am in love with you."

That was all he needed. The kiss was back with even more determination. He quickly dispatched his pajama bottoms, and even more rapidly freed her of her top. His lips, after pressing firmly against hers, departed south planting small kisses along her collarbone and then down to her breasts that he'd been fondling ever since unbuttoning the top. As he licked one nipple and then settled to suck the other, his other hand explored her with an obvious mission. He wanted the same advantage she currently had on him, as she stroked and caressed his length. Seconds later, Reggie felt a finger entering her, caressing her from inside. She gasped. With every determined movement of his, she hungered for more. He took her hands and held them over her head, pressing the entire warmth of his body against her. With one hand, he guided his entry. Reggie struggled against the one large hand keeping her hands prisoner. Then he plunged into her, pushing with vigor.

She pushed back, joining him in a wild, urgent dance of moaning and rubbing. A shudder ran through her with each successive pounding. Reggie gasped for air, unable to keep up. The feeling, hot and liquid in her core, exploded and tremors ran through her body spreading warm contentment. Gree collapsed on top of her, and Reggie closed her eyes and melted away. This time she slept for a long time.

Reggie felt incredible, strong, happy, and invigorated. He was so wonderful. Rolling over, she reached for him but he wasn't there.

Gree came in carrying a tray of food. Instinctively, she pulled the covers up to conceal her breasts.

"Too late." He grinned. "I've seen them already, and I so love admiring your beauty."

Reggie blushed bright red. Even her arms and hands glowed with embarrassment. He plunked the tray on her lap then leaned over it and kissed her. Pushing down the covers, he kissed her breasts too.

"Oh, God, are you sure you don't want to stay here and make love all day? I wouldn't mind seeing those spinning stars again."

Reggie frowned. "What are you talking about?"

He chuckled. "You must have fallen asleep too quickly and missed it. Right after we came, there were all these swirling golden stars in the room—all around us. I figured it was part of elf magic."

"I didn't see it." She sighed.

He put a piece of toast in her mouth. "Eat. I know you want to get going."

"Lives are depending on us."

He kissed her on the forehead and got up to go through his closet. He chose some casual clothes and dressed. It was sort of a striptease in reverse, but it had the same effect.

He came over and sat on the bed. "How are you doing?"

Reggie had only eaten one of the eggs. He placed a sausage link in her mouth.

"You need to eat more, if you're going to do well at rescue work."

She chewed. Then getting out of bed, Reggie went over to the pile of his sister's clothes. Her bra and panties were on the top, so she dressed quickly.

"Gree, do you mind if I borrow your cell a minute? I'd like to call my parents again."

"No problem." He tossed it to her and then left the room carrying the half empty tray.

As soon as the door closed, she dialed. Her mom picked up on the first chirp.

"Reggie, are you okay?"

"Yes, Mom, I'm fine. I just want to ask you a question about elves."

"Sure, dear. What is it? I know it's going to take a while to get used to your magic, but . . ."

"Mom," I interrupted, "what does it mean when you see swirling gold stars all around?"

"Oh, my God! Harry, Reggie has seen gold stars with Gregor."

Oh, my God. She's doing just what I don't want her to do. "Mom. MOM!"

"Yes, dear. Well, you see swirling gold stars after you make love to your lifemate. You saw this with Gregor?"

"Um, Mom, I have to go. I'll call again soon. Bye." Her heart beat so fast, her breath wasn't catching up. Her thoughts swimming, she remembered to call the college and tell them that she was alive, then her landlady and asked her to water her plants.

Gree slowly opened the door. "Ready to go now? Is anything wrong?"

Reggie handed him his phone. "Everything's fine. Let's go."

It was already daylight when they hit the street and started walking. With few people being around during a normally busy time, she figured it was the fear of additional terrorist attacks. Gregor took her hand in his. She wasn't used to holding hands with anyone and trembled, especially thinking of what her mom had said. Gregor paused and turned to face her. She knew that look in his eyes. He wanted to know why? A man brandishing a gun leaped at them from the shadows between buildings.

"Your money," he shouted, waving his weapon.

A giant, black bear responded with a deafening roar. The man tumbled backwards. Then he sat up and took aim. Reggie pressed her palms forward, and the gun flew out of his hands. The robber got up and ran down the street.

"How did you do that?" Gregor was human again. He'd morphed so quickly, Reggie hadn't seen the process.

"I don't know. Instinct?"

They walked to where the gun was.

"Hmm." Taking off her hoodie, she wrapped the gun in it.

"What are you going to do with that?"

"Give it to Mike."

Hand-in-hand, they continued down the street again.

"So, you're a bear when you change."

"I can change into anything my love wishes." He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her palm. "Thank you for saving this bear's life."

When Gregor said "my love" his words washed over her in the most soothing, beautiful way. Reggie had said she loved him and she meant it. She just didn't know how much. Every minute with him revealed more.

"I thought shape shifters could heal themselves."

"It depends where we're shot. If it's in the heart, we have the same chance as a human."

Mike signed them into the site.

"We found a gun on the street," said Gregor.

Reggie gave him a look and gave Mike the gun. He put it in a plastic bag.

"Where?"

"Two blocks from here on Greenwich Street," replied Gregor.

"Okay. Go ahead and get to work. Finding anyone alive is getting harder." He sighed.

As they moved away from Mike, she whispered to Gregor, "Why did you say that?"

"As a Nat, there are some things we can never say."

She nodded and looked around. Anguish lined everyone's faces. The search dogs were working. Reggie could hear the thoughts of the workers now, but the voices of the dying had grown quiet. Then she caught a whisper. Running she honed in on the faint sound. Gregor, with shovel in his head, raced after her. Other workers ran to help.

There it was—rustling, frantic gasps. "Someone's here."

Gregor and the others dug revealing a man's head and one arm sticking out of the dirt.

"We're getting you out," she said, holding his hand.

"Tell my little boy . . ." Then he died. He was gone, so quickly, Reggie had no time to react.

An ambulance crew carrying a stretcher rushed her way.

She squeezed his hand. Just like a battery, Reggie threw her energy into him.

His body jolted, and everyone jumped. He coughed. Then his eyes opened.

"You stay alive for your little boy. You stay alive," she urged.

The man looked up at her, as the paramedics put him on the stretcher and carried him away. Everyone left with him except for Gregor, who narrowed his eyes at her. Reggie had only gone two steps before everything got blurry. Her legs gave way. She tumbled to the ground like a ragdoll. The world slipped away.

Gregor picked her up. She knew it was him by his strength and his warm, deep voice. "Reggie, stay with me." It felt so warm being cradled in his arms. She could barely hear him. Then she heard Mike's voice—something about going home. Gregor was walking.

The whole time he kept talking. Reggie could hear him but couldn't understand what he was saying. Every time she tried to respond, her mouth wouldn't work. At times, his voice was very far away.

Being on something soft and wrapped in a blanket was her next memory. There was vibration—someone pacing in front of her. The motion made her dizzy. Reggie wished he would stop. Then Reggie heard words. Her mind kept floating away. It was hard to focus. "Catatonic." Then she was being lifted up, and she loved it. It smelled like Gregor.

The next thing Reggie knew her clothes were taken off. She hoped he was taking his off, too. She giggled, at least she thought that she giggled. Warm rain poured over her and his hands were everywhere rubbing. He held her up against him, as his fingers raked and squeezed through her hair and soaped her all over. Then the warm rain washed the soap away. The entire time, he kept saying, "Reggie, I love you. I know we

haven't known each other for every long, but there's so much about you that I love. From your red hair and adorable expressions to your compassion in putting others above yourself, you are more than I could ever dream of. Reggie, please, come back to me."

Reggie loved him too, but it was getting harder and harder to focus, even harder to stay. The rain stopped and he wrapped her in towels, then a bathrobe. Lifting her again, he carried her like a baby and placed her on the sofa. In her mind, Reggie kept seeing that man's face, the man who loved the little boy. She needed to sleep. All the pictures of life she loved most faded into shadows, and Reggie wondered if she had traded places with the man. It would be okay if she had. The dark was just a step away. She knew that. The dark comforted her like a warm blanket. Reggie felt completely loved. She surrendered her existence and slipped into a golden light. Only one thought remained, *I regret not meeting Gregor sooner.*

"I once read that a soul who gives their life for another is a unique light in the universe."

Where does that voice come from?

"And even if you're at peace with yourself, Reggie, I'm not and I need you."

Reggie gasped, oxygen filling her lungs. Every part of her trembled, and she opened her eyes. Live plants filled the living room. Thin, gold lines of lights wove through the air between them and her. Dressed in oversized pajamas, she lay on the sofa.

He was sitting in a chair opposite her with his face in his hands.

"Gree," she whispered.

Instantly, he threw his arms around her. "I thought I'd lost you." His deep baritone voice didn't have the usual smooth calm. His words were shaky, breathy. "I love you, Reggie. Thank you for coming back."

He pulled her onto his lap. His lips claimed possession of every part of her face. In her few years as an adult, experience had taught her that most men took. Gree was different. His every touch made her stronger, gave her the energy she needed to live. Reggie didn't know whether this was a real phenomenon or imagined.

When their lips parted, he held her.

"Gree, were you talking to me while I was unconscious? Something about a soul?"

"Yes. Did you hear me asking God to send you back to me?"

"No. You did that?"

He smiled.

Reggie kissed him, her lips tasting his. He moaned wanting more. She'd become attuned to his sounds and their meanings.

"Oh," he said, breaking away. "You have to call your parents right now. I couldn't take you to the hospital and risk the doctors discovering you were a Nat and keeping you for experimentation, so I called your parents. I figured they would know some way to help you." He flipped open the cell and pressed one number.

"You have my parents on speed dial?"

"Um, yes." He handed her the phone and her mom answered.

"Gregor?"

"No, Mom, it's me. I'm all right now."

"Thank, God. Harry, she's conscious."

She could hear her mother talking to her dad.

"I'm going to get you something to eat." Gregor rushed into the kitchen before Reggie could say anything.

"Gregor said he called you."

"It's a good thing he did. You would have died. He sounds like a very special man."

"He's a shape shifter."

"He told us that."

Gregor was still occupied in the kitchen. "Mom, I don't understand about my powers. I . . ."

"We're sorry about that, dear. Your dad and I thought it would be better for you, if you grew up passing for human."

Reggie cringed, thinking back at how abnormal she was as a child and how hard it was to fit in. "Yeah, well, I want to talk about that."

"I know, dear." Her mother sighed. "May I speak to Gregor?"

Gregor came out of the kitchen and put a large bowl on the coffee table along with a plate of bread slices.

"My mom would like to talk to you."

He handed her a spoon. "Sure." Sitting down beside Reggie, he picked up the phone. "Hi, Marian . . . Yes, she's fine now . . . She's probably still a bit groggy . . . Yes." He paused listening but keeping one steady arm around her. "Yes, I'll do that . . . Absolutely . . . I'll make sure of it . . . Thanks . . . Bye."

"What was that all about?"

"Just last minute instructions for your recovery. Are you sure you're feeling

better? You looked terrible as I came out of the kitchen." He used pillows to help her sit up more and blanketed the lower half of her body. "It's important to keep you warm."

"I'm okay."

"Good. Then you'll eat some soup." He held out the oversized bowl.

Reggie took a spoonful of vegetables. "This tastes like my mom's soup."

"It's her recipe. She said it always made you stronger whenever you were sick."

She ate more. Her eating pleased him, she could tell. The lines in his forehead eased. Reggie dipped a piece of bread into the soup and held it to his mouth. They fed each other until they emptied the bowl.

"More?" he asked.

"I'm full. Thank you."

He took the dishes into the kitchen. When he returned, they cuddled on the sofa. She ended up in his lap. His fingers raked gently through her hair.

"You have live plants now?"

"They're borrowed from the lobby. Your mom said their energy would help you. Reg, we have to make plans for tomorrow." His expression was so solemn, he had her rapt attention.

"What are we planning for?"

"We have to leave the city tomorrow. I'm going to take you home to Alaska."

"But, what about the site? We've been saving lives."

"There aren't any more people to save. The rest are dead. I saw what happened when you jumpstarted that man's heart. The energy flowed out of your body and into his."

"It was only a zap."

Gregor shook his head. "It was a great deal more than that, and it almost killed you."

"What's the worst that can happen to me if I'm drained of my powers? Becoming human?"

"No. No, it can kill you. You gave that man your life force. We were lucky that God sent you back. Your dad explained it to me. An elf without their life force is a dead elf. If all your energy is drained from your body, you die. Then your body twinkles out into stardust. There is nothing to bury."

Reggie shuddered, and he rubbed her arms as if she was cold. Laying her head against his chest, she listened to his big, bear heart thumping away. Tears streamed down her face, and she sniffed.

"When we get to Alaska, will you stay with me for awhile?"

"I will stay with you as long as you want me."

Reggie looked up into his eyes. Never having been to Maine, she imagined the sky to be that blue. He wiped the tears from her face, his fingers stroking her cheeks. She leaned up to kiss him. Gregor leaned down toward her and their lips touched. His tenderness became more aggressive with each progressive kiss.

"My elf girl," he whispered.

"My big bear," Reggie breathed.

He lifted her into his arms and stood. "You need to sleep, Reggie, in order to recover." He carried her into the bedroom and placed her on the bed. Reggie took off her robe and flung it weakly at a chair. She missed. He laughed.

"No." She smiled up at him.

"No?"

"I will sleep afterward."

When he chuckled wickedly she knew he understood. Her need for him burned though her body.

"I don't want to drain your powers."

Reggie moved a lock of dark brown hair off his forehead, as he leaned over her.

"You won't. If anything, you add energy to me." She pulled back the covers and reached for him to join her. He took off his robe and pajamas.

Climbing in and pulling her against him, he whispered, "You add energy to me, too. I didn't understand it at first, but your slightest touch makes me stronger and more attune with my true nature."

She rubbed behind his ears, laughing. "Really?"

That low, rumbling laugh of his sounded more like a controlled growl. He kissed her, tasting her lips with his tongue. Between kisses, he worked on slipping her out of her pajamas. The bottoms were lost in the bed sheets, but the top was another matter.

Reggie giggled. "Are you having a hard time?"

"No. I enjoy unwrapping." He struggled with the buttons.

She couldn't stop laughing. "So I'm a present?"

"You are a gift, and I hope you'll consider me a gift, too."

Reggie kissed him, then pulled the offending top over her head and tossed it. Reaching for his face, she pulled him down on top of her, kissing him with all the passion she could muster. Instead he left her gasping, sucking on her tongue. When he released her, his fingers played with the hair falling into her face.

"My love, I don't want to make you too tired. I have an idea."

"What is that?"

"Roll over."

She did and he placed a pillow under her stomach. Then she felt his body against her. His hands massaged every part of her, beginning with the shoulders and moving slowly down her back and arms. He didn't just use his hands, but his mouth kept kissing and licking until she whimpered.

"I want to do something," she complained.

"No," he whispered in her ear before sucking on it. Then he went back to the spot on her back where he left off. At times he lay for a moment or two, sprawled on top of her, with his arms reaching around to caress her breasts. She could feel him getting harder by the minute. Then he was back to kissing her lower back, fondling her behind. His finger reached between her legs, and she gasped as he began to stroke her sex.

"Gree," she called out, feeling helpless to do anything else.

"Yes, my love." His voice had a husky edge to it now.

Reggie couldn't answer. He pushed her legs farther apart, and his finger was replaced by a tongue. She writhed and squirmed and the heat pooled in her lower half.

"Gree, please." She couldn't even form the words in her head of what she was asking.

His tongue retreated, and for only a second, she was reprieved. Then his length entered her, sliding in slowly, then forcefully. He rocked back and forth generating a rhythm that increased in speed. Reggie moaned, and he responded with a low growl that vibrated from his body to hers. He thrust into her and she panted. In rapid succession, breathing through clenched teeth, he pushed and retreated just a little, only to thrust forward with a blazing heat. Reaching around her, he embraced her breasts,

driving into her until the heat within her exploded and she gasped. Gregor's back arched as he came. Then he collapsed on top of her, kissing her neck. Quickly he rolled to his side, taking her with him.

"Reggie, don't fall asleep yet. Look at this."

She struggled to open her eyes, but when Reggie did they went wide with amazement. Floating in the air all around them were gold stars the size of quarters. They were spinning and dancing, narrowly avoiding each other, leaving thin lines of stardust that shimmered for a moment before dissipating.

"That's from me?" She was stunned.

"Has that ever happened with anyone else?"

Reggie had only been with two men before Gregor, and nothing compared to him or to this. "No."

"Then it must be from us."

He kissed her checks, lovingly stroked her arms. Reggie felt him inside still and loved the feeling. The stars danced and twirled for a long time. Gregor yawned in her ear. She was still locked in his embrace, when they fell asleep.

When she woke, Reggie was facing him with her cheek against his soft furry chest. She sighed and hugged him tighter. He chuckled.

"Reggie, are you awake?"

"Yes."

"I'm packing a bag. Then we'll go on to your apartment and you can get what you need."

"Okay." She tried to get out of bed but missed her footing. Gregor caught her.

Finally making it successfully out of bed, Reggie went over to the clothes left from Gregor's birthday surprise for his sister. The jeans were fine, but the shirt was pink, with rhinestones on it, and said "I love New York." She tried on the t-shirt, and he eyed her appreciatively.

"I really love New York with you wearing it. You must be a little bit bigger than my sister." He grinned from ear to ear. "Come over here, and let me peel that off for you."

Reggie scowled at him playfully. "No, Gree. Do you have a shirt I can wear?"

"Oh, no, I want you to wear that one."

"I'll wear the one I wore yesterday. That one was a little bigger."

"No, that has debris dust all over it. Your father said it was poisonous."

She went into his closet and put on one of his dress shirts instead. Gree leaned on his elbow and watched in amusement.

Then he got out of bed and made her ache all over just looking at him. Reggie was sure he sensed this as he dressed very slowly wearing a sly grin. She took a bag out of his closet, and he started listing off things he needed and they started collecting.

Something drew her to the bright sunlight that filtered through the window. As she looked in the direction of Ground Zero, Reggie heard one last voice. She had to go back.

Reggie looked in his closet for anything she could use as a sweatshirt or jacket.

"It's going to be hot today. You're not going to need that," he said, remarking on the blue hoodie she pulled on and zipped up.

"I have to go back to the site."

"No. Your dad told me it would be dangerous for you to go back. There's no one

else alive." His tone was adamant.

"There's one more soul to save."

Gregor pulled her by the arm and swung her around until he had her in a tight embrace. He sat on the bed, and Reggie found she was sitting on his lap.

"Reg, please, be reasonable."

"I heard him. I have to go. I have to try, please, Gree." She gazed into his bright blue eyes. She loved him, but he wouldn't stop her.

He nodded. "Okay, but I'm going with you. You're not to walk away from me, understand? If anything goes wrong, I want to be able to grab you."

She smiled into his face, "Thank you."

They finished packing and put everything by the door. "Now we can just come back, get it, and leave," he announced. Reggie nodded.

Once on the street, Gregor held her closer to him, as if he worried that danger lurked around every corner and she was the target. Reggie couldn't help but wonder what exactly her dad had said to him that made him this way.

"I don't understand why I can't just stay in the city and recover."

"You're an elf. You need the forest, the trees. Your dad explained it all to me."

"We could hang out in Central Park."

He shook his head. "Yes, I mentioned that and he said your condition will persist and grow worse if you remain in the city." Gregor pulled her closer, putting his arm around her waist. Reggie did not feel well but didn't want to admit that to him. He would probably just pick her up and carry her home, if he knew.

Three blocks from Ground Zero, Reggie doubled over in pain. Tears burst from

her eyes and she crumbled to the sidewalk. Gregor lifted her off the ground. "That's it. I'm taking you home."

"No. Someone over there is in terrible pain." Reggie pointed to a dark alley between buildings.

Gregor held onto her but walked over to the alley. He leaned Reggie against the wall behind him, standing between the unknown and her. "Who are you? We know you're hiding. Come out," he shouted.

"I can't come out. I'll die in the sun, Gregor."

The familiar voice trembled. Gregor went closer and found his friend, David Hilliard, crouched behind two trash cans. The vampire looked like he had a bad sunburn on his face. "I stayed too long at the site, and the sun cut off my escape."

David tried to move further back into the ever shrinking shadows.

Gregor bent down toward his friend. "How can I best help you?"

"Can you darken the sky?"

Gregor straightened up and frowned. He looked up and then his expression changed. "I have an idea. Reggie, you stay here with David. I'll be right back." He turned the corner and was gone.

Reggie knelt in the dirt beside David. Then she took off her hoodie and put it over his head.

David smiled that unnerving smile of his. "You are very sweet."

Sticking out her arm, Reggie closed her eyes. "Go ahead. Just do it quickly." She felt her arm pushed aside and looked at the vampire.

"You are very kind, Regina, but I'm sure your lifemate would not see it that way. Gregor would dismember me for touching you, and I have to admit I wouldn't blame

him a bit. You're a unique treasure in this world, and he is lucky to have you."

"Um, we're not lifemates."

David, even in the terrible shape he was in, managed a laugh. "You are. The signs are all there."

"What signs?"

"The way you look at each other. Your pet names. And you are so completely devoted to him."

"How do you know that?"

"I read your mind."

"Can you read Gregor's?"

David chuckled even as he cringed back more into the shadows. "I can, but I won't."

"Why not?"

"Guys stick together."

She gave him an annoyed glare. He merely smirked.

Gregor turned the corner. He carried in his arms large bulky beige drapes. Throwing them over David, they wrapped up the vampire. Then Gregor tossed him over his shoulder.

They ran down the street to David's building, where George stood in the lobby holding open the door. Once they entered, Reggie understood where the drapes came from. Several large windows were bare. They hurried into the elevator with their oversized package and finally got him into the apartment. Gregor ran around closing all the drapes and Reggie carefully unwrapped the vampire.

David sat down hard on the sofa and glared up at them. "Never do that to a vampire again."

Gregor and Reggie just looked at each other and burst out laughing.

"Fine." David threw up his arms in exasperation, but then he smiled. Reggie noticed that since being in the dark, his burn had lessened. "May I use your phone? I have to order some blood, and my cell slipped out of my pocket at the site and broke."

"Sure," said Gregor.

"Ordering from a blood bank?" she asked.

"No. I usually do, but the human need is greater. I'm ordering from a butcher I know. Can I get you something?"

"No, thanks," Gregor replied.

"You should call home too, so whoever is waiting for you won't worry," Reggie added.

David shook his head and grinned. "I do not have anyone, little elf. I am not blessed the way Gregor is."

Gregor blushed. "Reggie and I are going out on an errand. Just make yourself comfortable, David. I don't intend on being out long. There's new towels in the bathroom and choose anything from my closet."

"Thank you, my friends. Where are you going?"

"We're going back to the site to get something," Gregor replied.

"No!" David stood up, his eyes fierce. "There's no reason to go back. Everyone is dead. Please, don't go there."

"I have to," she interrupted. "I hear weeping. There is one more to save."

"Don't worry, David. We'll be back soon." Then they walked out the door.

As they entered the elevator and the door closed, Reggie found herself clinging to Gregor. "Do vampires worry?"

"Not usually."

They were silent the rest of the way, with the exception of Gregor returning the drapes to George and telling him about their houseguest. The tension grew as they approached their third day at Ground Zero. Before they entered the protected perimeter, Gregor pulled her aside.

"We find him and then leave. Agreed?"

Reggie nodded. He released her arm.

Mike signed them in. "No survivors have been found since yesterday."

"I just want one last look," she said.

He nodded. They walked around. Reggie tried to focus on the sound she had heard so clearly from his apartment. There it was, growing more and more faint.

Reggie climbed to the spot. "Here." She pointed down between her feet.

"Stand over there." He indicated a safer spot and she moved.

Carefully, Gregor began to dig, removing a little at a time. With each shovel full, the debris dangerously shifted. After several minutes of digging, he shouted, "I see something green."

"Yes," she yelled over the din of workers and machinery. "That's it. Be careful."

He dropped to his knees and carefully moved the dirt around it. Puzzled he looked at her. "It's a plant?"

"Yes. Yes. That's it," she cried.

"Reggie, it's an office plant. We're not going to save all the office plants, are we?"

"No. They didn't survive. This one did and called for help."

Gregor looked confused but continued to dig until he had completely freed the little tree. Slowly he made his way down from the hill of debris. "Is this what you heard? It looks like the bonsai tree my co-workers gave me on my first day on the job."

Reggie smiled, taking the tree from him and carefully holding the roots.

"Let's go back now." Gregor held her around the waist as they made their way back out of the unstable terrain of Ground Zero. They signed out and hurried down the street to his apartment.

"He needs water."

Since they were near a convenience store, they stepped in. He bought a bottle of water and undid the lid. Cautiously, Reggie inserted the roots of the little tree.

With Gregor still protectively holding onto her, they got back to his place. David opened the door as they approached. He was wearing sweat pants and a t-shirt, obviously from Gregor's closet. Reggie was still carrying the little tree in the bottle.

She walked in the door and felt all wobbly. Then she collapsed. David caught the tree as she dropped it and put it on a table.

"Honey, what's wrong?"

"Look at her eyes," said the vampire. "They've changed from green to gray. There are toxins in the debris."

Reggie looked up at them from the carpet and tried to move.

"What does that mean, David?"

"With elves, it means they're sick. They have to return to the natural places to restore their life force. You should get her out of the city right away."

Gregor lifted her up and carried her into the bathroom. They showered quickly together. Reggie was so weak she couldn't help. After bundling her in towels, he carried her into the bedroom. Gently he put her in the bed. "She can't leave in this condition. We could call the other elves for help."

"They left when the planes struck the towers. Elves all over the city got violently ill. They went upstate. I suggest you take her there. I have a cabin on Hunter's Mountain you could use."

"Thank you, David. Is there anything we can do to make her stronger for the trip?"

The vampire looked thoughtful and then left the room. A second later, he was back with the bonsai tree replanted into a bowl. He held it out for her to hold.

"Touch the actual tree, Regina." As soon as she did, streams of light flowed between the tree and her.

"I don't understand. My plants at home never do this."

"Oh, they do," said David. "You're seeing the life force flowing because you're very ill. Unfortunately that won't be enough. Gregor, bring in the plants from the living room. I've already made a call for help. They should be here in fifteen minutes."

Gregor rushed out of the room. Reggie looked up at David, as he sat on the bed. His touch on her forehead was cold. When Gregor came back in he was loaded with plants and the vampire helped place them around the room.

"You really should tell your life mate that you love her," said David. "She needs you right now." The vampire walked out but turned and winked at her, before he went into the living room.

Gregor shut the door and climbed into bed. Reggie didn't feel as bad as yesterday, but her head swam and she felt nauseated. Breathing hurt. He pulled her into his arms.

"I have a very important question to ask you."

He had her complete attention.

"Will you marry me, Regina?"

Reggie looked up at him in surprise. She had just gotten used to the idea of being in love with him.

"Um, you don't have to answer right away. You could sleep on it. Actually why don't you close your eyes and sleep for a while, honey. You'll feel so much better."

She cuddled against his chest and closed her eyes. Still the question stood before her. Did she love Gregor enough to marry him? He had the best hug in the world, the kindest disposition, trusted her reasoning when it wouldn't make sense to most people, and oh, God, how every part of her wanted him. Reggie whimpered, and Gregor's automatic response was to stroke her hair and kiss the top of her head.

How do I deserve such a wonderful man, bear, shape shifter? She sighed. He rubbed her back.

A knock on the door startled her. "Excuse me, but the cavalry is here." Gregor leaped out of bed and opened the door. A whole team of men carrying several plants each came into the room until Reggie was surrounded by a veritable jungle. She breathed deeply and the tiny ribbons of lights flowed into her. With every passing second, Reggie felt stronger.

Gregor shook hands with the men and thanked them. After he closed the door,

he climbed back into bed. "Sleep, Reggie."

"Who were they?"

"Werewolves that own a flower shop."

She didn't know how many hours passed before she began to yawn and stretch. When she did, Gregor wasn't there. Reggie got up feeling somewhat better and rummaged through his closet for anything she could wear. She came up with some sweatpants (the drawstring pulled very tight) and a dress shirt.

Steak, corn, mashed potatoes with gravy, salad. Reggie followed the delicious smell to the dining room and found Gregor and David setting the table. It was dark outside. Gregor held the chair for her and then they started eating.

"You have to leave the city. The effect of the plants will only last so long, and you need a more permanent fix." David drank from a wine glass; it was red. Reggie doubted it was wine.

"I'm going to need clothes."

"I'll buy you clothes and anything else you need along the way. The problem is how to leave the city fast," said Gregor.

"Yes, that is a problem. Another vampire and I could fly you over to Connecticut or New Jersey."

"Maybe I could use my magic?"

They both turned to her.

"Really?" asked the vampire. "What can you do?"

"I don't know. After dinner, I'll call my dad. Maybe he'll have an idea."

They nodded and continued eating.

"Hi, Dad, I need your advice."

"Anything, Reggie."

"I have to get out the city immediately, before I become ill again. What do you suggest?"

Her dad explained the situation to her mom. "Harry, tell her about the extra door."

He chuckled. "When your mother told her parents that she loved me, they locked her in a high tower. I was able to telepathically teach her the leprechaun door trick. She drew the door on a blank wall, knocked on it three times, and closed her eyes to focus on where she wanted to go. In her case, she focused on me, and when she opened the door, I was standing there. We ran to the human world to get married. I think the door trick will work for you, too. Did you get all that?"

"Yes, Dad. Thanks. I'll call you when we get there."

Reggie smiled up at Gregor and put down the phone. "Before we do this, I have to say something."

He took a deep breath. "Okay."

"Yes, I will marry you."

"Yes!" shouted Gregor. He swung her around and kissed her.

David laughed and hugged them. "Congratulations. Now you two better take off. Don't worry about anything. I'll take care of all the plants."

After they retreated to the bedroom, Gregor turned to Reggie. "When do you want to get married?"

"Right away."

"Yes!" He whooped. "Okay, what do you need to do the magic?"

"Do you have a pencil?"

He went to his desk and came back with a pencil. A packed bag, a rolled up sleeping bag, and the bonsai were ready nearby.

"What's the sleeping bag for?"

"In case, we do some camping on our honeymoon."

"Oh." Reggie giggled.

After taking down two paintings of woodland scenes, she drew a large door and knocked three times. Then she closed her eyes to concentrate. When Reggie opened them again, a door had appeared, half the size she had drawn. They looked at each other puzzled.

"Maybe it's leprechaun sized."

Reggie narrowed her eyes at him. "My dad is 5' 8".

"Sorry." Gregor walked toward the opening, and she pulled him back by the arm.

"Let's move the bags in first." They did that, pushing the bags and the bonsai tree through the hole. The three items disappeared. Then crouching low and holding hands, they walked through it effortlessly.

The door disappeared behind them. In the pitch dark, Reggie's eyes made out a cave. The bags and plant were at their feet.

"I don't think we're in Alaska."

"We're in a cave." Gregor released her hand and walked around. He walked up to a simple drawing of stick figures on the wall then laughed. "It's my cave, where I used

to hide out as a kid. I used to come here to get away from my family; I would sleep and fantasize about being an adult. How did we manage to get here?"

"Um, I think it's because I sort of dreamed about it. What fantasies did you have?"

Gregor laughed one of his low rumbling, delicious laughs. "If you dreamed about it, then you know." Reggie turned beet red. He pulled her to his side. "You know, what if we stay here tonight, and tomorrow set up a wedding? Maine has no waiting period."

"My parents are expecting a call."

"Tomorrow," he whispered in her ear in the most seductive way.

She giggled, as he laid out the sleeping bag. Facing each other, Reggie worked on unbuttoning his shirt.

"I could rip it off."

"I've got it," she said, getting the last button and freeing him from it. Then the zipper of his pants got stuck on his bulge. He finished the job in seconds.

"You're overdressed, honey." He pulled off her clothes and lay on her. Teasingly, he tasted her lips then invaded her mouth with his tongue. As he withdrew, Reggie sucked his tongue pressing her teeth against him lightly.

"Why, you little minx!"

Gregor kissed her again but without his tongue this time. His lips made a blazing, wet trail from her mouth down her jaw and neck. He cupped her breasts, fondling, kneading gently.

"Ah, Reggie, you're so soft." The moment he kissed a nipple, Reggie was incapacitated to react with speech. Moans became the extent of her replies. He sucked and she whimpered. After several minutes of pure pleasure, he moved to the other

breast.

His mouth and hands worked in unison as he continued licking his way down her body. Reggie panted when he moved her thighs apart and his face disappeared. He kissed the inside of each thigh moving upward. Then his tongue penetrated her folds, kissing the depths of her. She grabbed his hair, her fingers trembling. His blue eyes blazed as he leaned up on his elbows and looked at her.

"Do you want me to stop?"

"Um, no."

He began to lower himself. Then she pulled on his hair again. Gregor peered up at her with an evil grin. "Do you need something, my love?"

"Yes, Gree."

"What?"

Reggie gestured with her forefinger for him to come up. He crawled seductively up her body, until they were face to face.

"What would you like, Reg?"

Reaching down, she positioned his shaft against her.

He grinned. "Oh, I wasn't pleasing you?"

"No. You are wonderful, but I need more than your tongue."

"Something bigger you mean?"

She smirked then nodded.

"Ooh, you're so bad." He pressed his lips to hers. She moaned. Then he pushed and filled her. Gregor kept kissing her and moving back and forth, each time increasing force and speed. She arched into him and him into her. When he withdrew and thrust in one last time, Reggie unraveled, warm currents of pleasure washing over her. He

growled draping on top of her. Reggie sighed in that moment of pure ecstasy. She turned her head.

"Do you see it?" he whispered.

"Yes."

Swirling gold stars illuminated their cave. Reggie took his hand and kissed it. His hand caressed her face. Tonight she was determined to make all of Gregor's teenaged fantasies come true in his special cave. Tomorrow they would go back out into a bigger world.

"I have a confession to make."

"What is that?" he asked.

"The stars mean that I'm with my life mate."

He held her closer. "I have a confession, too. I knew you were my life mate when I saw you outside the coffee shop."

Reggie smiled up at him and kissed him.

"Reggie," he whispered, "have you given any thought to where you want to live? Alaska or Maine? I can do my work from anywhere."

"I want to live where they need us most."

"Where's that?"

"New York City." Here she was safe in her beloved's arms, and all she could think about was a man wanting to see his little boy, people wandering lost in shock covered with dust, workers tired to the bone but continuing to dig after every movement or sound—every hope. In the wreckage of so many lives, love survived.

The End