



A VAMPIRE

for
Christmas

SUSAN HANNIFORD
CROWLEY

M VAMPIRES IN
MANHATTAN

A Vampire for Christmas

By

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For my family and friends

"No," Georgia whimpered at the hand reaching into the window display, yanking out the coat she'd stared at every day for three weeks--the thick brown and black, faux fur coat with the black hood. None of the other coats compared to that one with its elegant lines and obvious warmth. Georgia's own coat was shabby. She shivered.

If only her credit cards weren't maxed out. A tear streamed down her cheek before freezing on her face.

Then she saw the reflection. Every time she stopped at this window, his reflection would be there staring back. He stood about two feet behind her, so the image was shadowed. At first, she reasoned that perhaps he lived in the neighborhood and it was a coincidence. Maybe he was looking at coats for his mother or girlfriend. Maybe he was a stalker. She turned to leave.

Someone tapped her on the shoulder. Georgia gripped her bag strap and turned, then looked up. He was tall, broad shouldered, and compassion made his face kind. Bright green eyes gazed into hers. His warm brown hair was cut conservatively, which matched the new, dark brown coat.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. I'm fine. Thank you."

"You're not fine. Please, let me help you."

Instantly, she burst into a run and didn't stop until she reached the donut shop across from her apartment. Sitting at a table, Georgia peeked through the window. He hadn't followed her. Snowflakes floated down obscuring her vision. Maybe she overreacted. Maybe not. You couldn't be too careful in New York. She got up and went to the counter to order coffee and donuts to go.

When she stepped outside again, the lights had come on up and down the street. It was beginning to look like Christmas. It could be so magical if it wasn't so sad. Georgia figured that she would run out of money by New Year's. What a way to start the New Year. Jobless. Homeless. Broke.

Georgia looked up and down the street but saw no sign of the man from the reflection and decided it was safe to cross the street to her apartment.

As she unlocked the building door, her landlady with the iron gray hair stood there. "Good evening, Georgia."

"Hi, Mrs. Polasky."

"Do you have that rent money for me?"

Georgia shuffled in her purse and took out a check and held it out. "Here it is."

The woman took it. "That's good. Have a happy Christmas." Then she went back into her apartment and slammed the door.

Last check, thought Georgia. She didn't want to tell her. Maybe she could hold out again until halfway through the month to tell her landlady. Maybe something wonderful would happen. Maybe instead of snow, money would fall from the sky.

Georgia pressed the button for the elevator, when her landlady's door opened. "Oh, Georgia, a courier came by with this package for you. I almost forgot."

It was a large, rectangular box with a fancy bow. The tag on the box had her name. "Thank you."

The elevator doors opened and Georgia walked in. As soon as the doors closed, she examined the box more closely. It was heavy, a woven white, but bore no markings other than the tag. The bow was a deep green. Before she could open it, the elevator

had reached the fifth floor and she got out. Georgia hurried to her door, unlocked it, opened it, and locked it behind her just as fast.

A light came on automatically in the hall. She went into the living room and sat on the sofa. She turned on the closest lamp and put all her attention on the box. Who could have sent it? Georgia opened it and the sight made her tremble. It was the coat. Her coat. Excited, she tried it on. It fit perfectly and oh, it was so warm. Going through the paper in the box, she searched for any clue of its sender. Who could have done this for her?

The only relative she had was Uncle Mick, but he usually sent her candy and a card. Receiving this coat didn't make sense. Then she thought of Jim. He'd be just the one to do something sweet like this. But as far as she knew, he was still with his new girlfriend. Georgia regretted breaking up with Jim. He was thoughtful, caring, always thinking of her first, but she just didn't feel that overpowering love all the books talk about. She really wanted to feel that love because he was such a great guy, but there were no sparks when they kissed.

Georgia shook her head. In the morning, she would go over the possibilities. But for now, she put the coat in the closet and kept the box on the floor beneath. She'd examine that in the morning too. Dinner was going to be canned ravioli again. It was on sale. Her money had dwindled. She might be able to get a chicken at the food bank. That would be nice for Christmas. Turning off the lights in the apartment, Georgia ate her dinner in the dark gazing out her window at the festive lights outside. New York was a wonderful place to spend Christmas, but being broke dampened her spirits.

Her thoughts drifted back to the coat. Who sent it?

Trevor sat back against the plush upholstery of his car and closed his eyes. Nothing had worked out the way he planned it. He had scared her off.

"Where to, sir?" asked his driver.

Trevor sighed. "My parents' house, Keith."

"Right, Mr. Stenwood."

Rolling through Manhattan, Keith made the turn to Battery Park and then to the townhouse owned by the Stenwoods. Holiday lights flickered and reflected in the tinted glass windows. Trevor glanced at them with a heavy heart. If she had looked at him for more than a second, if she had opened her heart to his words, then he would have had a chance to win her over. Now all his hopes were dashed. Trevor shook his head in despair. He didn't merely want her. She attracted him, but it was so hard to pinpoint what it was about her that made him smile and daydream those deliciously, wild scenarios in his head. Not being able to speak to her was killing him.

He hadn't seen his folks in a long time. While he considered going to the club instead, he thought if anyone knew about finding and keeping a long-term relationship, his parents would. They'd been married forever.

"We're here, sir." He hadn't even noticed when the car stopped or when Keith opened the door.

Suddenly, his driver was on the ground choking with some behemoth on top of him. Trevor sighed and in a blur was out of the car and lifting the attacker over his head with one arm.

"How are you doing, Keith?"

His driver got up off the ground and brushed himself off. "Fine, sir."

Trevor stared into the eyes of the struggling man who went limp. He lowered him onto the ground. The assailant was asleep with a stupid grin on his face.

"That's good. Keith, please, call the police and let them know where this mugger is?"

"Yes, sir. Have a good evening." The driver was about to re-enter the car, when he paused.

Anticipating the question, Trevor replied, "I won't be needing you for the rest of the night."

"Very good, sir." The chauffeur got into the car. He would wait until the police came and took their sleeping captive away.

Trevor climbed the few steps to the door and was admitted by the butler who took his coat. He followed the aging servant into the informal parlor. His parents sat cuddled together on the overstuffed aqua sofa, watching a DVD of "Nosferatu." They laughed every time a dead body was found. They hadn't aged a day, of course. His mother was still the blonde, dark eyed beauty that caught his father's attention during the American Revolution, so much so that he deserted the British ranks. His father's dark brown hair and mustache remained perfectly trimmed and untouched by gray, like the day he married his American bride and then made her immortal. He had to give them credit. They did make a concerted effort to dress and speak like current New Yorkers.

"Those were the good old days, weren't they, Betsy?"

"Ah, Thomas." She sighed.

Trevor almost felt guilty for interrupting his parents. Almost. He cleared his throat.

His mother turned toward him smiling. "Oh, Trev, take a seat and stop looking dejected. We felt your presence when your car drove up outside."

Trevor chose the Queen Anne chair closest to his mother. His father muted the TV. "So why the visit, son? We haven't seen you in a long time. Are you having a problem?"

"I found my lifemate."

"That's wonderful, dear," his mother gushed.

"It would be if she wasn't afraid of me," he growled.

His father laughed. "Why is she afraid of you?"

The skulking Nosferatu stood on a boat built on land as part of a movie set. Trevor didn't like this scene in the film. It made him feel out of place. "I tried to talk to her."

"Did you look into her eyes?"

"Yes, Mother."

"And she resisted you?" His father's incredulous tone left a bad taste in his mouth, but that was how his dad was. "Then she must be your lifemate or mentally ill."

Both parents laughed at that remark.

This wasn't helping. "Not funny."

The maid arrived with wine glasses. They each accepted a glass and waited as the servant poured. Thomas had grown up with this ritual. He waited until his father took the first sip and nodded. Then they enjoyed the sweet nectar of life.

After finishing his drink, Trevor stood. Obviously, this was not a good moment to talk to them. Tomorrow night might be better.

"Good night."

"You're welcome to stay," said his mother.

Trevor nodded and left making his way up the grand staircase. He touched the curved, mahogany banister and chuckled. So many times, he slid down it and went flying across the foyer. Good thing he could float or it would have been a disaster. When he reached the top of the stairs he noted, that like his parents, everything had stayed the same. While they made a point of being current, their home was private, open only to family and a few friends. The portrait on the wall of George Washington hadn't moved since it was given by the president to his mother as a gift.

When Trevor opened the second door on the right, he found his bedroom as he left it ten years ago. His basketball trophies still stood in a row on a shelf. His desk was pristine with pen and paper in place. He sat on the wine red bedspread and gazed out the window. Snow floated like twirling silver stars.

Betsy Stenwood walked in and sat beside her son. "Tell me about her."

"I feel stupid."

"No, you're a man. You're at a distinct disadvantage."

"Even as an immortal?"

She chuckled. "Especially so, my son. Tell me. What is this love of yours like?"

Trevor watched the snow swirl in the wind letting his eyes go out of focus.

"Georgia is beautiful with soft brown curls framing her face. She has the largest, purest blue eyes. Right now, she's scared, not only of me but of life. Everything's gone wrong for her. She was laid off ten months ago and is running out money. Georgia doesn't have family to fall back on. She's a strong, self-reliant woman, and she believes she'll find a way out of this financial hole."

"You could help her." Trevor hadn't heard his father come in.

"I don't see how."

"Buy her coffee." His mother patted his hand and then got up. The two left and Trevor remained staring out at the endless snow. He wanted Georgia so much his teeth ached.

It wasn't the job Georgia longed for, but it was something. As she stepped out of the coffee shop a few minutes after eleven, a passerby grabbed her purse.

"No," she shouted, clutching the leather strap. He pulled so hard, she toppled over. But Georgia remembered her lessons at the dojo and struck at the robber with her feet. He tripped sideways.

Then he pulled a knife. In a blur, the strange man from the store window had one foot on her attacker's hand and the other on his throat.

Georgia scrambled to her feet and in a fit of rage yanked her purse free then punched her rescuer in the jaw.

He swayed a bit but remained steadfast on her attacker. Shocked, Georgia rubbed her knuckles. She'd broken boards with that fist, so it should have had more impact.

A siren later and the police arrived. They arrested the mugger, and the questions began. Georgia was very interested in the stranger's answers.

"Your name, sir?" asked the female officer.

"Trevor Stenwood."

"Occupation?"

"CEO of Stenwood Garments."

"Could you tell me, Mr. Stenwood, what happened?"

"I was just walking by when I saw this woman being robbed."

"He was stalking me," Georgia interrupted.

"I was not."

"Yes, you were."

The officer glared at him with raised eyebrows. "Were you?"

"I just wanted to ask her out to lunch."

The officer turned her attention to Georgia.

He just didn't seem very threatening now.

"I'm sorry if I scared you," said Trevor.

He seemed so sincere. Georgia smiled.

"I'm sorry I hit you."

"You struck him?" The officer turned to Trevor. "Do you want to press charges, sir?"

"No." He chuckled. "Do you have anymore questions, officer?"

"Where can we contact you, Mr. Stenwood?"

He gave her his business card.

She turned to Georgia. "Ms. Blake?"

"I work at Donut Haven in the morning, and I live at 328 Cedar, Apt. 3B."

"Phone number?"

"I don't have a phone."

"Thank you. We'll be in touch."

Trevor smiled. "So where would you like to go for lunch?"

Georgia's heart pounded like a drum. She was about to say something when she realized the sleeve of her new coat was torn. "I can't believe I ripped it."

"I know an excellent tailor who could repair that in no time."

Before Georgia could respond, a dark sedan pulled up and Trevor Stenwood opened the back door. She slid across the soft gray, plush upholstery and he climbed in beside her. A panel of glass separated them from the driver.

"Keith, Mr. Robers, please." The car pulled away from the curb and into the traffic.

Georgia's thoughts took a moment to catch up with events. Why did she get into a car with a stranger? Trevor sat a distance away and made no move to get closer.

"Keith?"

"Sir?"

"Would you mind telling Miss Blake what kind of man I am? She looks troubled."

Georgia wasn't aware until that moment that she was shaking. She looked into the rearview mirror and saw the driver's brown eyes staring back.

"Mr. Stenwood is a good man, Miss. He's never harmed anyone. You have no reason to fear him."

"He put down that robber."

"He did that to defend you, Miss. I saw the entire incident from the car."

Georgia couldn't find fault with Keith's explanation. She turned to Trevor.

"Thank you."

He smiled and relaxed back into the seat. Georgia did the same.

"So you started work at the coffee shop this morning?"

"Yes, it's only part-time but at least it's something. On the bright side, it leaves me available to keep interviewing." She looked down at her hands.

"What kind of job are you looking for?"

"I went to college for fashion design, but the closest I got was as an assistant to an assistant of a buyer."

The car parked in front of a shop. Signs in the window advertised custom tailoring, fur storage, and vintage clothing. The driver opened the door. Trevor got out first and offered his hand to Georgia. She took it. He had a warm but firm grip. Her boot hit ice for only a second, but he supported her and got her to the sidewalk without mishap.

She blushed. "I should thank you again."

He blushed. "No problem. My pleasure really."

"You're going to think I'm accident prone."

"Not at all."

The store was dimly lit. Small salons with several salespersons spoke in near whispers to customers. Trevor walked past them all to greet a gray haired man with half-moon glasses.

"Robers, this is Georgia Blake."

"A pleasure to meet you, Miss Blake."

"A misfortune tore her coat." As Trevor explained, he helped Georgia take the coat off.

The older man took it and examined it. "Hmm. Yes, I can repair it, but it will take some time to do it properly."

"Perhaps you have a coat Georgia can wear until she gets hers back?"

Robers nodded, left the room a moment, and returned with a pale brown, full length mink. He draped the coat over her shoulders. "You look quite charming in this, my dear. It came from the estate of Mae West."

Trevor's smile broadened.

Georgia caressed the fur with trembling hands. "It's really beautiful. I don't like killing animals, but since it's an old coat that should be okay. I mean I guess I could wear it—for a little while anyway."

Trevor took Georgia's hand. "Thank you, Robers. You have my number."

"Certainly, Mr. Stenwood."

He led her from the store to the waiting car. Georgia had never worn anything so soft and beautiful in her entire life. Her coat was lovely but this one was breathtaking. She stared out the window when the car re-entered the flow of traffic.

"Georgia, you do like the coat, don't you?"

She laughed. "Are you kidding me? It belonged to a movie star. It's hard to say who was the more glamorous, Mae West or the coat?"

He laughed. "I'm glad you're enjoying it. Now what are you in the mood for? Chinese? Italian? Seafood?"

"Seafood."

"Excellent. Keith, the Seaport, please. I know just the place."

The restaurant wasn't what she expected. It was rustic but very homey. Built on a neighboring pier, the thick paned glass windows looked out over the sound. In the middle of the small dining room was a covered fireplace. Georgia welcomed the warmth. She had never been to the Seaport before and enjoyed her view of the tall ship anchored at a nearby dock. Twinkling lights outlined its mast. Delectable fragrances floated over them from the kitchen.

When the waiter arrived with menus, Georgia was dizzy with expectation. She looked at her menu. There were no prices and it was hard to choose from so many delicious sounding meals.

"What are you having?" She leaned toward Trevor.

"I was going to start with the lobster bisque and move on to the shrimp scampi."

"That sounds good. I'll have the same."

When the waiter returned, Trevor gave him the orders. He waited until the man was out of hearing range.

"Georgia, you know you could have ordered anything."

"I know." She gazed out the window. Snow danced over the waves. Then snowflake and wave would touch as in a kiss and the snow would be gone forever, absorbed into the water.

"May I move my seat so I can sit next to you?"

She thought about saying no, but the truth was she was ready for him to be closer. "Okay."

He moved the chair so he was exactly next to her and they could see the same thing out the window. "It's sad, isn't it?"

"What?"

"The snowflake is so exquisite, but its life is so short. The ocean is eternal. It loves the snowflake and when they meet. . ."

"The snowflake dies." Georgia sighed.

"No, not at all. The snowflake changes into water and becomes immortal."

Georgia turned to face him. They were so very close, his mouth above her lips, his eyes gazing deeply into hers. She could feel him searching for some answer. Then

his lips possessed her mouth so gently, sweetly, as if to caress. Georgia felt herself melting like the snowflake touching the ocean wave. She kissed him back. Every kiss led to another. She felt his arm steady her. Her eyes were closed, as his finger brushed her cheek.

"Don't you want to eat something, Georgia?"

She opened her eyes. The meal had arrived without her noticing. "Whoa. I guess we should eat." Between bites, they managed conversation.

"We were talking about your career in fashion."

"It wasn't much of a career. I worked for three years thinking I would move up. Then I was laid off in the budget cuts." She took a sip of white wine and then focused on Trevor. "What does a CEO do?"

He exhaled. "Well, not much when I'm on vacation. Normally, I oversee all the operations, check the books, and make deals. Stenwood Garments is really a distributor. We sell to various chain stores. The only thing we create is a line of school and sports uniforms."

"How did you get to be CEO?"

"My family owns the business. I graduated with my business degree and my dad asked me if I'd like to be in charge of a company. I said sure." He paused and took a sip of water. "I was being sarcastic, of course. Then he said, 'Great. Have mine.'"

Georgia couldn't stop laughing. "Well, that will teach you not to be sarcastic."

"Yes, it's taught me a lot of things."

At points in the meal, they quizzed each other about favorite things.

"Where's your favorite place in the city?" he asked.

"Rockefeller Center. I love their ultimate Christmas tree. Yours?"

"The Metropolitan Opera."

Her eyebrows flew up. "You like opera."

"No." He smirked. "I love their chandeliers."

Another fit of laughter shook her. "You're being sarcastic again." When he smirked, she poked him. "I would have never pegged you for an opera lover."

"There are moments in an opera when you are lifted outside yourself and the world fades away. It's very soothing, comforting. Have you been there?"

"No, but I would like to."

"Then it's on my list to take you."

"You're developing a list?"

"Yes."

"What else is on that list?"

"It's a secret."

She giggled, and the whole meal continued this way. When it ended and there wasn't any more to eat or to say, she sighed and leaned against him. He held her with one arm, his cheek touching her head.

"Dessert?" he whispered in her ear.

"I'm undecided," she said turning to him.

They looked into each other's eyes for a long time. "Georgia, you're not just a date to me."

"What do you mean?"

"I was watching you for days, trying to think of something clever to say. Some way to meet you."

"Trevor, did you send me that coat?"

"Yes. I couldn't figure out which one you wanted. It was between that one and the all black one, so I paid the sales woman to take that one out of the window."

Georgia shook her head. "When my face fell, you knew."

"Yes."

"You know, most men would have given me flowers."

"Georgia." He kissed her on the cheek. "Do you think I'm like most men?"

She turned her face up to him, and he descended taking her lips softly one at a time over and over again until she was dizzy with want. When they parted, her head fell against his chest and remained there. He enclosed her in his arms, softly stroking her hair.

When she regained the sensation of living in this world again, she turned for one last look out that darkening window. How many hours had they been there? Where did the time go? She only knew that being with Trevor was the most amazing experience. Her heart felt safe with him.

They left the restaurant and ventured into the storm, which was picking up. She was very warm draped in the luxurious fur. Still Trevor held her tightly against him as if she needed him for heat. Perhaps she did. Heat pooled in her lower regions and affected her thoughts. The car drove up and they entered. This time, they both sat in the middle. Georgia shivered with delight. Everything that had happened was new, exciting, dangerous. Dangerous because how could she possibly know what Trevor was really like. Dangerous because she could easily fall madly in love with him and be powerless to prevent her fall. She didn't want to give anyone power over her, but love has a way of taking control.

When they arrived at the steps of her apartment, she was disappointed. The car stopped.

"My coat is still with Mr. Robers."

"Don't worry. When he's done, he'll call me and I'll get it to you. In the meantime, enjoy this one."

She turned to him. "I had a wonderful time."

"So did I, and I think we should plan our next date."

"Our next date?"

"Yes, I'm going to make dinner for you tonight."

"In your apartment?"

"No, yours. Expect me at seven." He helped her out of the car, and after she had opened the door to the building he stepped into the foyer with her. There he kissed her, gently touching one side of her face.

"Now go upstairs and take a nap. I'll be here at seven. Don't forget."

"I don't think I could forget even if I tried." Georgia went up the stairs. He followed. They got to her door. He swept her into his arms and kissed her again, his tongue invading her mouth and stroking the inside of her cheeks. She moaned.

When their lips parted, she almost collapsed. He held her. It took several minutes before Georgia could find her key and manage the lock. She stood with the door open, and he nuzzled her neck.

"Um, goodbye. I think." Georgia giggled into the frame of the door.

"See you later." He trotted down the stairs and disappeared.

Georgia shut the door and then stood in shock against it. What happened to her today never happened in real life. A rich man was interested in her, but Trevor was

more than that. He was considerate and fun. Other people respected him. Maybe he wanted her only for sex. Maybe not. Her mind was still befuddled by his kiss.

Promptly at 7 o'clock the doorbell rang. She pressed the buzzer, but when Georgia opened the door a teenage boy stood there holding a huge bouquet of red roses.

"Are you Georgia Blake?"

"Yes."

He handed her the flowers. "Mr. Stenwood sends his regrets that he will be late. He asks that you continue to wait for his arrival."

"Sure, why not." Georgia looked at the flowers and putting them down on a table by the door, went for her purse.

"No, Ma'am. He already tipped me. Thank you anyway." The boy walked down the hall and down the stairs.

Georgia was puzzled. The three dozen long stem red roses were spectacular. She was about to shut the door when a hand stopped her. She jumped ready to assault the attacker with a red bush of thorns.

"No, please." Trevor threw up his arms to defend himself.

She laughed. "You weren't very late."

"Yes, but I wasn't on time and I'm sorry for that." He leaned forward to kiss her and she let him.

He had two bags of groceries in his arms and several more in the hall that his driver added to.

"What's all this?"

"Important for cooking," he announced.

In a short time, Trevor and Keith had the groceries put away in her kitchen. The driver left, and Trevor rummaged through her drawers and cupboards looking for cooking utensils and pots. He found several wooden spoons, a strainer, two large pots, and a sauté pan.

"What are you making for dinner?" She leaned against the door jamb smiling at him. Her kitchen wasn't very big.

"My special spaghetti." He had laid out the ingredients on the table: pasta, oil, tomato sauce, oregano, basil, rosemary, raw sugar. He had jumbo shrimp chilling on ice in a bowl.

"I don't see garlic. I think I have some." She searched through the cupboards.

"Oh, no, I won't be needing that. I hope you don't mind, but I'm allergic to garlic."

"No, that's fine." She closed the cupboard.

"Did you have a good nap?"

"Yes." Georgia shook her head at his strange question, but his presence made her so happy it didn't matter.

"Good. Then I can keep you up late."

"Can I help?"

"Well, once I get to know you better I might let you help, but right now I'd rather cook on my own. I want to impress you." Then he smirked. "And frankly, Scarlett, you make me nervous."

Georgia couldn't stop giggling. "Okay," she teased. "But I feel like I should be doing something."

"Hmm," he moaned. "Why don't you take a bubble bath? Thinking of you covered with bubbles will inspire my very best cooking."

Georgia had to leave the room. He was too much. Collapsing on the sofa, she turned the TV on briefly. Someone had gotten mugged down the street. She wondered if it was the same guy that attacked her. No, they couldn't have let him out this quickly. Then again, if he made bail, who knew.

She lowered the sound on the TV to listen to Trevor singing some song in Italian. At least, she thought it was Italian. He made her feel . . . ooh. Getting up, she lingered outside the kitchen door a moment and then detoured to her bedroom. Changing in her room and getting out her vanilla bubble bath, she headed for the bathroom. Seconds later, oodles of tiny bubbles clung to her wet skin. The bath soothed away the last fear she had about the mugging. It was funny to think that something as bad as a mugging had brought someone as wonderful as Trevor into her life. Georgia closed her eyes, hummed a nameless tune, and let the hot water relax her aching right shoulder. That's where the mugger had pulled on the strap of her purse.

Trevor leaned against the bathroom door. He could hear her humming and the water splashing. He closed his eyes. Oh, to be with her right now. His mouth longed for her kiss.

Slumping on the nearby bed, Trevor tried to contain the pain. To have his lifemate so close and not touch her was agony. He closed his eyes, and his thoughts drifted and mingled with hers.

Just imagining what she might be dreaming drove Trevor nuts. He wanted the wet, curvy Georgia in his arms. He wanted to explore every inch of her first with his fingers, then with a thousand strategically placed kisses.

Tiny bubbles slid down her sleek wet skin. The vanilla fragrance of the bubbles wafted over Georgia. She inhaled and relaxed back into the tub. She closed her eyes.

Clearly she was dreaming but Trevor wasn't sure how much of this was her thoughts or his wishful thinking.

Georgia burst from the bathroom. Her rose petal skin glistened with dew. He grabbed a towel and began the arduous, painstakingly detailed task of rubbing her dry. First the face. Her lips were difficult so he applied a different method—his lips brushed over hers repeatedly inhaling every droplet. He caressed her neck with the towel and moved to her arms. The fingers he kissed, relishing every digit until she giggled. Her breasts commanded his undivided attention, as he kneaded gently with the towel before applying soft, wet, sucking kisses to her nipples.

Georgia moaned. Trevor became semi-conscious. When did he lose his clothes? How did they get on the bed? Gazing down into her eyes, he saw trust. She trusted him but did she love him? He needed to know that she did, that she could for an eternity.

"Trevor, I need you." She caressed the side of his face and drew him to her in a kiss.

Trevor burst awake. The buzzer had gone off in the kitchen and he hurried to turn off the oven and put everything on the table. He found three pillar candles and put them in the center for ambience.

When Georgia didn't arrive, he set out after her.

Rapping lightly on the bathroom door, he called, "Georgia. Dinner's ready."

Georgia's eyes snapped open. She slipped under the water then rose choking and splashing.

"Georgia, are you okay?"

She coughed.

He rushed in and reached into the tub scooping her up into his arms. Like lightning, he lay her on the bed, flipped her face down and thumped her on the back.

Coughing, choking, water gushed out. Her inhale sounded raspy. "Trevor."

He turned her on her back. Trevor straddled her, worry etched on his face.

He looked so deliciously handsome but obviously overdressed. Oh, no. The dream.

"Should I take you to the hospital?"

"No." She shook her head. "I'll be fine. I fell asleep in the bath. I never do that. Did you say something about dinner?"

"Yes." He immediately got off her. Nervously, he turned the other way. "Yes, everything's on the table. I'll let you dress." He left closing the door.

Georgia lay there dumbstruck. Why did I do that? I wanted him. She closed her eyes and inwardly reprimanded herself. All day she'd been unsure but all that ended in that single moment. Passion rushed through her at his touch and there was the dream. Okay, so it wasn't exactly like the dream but close enough. She would have loved to be dried like that.

Slowly she got up and wandered to the closet. She didn't know what to wear. Hanging in the back was the pale blue, silk nightgown she once bought to impress a boyfriend. They broke up before she had a chance to try it. Georgia slipped it on over

her head and it shimmered down and fluttered at her ankles. She looked in the mirror. It barely covered her breasts. Hmm. She actually did want to eat his dinner before he devoured her. Georgia threw on a plush blue robe which tied at the waist.

When she entered the living room of her small apartment, he was lighting the candles on the table in the dining room area.

"You look beautiful." He held out the chair for her.

Georgia sat. Everything on the table either shimmered or smelled delectable.

"Shall we dig in?"

They started with the salad and moved on to the spaghetti and meatballs. The sauce lingered on her tongue as she relished the flavor.

"It's wonderful. It tastes so good and without garlic. Who would believe it!"

He smiled. "Thank you." He paused. "What are you doing tomorrow?"

"You mean besides working at Donut Haven in the morning?"

"Yes."

"I'm going to see my uncle to give him his Christmas present."

"Can I go with you?"

She frowned. Her Uncle Mick was the only member of her family left, and she didn't know if she was ready to introduce him to Trevor.

"I'll have to think about it."

He didn't press the issue, but when they finished eating, he started to clear the dishes.

She jumped up. "No, I'll do that. You cooked, so I'll clean up."

"We didn't have dessert yet. I have blueberry and lemon gelato in the freezer."

"We can have it later." She put more dishes in the sink and began to wash.

"I can help you with that."

Georgia chuckled. "Why don't you go in the living room and see what's on TV? I'll be out in a few minutes."

When she came into the living room, Trevor was looking at her family photos on the shelf beside the TV.

"Who's this?" He indicated the photo of a smiling dark-haired couple.

"My mom and dad. They died in a train derailment, so my brother and I went to live with our aunt and uncle."

"You have a brother?"

She showed him another photo. "Jake was killed in Iraq."

Moving down the row of photos, she lifted one showing a silver-haired woman and a bald man. "Here's Grandpa Jake and Grandma Clarice, who lived in Florida. They died a few years apart from cancer." She put it down and held the next photo to her instead of showing it. "After my parents died, Jake and I ended up living here with Uncle Brian and Aunt Saretta." She handed him the photo. "He died in a plane crash. She died last year when a car struck her as she was crossing the street."

"Wow. Your parents. Then your aunt and uncle. A lot of your family members have died in accidents."

She nodded, as that realization struck her for the first time. Georgia had never put all the deaths together before in a continuum. She shivered, and Trevor took her into his arms and held her.

After a minute, she sniffed. "I'm okay." Parting from him, she sat on the sofa and started to change channels, but she couldn't focus on anything. Tears blurred her vision.

"I didn't mean to bring up bad memories."

He hugged her and stroked her hair. Taking the remote control, he put it on the coffee table. Georgia would have protested, but she allowed him to draw her in. His embrace was so comforting.

"Are your parents still alive?"

He moved back to look at her. "Yes, they are." He chuckled. "They live three doors down from me."

"So close?"

"Yes. I chose to stay close to them. I grew up to really like my parents."

"That's wonderful." Georgia smiled up at him. There was a look of anticipation in his eyes. Perhaps he saw the longing in hers.

Trevor kissed her one lip at a time before pressing his mouth firmly against hers. His tongue coaxed her lips apart and conquered her mouth, stroking from the inside. Slowly, they moved down on the sofa.

After countless kisses, he nibbled her throat. His hands were busy untying her robe. His eyes opened wide when the beauty concealed was revealed. The fabric fell away so easily. He gasped before kneading her breasts with both hands. He suckled at one while fondling the nipple of the other.

Georgia was in ecstasy, his every touch and kiss sending her beyond heights of her experience. She reached for any part of his body she could grasp and returned his intensity of touching. This only made him more earnest in his process. When he rubbed his teeth against the curve of one breast, she moaned and lurched.

Then he pulled away and sat up. "We have to talk."

Georgia straightened her nightgown to cover again and pulled her robe closed. Trying to hide the disappointment on her face was another matter.

"Georgia, I'm madly in love with you."

She smiled with relief.

"I want to do the right thing, and I'm afraid you're going to be angry with what I have to say."

Her heart jumped. "Are you married?"

"No."

"You're engaged?"

"Not yet but I'm working on it."

Georgia felt her face go red.

He smiled and took her hands, kissing her knuckles. Then taking a breath to continue, he said, "What I'm going to say—well, it will sound off the wall. I just don't want you to be angry with me."

"I won't be angry."

"Promise?"

She smirked. "Okay. Promise. No matter what it is, we'll work through it."

He took a deep breath and the words rushed out. "We're both supernatural beings. You're a Harmony and I'm a vampire. That man who mugged you was a Shade, a demon bent on eliminating all Harmonies from the world. I suspect that's why you've had so many accidental deaths in your family."

Shock. Bewilderment. Horror. Fury. All this and more collided in Georgia's head. She was dating a nut. "Get out of my house."

He stood and walked out the door before she could blink.

"You promised you wouldn't be angry," he said through the door.

"Go home, Trevor."

Georgia's thoughts railed in anger. How could she have been so taken in? What a ridiculous story? Then she crumbled into tears again. The bad part was she was beginning to think she loved him. He had been so sweet to her. She ached and wept. Trying to use the remote control to find something on TV to take her mind off him was useless. When she tossed the remote back on the coffee table, she saw the cell phone.

Grabbing it, she stalked over and opened the door. He was gone.

Closing the door, she slumped back onto the sofa. Georgia slid the cell phone open. If she opened his address book, she could call his office or his home and leave a message that he'd left his phone here. When she did, Georgia found only one address book contact. It was Trevor, and the number was listed as his cell. What did this mean?

He waited. He paced in the hall. He walked up to the door to knock but then thought better of it. Exhaling defeat, Trevor stomped down the stairs and pushed the door open into the blustery wind. He could have summoned his driver to bring the car by, but the man was home with his wife and children. Snow swirled around him. Few people were on the street. Trevor figured, *Why not just be who I really am?* Ducking into the closest alley, he flew directly up into the sky. He tried to be discreet in accordance with the Arnhem Society's laws that governed all the city's undead.

In mere seconds, he was standing on the steps of his parents' home. The butler admitted him as usual then announced him to his parents in the dining room.

Their dining ritual never ceased to amuse him. Being over a hundred years of age, they both were able to digest human food and ate on a regular schedule. When he entered the room, he found them not seated opposite each other over the distance of a

grand table but next to each other instead. They always positioned themselves in close proximity; they were always touching each other.

"Good evening, Trevor." His mother rose to meet him as he approached, placing a kiss on his cheek.

He went next to his father who hugged him and took his seat on his father's left.

"What's happened now, son?" asked the old man who still looked twenty something.

"She threw me out."

A servant poured blood into Trevor's wine glass. Trevor took a sip, nodded, and then the servant left.

"Did you sleep with the girl?"

"Really, Thomas."

"No, Betsy, if he had slept with her, she would never have thrown him out."

"Why is that, Dad?"

His mother giggled.

"Because making love to your lifemate is a divine experience, far beyond the bliss mortals know. So what happened?"

"We were making progress." He grinned. "But then I felt the right thing to do was to tell her. I mean it's important. She has a Shade after her for God's sake."

"Don't you think it might have been too much for her to process at one time?"

His mother rested her chin in her hand as she listened.

"Maybe."

"Definitely." His father snorted and sipped his drink. His father was always right.

Trevor took a deep drink and closed his eyes for a moment.

"Does she love you?" His mother asked as both leaned toward him.

"She likes me. Probably more than that. If I had shut up, I'd be spending the night."

The servants arrived with dinner. Trevor loved the rich scent of roast beef. After the spread was complete, his father excused the servants from the room.

"Son, you should go back to her."

"No, Thomas, he needs to give her time."

Then the two smiled sweetly at each other. Thomas cut a bite-sized piece of beef and fed it to Betsy. She chewed dutifully but swallowed and smiled seductively. He grinned and winked at her. At times, it was tough being around his parents. You'd think after more than two hundred years of togetherness, they'd cease to be in constant heat.

His mother turned to Trevor. "Are you eating anything?"

"I'm not hungry."

"Give her time. If she's your lifemate, she'll need you sooner or later."

Trevor sipped his drink. His mother was right of course. He had blown it by telling too much too soon. Love was no excuse for rushing. However, with the sheer excitement that stormed through his body every time she was near, he found it difficult to restrain himself.

Buzz. Everyone looked.

"What is that?"

Buzz. Trevor laughed. "It's my cell."

He held it to his ear.

"You left your cell phone here."

"I bought that for you. I was worried that you had no way to call out in case of an emergency."

"Oh." She snuffled. "Trevor, can we talk?"

"Um, could you hold on, please." He put his hand over the phone.

"It's her." His mother beamed.

Trevor nodded and walked out of the room. He took refuge in the library. Leaning against the window, watching the snow dancing in the streetlights, he answered. "Do you want me to come over? I can, if you want me to."

"Um, I'm not sure." He heard hesitation in her voice. "How can you be a vampire if you're out during the day?"

"I was born a vampire. Some literature would call me a day walker."

"Oh."

He heard some sniffing. "Are you crying, Georgia?"

"Were you going to bite me?"

"Not unless you asked me to."

There was silence on the other end. When it finally broke, she whispered, "Maybe you'd better come over."

Trevor restrained himself from cheering. "Um, okay. I'll be there in a few minutes." He put his phone back in his pocket.

When he walked out of the library, he nearly knocked over his parents.

"Well?" his mother asked.

"She wants to see me."

"I told you." His father punched him in the arm. "Well, get going. Don't keep her waiting."

Georgia leapt off her bed and rushed into the bathroom. Her face was a mess from crying. She didn't want him to know how much he affected her. Taking a washcloth, she ran the cold water and then pressed the cloth against her face. How could she possibly believe him? Still, he had subdued her attacker with incredible speed and strength. She had experienced his strength firsthand when he scooped her out of the tub. And there was the part about being allergic to garlic.

The intercom buzzed. "Who is it?"

"Trevor."

"Okay. Come up." She pressed the button to release the door. The bell rang and she jumped. He'd arrived too fast.

When Georgia opened the door, he was not only standing there all handsome in his dark blue suit but he held another bouquet of red roses.

"I'm sorry."

Georgia frowned. "How did you manage to get here so fast. . . and with roses?"

"I think I should tell you inside."

They both stared at each other. A grin spread across her lips. "I guess that's not a myth after all."

"No, it is a myth. I'm only standing here, because I'm polite."

"Oh, come in then."

He walked in and immediately swept her into his arms. She pushed him away. "Not so fast. You have a lot to explain. Sit down."

Trevor took a seat on the sofa. She took the flowers and left for the kitchen.

When Georgia returned she had a little potpourri bowl filled with chopped garlic. She sat in a chair opposite the couch and put the bowl on the coffee table between them.

"Ask anything you want." He sighed and leaned back in his seat.

Georgia frowned and sat on the edge of her chair. "Okay. How did you get those roses in the middle of the night?"

"I know some werewolves that are florists."

"How did you get here so fast?"

"I flew."

"Prove it."

Trevor floated off the sofa and landed behind it. Then he headed for the door.

"What are you doing?" She raced after him.

"Leaving and I won't be back. Obviously, you don't trust me."

"It's not that." She stumbled with her words. "I'm afraid."

"Georgia, the whole world's afraid but that no way to live your life." He put his hand on the doorknob. She put hers over his to stop him.

"Aaaaa!" He pulled his hand away. She had burned him with the garlic left on her hand.

"Oh, no. Quickly into the kitchen." They hurried in and she turned on the cold water. He thrust his hand beneath it. Using the other faucet of the old double sink, she scrubbed her hands hard. "Trevor, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

In a blur, he had her flat down on her back on the table and was on top of her.

"Georgia, if I had wanted to hurt you, I would have done it." He kissed her on the forehead and got off her. She sat up shaken and left to go into the living room. Then

she returned with the bowl and after dumping it into the trash can, washed her hands all over again. He stood over her in silence. When Georgia finished, she turned right into his arms.

She stared up into his eyes. "Is there any way we can start over?"

He smiled. "I would like to."

She walked into the living room but the smell of garlic was overwhelming. After going and opening a window on one side of the room, Georgia stood there trying to decide.

Trevor offered his hand. "It's going to get too cold in here before it airs out." He pulled her into the bedroom and shut the door. Then he pulled a blanket from the chest at the foot of the bed and wrapped it around her. They sat on the bed. Georgia twitched nervously. She felt like she was sixteen and her aunt had caught her with a boy in her bedroom. They didn't do anything but she still felt guilty. Looking into Trevor's gorgeous, green eyes flustered her in all sorts of places.

He sat very comfortably cross-legged. "I'll answer any question I can."

Georgia gulped. "May I see your fangs?"

He smiled and suddenly they were there. "Do you want to touch them?"

She nodded and extended her fingers, touching gingerly at first and then stroking them.

Trevor quivered and moved her hand away.

"I did something wrong?"

"You don't stroke a vampire's fangs unless you want to make wild passionate love."

"Oh." She jerked her hand back. "Good to know." Georgia blushed moving her hand to push back a curl that fell in her face. He was faster and tucked it behind her ear.

"You said I am a supernatural too?"

"You're a human with a supernatural gift. Joy flows from a Harmony to others like a fountain that never stops."

Georgia shook her head. "I'm not always a happy person."

"That has nothing to do with it. You're a giver. Have you ever given something you've made to someone not related to you and seen their reaction?"

Georgia concentrated. "There was my fourth grade teacher. I did this drawing for her. It was just a weird little picture of flying horses but she kept it."

"Her reaction was over the top?"

"Well, it was definitely enthusiastic. A few years back a friend wanted me to go with her to a parent-teacher meeting. It was with this teacher. She'd had the picture framed and hanging in her class. She said it made her happy just to look at it."

Trevor raised an eyebrow. "I'm sure if you think back, you'll find similar incidents. I wouldn't be surprised if everyone suddenly decided the coffee at Donut Haven was the best in the city."

Georgia's mouth fell open. "It's already happened."

"Are you making the coffee?"

She nodded.

"It's what you are that affects them. Unfortunately, it's what you are that has attracted the Shade."

Georgia yawned and lay on the bed. "What exactly is a Shade?"

"It's a kind of demon that destroys Harmonies to defeat the human race.

Harmonies are one of the gifts God gave mankind to help them survive."

"Can I do anything else besides giving joy? Can I throw lightning or disappear?"

"No. Giving joy is a pretty big power."

Hmph. Georgia wasn't sure about that. "Is that why you love me? Are you really attracted to all the joy flowing out of me?" She stretched and yawned again. Rolling over to the nightstand, she spotted the clock. "Oh, no, it's three o'clock. I have to be at work at seven."

"Then go to sleep. We can always continue this tomorrow."

"You can sleep on the sofa."

He got up and left the room but a few minutes later, he was back.

Georgia had slipped out of her robe and was under the covers. "What's wrong?"

"I closed the window because the snow was coming in, and the room still reeks of garlic. Can't I just curl up beside you? I promise I won't try anything."

Exhaustion claimed her power to reason. "Sure."

He stripped down to his boxers and joined her in bed. Georgia had wanted this but not exactly the way it turned out. Trevor wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close.

"Un un," she protested. "Too close."

"I'm cold."

"Vampires don't get cold. They're the undead."

"I was born a vampire, so I can get cold."

"Yeah, right. I don't understand that. Tell me tomorrow." She closed her eyes and snuggled against him. Did he just kiss her on the head? No matter. Georgia couldn't stay awake another minute, not even with a sexy vampire in her bed.

Trevor opened his eyes. Georgia was still asleep only facing him. He inhaled her sweet, delicious scent and ached for her for a reason beyond blood. His fangs had protracted as he slept. Normal for a vampire. His state of arousal wasn't. Having had sex over the years with human women, his sexual interest awakened enough to accomplish the task. Now everything was different. With sweet Georgia in his arms, desire burned through his every extremity. He needed her desperately and he never needed any woman like that before.

The new cell phone on the nightstand rang. Georgia in her sleep reached out and took it.

"Hello," she squeaked. "This is who . . . Bart . . . Bart who?" She nodded. "You won't need me this morning . . . Got it . . . There's a blizzard?" She tried to open her eyes but yawned instead. "Okay, got it. Bye."

Trevor chuckled with amusement.

She put the phone back on the nightstand, then turned to face him with blinking eyes. "What are you laughing at?"

"You're adorable when you're half asleep."

"Your fangs are showing." She woke up a little more.

"They show when I'm sleepy."

"Oh." She rolled over. Then she rolled back. "Thank you for the cell phone, but I don't know how I'm going to pay for it."

"Don't worry about that."

Before he knew what was happening, she pulled him against her and kissed him. Trevor loved her taste, like cherries, ripe and tender. He wanted her but held back. Georgia didn't. Then she pulled back from him abruptly.

"How did Bart have my number?"

"I called and gave it to him."

"Why did you do that?"

"In case of emergency."

"Like the blizzard."

"Exactly." This time he kissed her, pushing her lips apart with his tongue.

She moaned relaxing against him. Then she pushed him back again.

"Why are you with me?"

"I love you, Georgia."

"This is happening way too fast."

"I won't do anything you don't want." He felt he had to say that.

She smiled but her hands that rested on his chest trembled. "When did you first know that you loved me?"

"The instant I saw you I knew. But it wasn't until I was standing behind you as you gazed in the shop window, that I realized you were a Harmony. Knowing that, I am sworn to protect you."

She looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"The Arnhem Knights are part of a secret society of vampires that began when New York was New Amsterdam. I have sworn to prevent vampires from killing humans and to protect the supernaturals of the city."

"Being in my bed is part of your mission?"

He caressed her cheek; his fingers lingered in her hair. "No, Georgia. Why is it so hard for you to believe that I love you?"

It was incredibly hard for him to read her face at that moment. Normally reading a human was easy, but he had to remind himself that she was a gifted human. Then again perhaps his own emotional expectations stood in the way. He had no idea what she was thinking, but he knew once they made love that would change. As lifemates, they'd have that connection. If she would allow him to . . .

"If we made love, would you have to bite me?"

"No." But if he did, it would strengthen their bond.

She hugged him, burying her face in his chest. "I really wish I could right now, but I'm just not ready."

Argh.

"I'll go make coffee." Cheerfully, she hopped out of bed and left for the kitchen.

It's happened again. I keep screwing this up. The worst thing about it was that this time, he couldn't figure out how he'd done it.

Trevor slipped out of bed and went into the bathroom. He gazed at his unhappy reflection, one of the perks of being born a vampire, and turned on the shower. Normally a cold shower would be in order, but instead he allowed the hot water to wash over him. She had lavender body wash on the little tiled shelf. After squirting a little in his hand, he lathered up. The fragrance really was relaxing.

Georgia walked in. "I've brought you some towels."

He reached out and pulled her into the shower with him. The hot rain poured over her making the pale blue nightgown translucent. Pulling her to him, he possessed

her lips. She didn't push him away. One arm reached around his back, while the other reached up, her fingers tangled in his hair. As the kiss grew more passionate, their tongues battled for supremacy. Trevor acquiesced to her and was rewarded when her tongue stroked his fangs.

He pushed away breathless. With his hands against her shoulders, he asked, "Do you always wear diaphanous gowns to bed?"

She shook her head no.

"You wore this for me?"

She nodded.

"Georgia, do you want me to make love to you?"

She bit her lower lip and looked up at him. Then the words came out in a mad rush. "Yes. Yes. Yes."

Elated, Trevor pressed her to him in a kiss. He slipped the wet gown off her shoulders and kissed, licked, and suckled every part of her body.

Georgia closed her eyes, throwing her head back in enjoyment. Every place that he touched sparked with excitement.

As his lips reached her waist, she giggled.

"Ticklish, huh?"

He nibbled her and she laughed uncontrollably. Trevor continued pressing his mouth against her skin and teasing with his tongue all the sensitive spots that gave the best reaction. Georgia shook all over with giggle fits.

Then he lifted her slightly pushing her back against the tiled wall. For a second, she was riding on his thigh. After he lifted her higher, she wrapped her legs around his

waist. The hot, steamy water beat down on them. Trevor positioned his shaft, and she felt that instant of excitement as they stared at each other. After the next move, there was no going back.

Georgia gazed into those brilliant, green eyes intently looking back.

The phone rang.

She turned her head, and he nuzzled her neck.

"Let it ring," he growled.

Georgia turned back to face him.

She pushed down and he slid into her. Trevor's lips caressed her.

In that moment of joining, she thought she heard a voice in her head say, "Finally mine." His voice.

Georgia shook her head in disbelief.

Moving in an orchestrated pushing and pulling, giving and taking, he embraced her so tightly it was hard to discern where he ended and she began. His kiss on her mouth was all consuming passion. In a frenzy, his movement heightened.

In the midst of wave after wave of thunderous pleasure, he whispered, "Is something wrong, my love?"

"Don't stop," she breathed. "Oh, God." She pulled his hair, her body trembling. He lurched back then forward into her.

They peaked together. If Georgia had been standing, her legs would have buckled. As it was, she marveled how he kept her in a tight hold and leaned forward to turn off the shower.

Every time Georgia opened her eyes, something changed. First, he wrapped them in towels. She closed her eyes. When she opened them, they were in bed and she had no idea how they got there. Trevor was on top, still inside her.

"Honey." His lips brushed hers. "You keep blinking in and out. Are you back?"

Georgia smiled. "I think so. You are so warm. Aren't vampires always cold?"

"They are, even the born ones." He kissed her cheek. "But to our lifemates we are warm to the touch."

Before she could ask what a lifemate was, his mouth closed over hers in a fiery kiss. Everywhere Trevor's fingers rubbed and fondled sent her into spasms of delight. He rocked back and forth igniting her core. The release came fast and fierce, leaving her unable to move a muscle but elated. He shouted her name then collapsed and took her with him when he rolled on his side. Trevor gently planted kiss after kiss on her face, so many she lost count and fell asleep.

Oh, such a wonderful sleep. Georgia stretched and yawned, opening her eyes to meet Trevor's smile. He stroked her cheek.

"Good morning, sweetheart."

She grinned and moved to get up.

"Where are you going?"

"To check my phone. Someone called, remember?"

He grabbed her by the foot and playfully pulled her back into bed. "Oh, don't do that, Georgia."

Giggling, she reached for him. "You'd be happy if we stayed in bed all day making love, wouldn't you?"

"Absolutely." He ran his hand lovingly, slowly from her shoulder to her thigh.

"Sounds great to me. Besides the city's been shut down by a blizzard." He clicked the remote and the small TV on the dresser flashed to life.

"The brunt of the storm has moved northeast," said the meteorologist.

Georgia picked up the cell phone and after pressing buttons found the message.

"Um, Georgia, hate to disturb you and I know I gave you the day off, but if you could find it in your heart . . . Beep." She walked over to the window. Sure enough, the lights of Donut Haven were on. The snow fell lightly now, and the plows were cleaning the streets.

She hurried to put on her clothes. "Bart needs my help at the store. You're free to stay here."

He rushed to dress. "I'm going with you."

Georgia didn't want to argue. In all honesty, she felt better having Trevor there. Nothing like having a big, strong, sexy vampire as a bodyguard. The last thing she did before walking out the door was put the cell phone in her pocket and hold out her arms as Trevor slipped the fur coat on her.

They trudged across the slippery street. Trevor kept one arm firmly around her waist. Under the other arm he held the package Georgia intended on giving her uncle after work.

Tires squealed. Georgia found herself on the sidewalk with Trevor. Two cars smashed into each other, and she knew seconds before she'd been in the middle of the street. Shaking, she continued the rest of the way to Donut Haven with Trevor glued to her side.

Georgia was amazed when she opened the door to the shop and found it crowded. Several regulars shouted her name in greeting. Before she reached the counter, they were already giving their orders.

"Make mine extra creamy, Georgia," said one woman.

"I'm so glad you're here." Bart was clearly overwhelmed with business. "Please, make the coffee." He reached over the counter to shake hands with Trevor. "So you're the boyfriend."

"Fiancé."

The crowd cheered. Several customers shook Trevor's hand. Georgia frowned at him. She'd definitely have a word with him later, but for now the store was buzzing with customers clamoring for their coffee.

Trevor watched the faces of each customer, as they sipped their coffees then smiled and sighed. Yes, this was the work of a Harmony. They'd be cheerful all day long and not know why.

Hours went by before she stopped over at the table where he was reading the paper. She handed him a coffee. He took a sip and laughed. The flavor was definitely enhanced by her special gift. "Mmm, definitely Harmony made."

After sitting down, she leaned over to him. "Why did you tell everyone you're my fiancé?"

Trevor leaned toward her. "Because at the right moment I'm going to ask you to marry me."

She laughed at his unbelievable straightforwardness. "Aren't you supposed to ask first before announcing it?"

"I'm not a slave to social restrictions." He took another sip.

"I see."

"Actually if you look at things that way, then you're obligated to marry me?"

"And how is that?" She propped up her smirk-wearing face in her hands.

"In another age, you'd have to make an honest man out of me for what we've done."

Georgia laughed so hard, she slipped off the chair. Trevor was on the spot to help her to her feet. He kissed her.

"Mmm, you taste like Mocha Latta." She giggled because his hands were traveling.

He chuckled. "You taste like Apple Cinnamon Crumble." Then he whispered, "Oh, come on, please, crumble for me."

She pushed him away laughing and returned to work.

It was nearly two in the afternoon when the other staff arrived, and Bart let her go for the day. Trevor helped her with her coat and took the package. Georgia noticed how close he held her, as they exited Donut Haven.

His car waited at the curb. Keith remained in the car and Trevor rushed them inside. She slid into the middle with Trevor right beside her, his arm already around her. As soon as the door shut, the car pulled into traffic.

She was about to ask . . .

"In case, you haven't noticed two Shades were after you this morning."

"Two Shades? Did the mugger get out of jail and call for demon backup or something?"

"Not exactly and sort of."

"Shades don't have corporeal bodies. They will temporarily possess the weak-minded to do their dirty work. If the human they possess is incarcerated or killed, they simply float out looking for another victim to control."

"I didn't realize." Georgia hugged herself trying to keep the fear in.

Trevor kissed her. "I'm here. If it gets worse, I'll call in help."

"From the Arnhem Knights?"

He nodded.

Georgia watched the scenery change as they entered the countryside of New Jersey. Another exit and she could feel her uncle's presence. She always felt him long before she saw him. Thinking about Uncle Mick always made her smile then laugh. Actually her uncle had that effect on everyone who met him. So . . . he's a Harmony, too.

When they pulled up to Woodside Manor Convalescent, Keith got out of the car and opened the door. Trevor helped Georgia out. He kept her hand as they went inside. Georgia knew the way to her uncle's room. His health began to fail last year after a bout of pneumonia.

She knocked on the door of Room 118.

"Come in." Georgia loved that cheerful voice on the other side.

Pushing the door slowly open, she found her uncle sitting in a chair reading the newspaper with his feet propped up on a footstool.

Immediately he leapt to his feet and hugged Georgia. "Well, if it isn't my favorite person in the world!"

She giggled. "If it isn't my favorite uncle!"

Obviously this verbal exchange was a time honored family ritual. The older man had Georgia's eyes and there was a definite family resemblance around the smile. His brown hair had thinned and grayed but still curled like Georgia's. Trevor stood in the background smiling, while holding the package.

Then her uncle stepped back from Georgia and eyed Trevor suspiciously.

Georgia reached for Trevor's hand. "Uncle Mick, this is my boyfriend, um, fiancé Trevor Stenwood."

"Really?" As soon as Georgia released his hand, Mick shook it vigorously. "Good to meet you, Trevor?"

"Mr. Blake."

"Please, call me Mick. Have a seat." He indicated the several chairs spread about the room. Trevor pulled two closer and the couple sat down.

"Oh." Georgia took the package from Trevor. "Merry Christmas, Uncle Mick." She handed it to him.

He gripped the box covered in brown paper and held it to him. Wiping a tear from his eye, he smiled gazing at her. "She sees me every week," he said to Trevor. "She never forgets me." Then he tore off the wrapping revealing the festive blue and silver snowflake paper beneath. He ripped that off and found candy striped paper. Mick laughed. "Oh, Georgia." Turning to Trevor, he winked, "Yes, you're getting yourself a handful. There's never telling what she's up to."

After ripping off that paper, he got to the box and opened it. "Yes!" He shouted, as he pulled out the leather bomber's jacket with the fur collar. "This is great." He stood

up and modeled the jacket for them proudly. Then he turned and hugged Georgia.

"Thank you, sweetie."

Someone knocked on the door. "Mick, time for your medication."

"Come on in, honey."

A fiftyish woman with curly red hair giggled, as she came into the room. She took a small cup containing a pill from her tray and handed it to him with a glass of water.

"This is Della. Isn't she a pip? She has the prettiest, curly hair in three states."

He took the pill and drank the water. The woman tittered like a teenager. Then she turned to Georgia. "He has an infection that's clearing up. Not anything to worry about."

"Della, this is my niece's fiancé, Trevor Stenwood."

"Pleased to meet you. I'll just leave you alone now to visit." The cheerful woman walked to the door.

"Oh, Della, parting is such sweet sorrow."

"Oh, Mick." She giggled before leaving.

When the door was shut, Mick turned toward Georgia with a more serious expression. "You two bring your chairs close. I'm running out of time and I've something to give you."

The three pulled their chairs closer.

"What do you mean you're running out of time?"

"I feel my time ending and there's a lot to say. Georgia, our family is different. We're . . . "

"Harmonies?"

"You knew?"

She glanced sideways at Trevor. "You could say I figured it out."

"When I was young, I was a merchant seaman and traveled the world.

Harmonies are always in danger from Shades, the demons determined to destroy us. I had too many near misses not to take it seriously. When I was in Bora Bora, I visited a witch doctor who knew exactly what I was the moment he saw me. He told me that Harmonies are treasures in the world and to protect me, he gave me this ring."

Trevor noticed that the ring was gold and engraved with a sunburst.

"He said it was an ancient shield. I thanked him, of course, but was skeptical. When I came back, I watched as my family died in strange accidents. Nothing has ever touched me, since I put on this ring."

He took it off and handed it to Georgia.

"I couldn't possibly."

"Yes, you can. It's my last Christmas gift to you."

Georgia looked at him with tears in her eyes. "What's going to happen to you?"

"I'm moving on, happy in the knowledge that I've secured future generations of Harmonies through you." He kissed her on the forehead. "Trevor, a word." He walked toward the window, and Trevor followed.

"You're a vampire." He stated it as fact not a question.

"Yes, sir."

"I don't know if the power of the shield is limited. When the witch doctor was young, he received the ring as a gift for helping one of your kind. Perhaps you can research its origins."

"Is that what you want me to do?"

"No, I want you to give me your word that you will protect Georgia."

"I will."

"Good. Maybe I'll live long enough to come to your wedding." The man laughed.

Georgia put the ring on her forefinger, as Trevor walked back to her.

"You should leave now." Mick hugged them and wished them a Merry Christmas.

Georgia shook her head.

"No, sweetie, don't do that." He wiped her tears with his hand. "Call me later."

She nodded and Trevor took her hand and led her out.

All the way back to the city, she kept her head buried in his chest. Georgia was terrified by what her uncle had done. She couldn't stop crying.

Georgia raised her head to look at Trevor. "Can't you hypnotize me or something so I won't feel so horrible?"

"It won't work on you because you're my lifemate." He stroked her hair.

The cell phone rang in his pocket. He flipped it open to answer.

"Yes." Then he smiled, listening attentively. "Thank you. We'll be there." He closed the phone. "Kevin, the Temple Grill."

"Yes, sir."

"What's happening?"

He kissed her softly on the cheek. "Some friends of mine have invited us to dinner. I hope you don't mind that I took the liberty of accepting. It might cheer you up."

A weak smile spread across her face. "Okay."

When they arrived at the restaurant, the maître d' nodded at Trevor and escorted them to a private room in the back.

His friends were already there. The man, who rose to shake Trevor's hand, was tall and dark haired. His eyes were deep, dark pools into another world. He was good looking, but then again so was Trevor. Still David was disturbingly handsome, in a dark alley in turn of the century London sort of way. Maybe all vampires were devastatingly handsome with that undercurrent of danger. The woman by his side was fair, blonde, and blue-eyed. Her smile was gentle and so angelic. A man would die for such a beauty. She wondered how many had.

"Georgia, this is my friend David Hilliard and his mate Laura Cordelais."

David took her hand and kissed it. "Please, join us for dinner."

Georgia looked from one to the other and the words just fell out of her mouth.

"I'm not the dinner I hope."

David and Laura laughed and the four sat down. Trevor was right next to her, and Georgia held his hand under the table.

The waiter arrived and she noticed that he poured something red into their wine glasses then turned to Trevor. "May I take your orders, sir?"

"Please, give us a few minutes."

He left.

"It's lovely to meet you." Laura smiled and tilted her head. Georgia felt examined.

"Same here." Then Georgia caught herself. "I mean it's great meeting you, too. Are you both Arnhem Knights?"

"You certainly are direct." David glanced at Trevor.

"Well, I figure Trevor called you in to back him up, since I was nearly killed again this morning."

David nodded.

The waiter knocked on the door.

"Come in," said David.

"Are you ready with your orders, sir?"

"We'll have the usual. Trev?"

Georgia asked, "What's your soup of the day?"

"New England Clam Chowder."

"I'll have that with a ginger ale," she said.

"I'll have the same with a blood."

"Very good, sir." The waiter left closing the door, plunging them into privacy once more.

Trevor put his arm around Georgia. "Aren't you feeling well? Ginger ale and soup is a sick person's meal."

She leaned against him. "I feel sick over leaving Uncle Mick like that."

"He told us to go."

"I don't care."

"If you give me his location, I'll send a team to protect him," David intervened.

They both looked at him.

Georgia was about to say something when her cell phone rang. She held it to her ear. "Yes?"

"Ms. Blake, this is Dr. Marsden from Woodside Manor. I'm sorry to have to tell you that your uncle has died."

Tears slipped down her cheeks. "How?"

"I don't know what to say. He slipped and fell. Our medical staff rushed to his aid, but he was already dead."

The phone fell from her hand, as Georgia rushed from the table. In the hallway, she nearly knocked into the waiter.

"Where's the ladies' room?"

He pointed and she ran in that direction. Entering, Georgia took a stall and leaned against the wall and cried.

"Georgia," called a soft feminine voice. "Georgia, it's me Laura. I'm right here for you. Take whatever time you need."

Georgia took her time. She loved visiting Uncle Mick. They usually played cards or watched movies. He would tell her stories about her dad when he was a kid. Just seeing him made her happy. Ah, yes, all because he was a Harmony. Or maybe it was because he was her uncle and she loved him.

She wasn't wearing a watch so she didn't know how much time had passed and Laura didn't interrupt her. When Georgia came out of the stall, the vampiress had a compact open and was fixing her lipstick. Georgia noticed that Laura didn't have a reflection in the restroom mirror.

"How can you do your lipstick without seeing yourself?"

Laura smiled. She turned so Georgia could see the little mirror in the compact and the reflection. "This mirror is made by a vampire inventor Sydney Lucente. I've several of his 'special' mirrors in my house."

"That's amazing." For a few seconds, that mirror took her away from everything then grief crashed in on her again. She sniffled and opened her bag to repair her makeup.

"I'm very sorry about your uncle."

"Thank you. I don't know much about real vampires, only the ones in the movies. Do you grieve when you lose someone?"

"Terribly." Laura put one hand on Georgia's shoulder. "We're not all devoid of human emotions, especially those of us that are newly made."

"How long have you been a vampire?"

"About a year and a half."

"How long have you been with David?"

Laura smiled. "About a year and a half. David made me a vampire."

"Does it hurt?"

"I couldn't tell you that. I was dying at the time. I jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge in grief over my mother's death and the cascading misfortunes that rapidly followed."

"Whoa," said Georgia. "I guess you do grieve terribly."

"Why did you want to know if it hurts? Are you thinking of becoming a vampire because you love Trevor?"

"I was thinking about it."

"Now that is something." A grin spread across Laura's face. "To become a vampire for love. Whoa."

Georgia narrowed her eyes at Laura. She was going to take a chance. "Laura, may I ask you a personal question?"

"Yes. For the woman who would become a vampire for love, you may ask me anything."

"How did you know David was the right one for you?"

Laura's lips pursed in concentration. "Well, lifemates aren't cold to the touch. They're warm. When you look at him, do you get the uncontrollable urge to tear off his clothes and . . ."

Georgia burst into laughter. "All the time. It's like he's a drug and I can't get enough of him. That has to be bad."

"Or very good." Laura's fangs shimmered. "See. Even talking about it calls the fangs out. The vampiress closed her eyes a moment and the fangs retracted. "I try to practice restraint. After all, I don't want David to get a swelled head, but. . . he does make it hard."

The two giggled, then Georgia grew serious. "But everything you've said so far is really sexual attraction. How were you sure about David? How did you know?"

Laura sat down in a pink chair by the wall mirrors. She cast no reflection. "I was very unsure of David, and he had a notorious past with women. We almost split up because of it." She sighed as if talking about it still hurt. "He took me to New Orleans where my family's from thinking it would help, but instead it caused all kinds of trouble. That's a story for another time, when you come over for dinner." She paused, as if to collect her thoughts. Looking straight into Georgia's eyes, she said, "The man fought demons for me. He even freed me to find my happiness." A salt water tear streamed down her face. "Then I found a hole in my heart, where David should have been." Her sadness faded into a smile. "That's how I knew."

Laura stood and put her hand on Georgia's shoulder. "I know some people say love enslaves. But when it's the right person, love frees. If it wasn't for David, I would never have realized my Telkhine powers."

A puzzled look crossed Georgia's face. "What's a Telkhine?"

"I can control the weather, including lightning."

"Whoa, now that's what I call a power. I can only bring joy to others."

Laura chuckled, "Don't you see? That's the best power of all."

Georgia considered that she'd have to think about that.

"Oh, oh. The guys are wondering what we're doing now. David's just made the rude remark about us falling in. We'd better go."

Georgia laughed. Then she cried again and Laura hugged her. After a minute or two, she straightened up. "I do have to call the convalescent home and make arrangements for my uncle."

"I believe Trevor was taking care of that for you when I left."

Georgia nodded, and the two left the restroom and returned to the private dining room. Trevor stood up so she could slip back into her seat.

He put his arm back around her. "Are you feeling any better?"

"Not really and sort of."

He kissed her.

"How about now?"

She smiled a little. "I think you're going to have to do that a lot to make me feel better."

"I don't mind at all."

The two vampires opposite them wore broad grins.

Georgia frowned. "Laura, can vampires read minds?"

"Yes, it takes practice though."

"So David knows whatever I told you, and so does Trev?"

Trevor kissed Georgia on the nose. "I won't know it unless you want me to know it."

She shook her head laughing. "And what won't you know?"

"That you love me."

A knock at the door announced the waiter, who was promptly admitted and served the food. Georgia would have to get used to this new world, new way of doing things, and even thinking. As she took small spoonfuls of soup, she thought of Uncle Mick and how he loved clam chowder with oyster crackers. Trevor's hand immediately stroked her hair, as if he could relieve some of her pain. She smiled at him.

"Thank you."

"What for?"

"For making the arrangements for my uncle."

"You're welcome. I've put off the funeral until the week after Christmas. I hope you don't mind."

"No, that's okay. You know with everything that's happened, I still have Christmas shopping to do."

"Me, too," piped up Laura. "Do you want to go together? The four of us? It will be so much fun."

Georgia saw David and Trevor roll their eyes, but then immediately nod their heads like bobbleheads.

David leaned over and kissed Laura's cheek. Her fangs were showing.

"You'd better say that," she joked. "So after we leave here, which should it be? Macy's or Bloomingdale's?"

"Macy's." Georgia felt more and more comfortable with Laura with each passing moment. As she finished her soup, she wondered if it was like her feelings about Trevor. First he was a potential stalker, then an admirer, then a scary vampire, until she got to know more about him and now her fiancé. Though there was still one more thing. He hadn't asked her yet.

"I'm waiting for the right time," he added.

David and Laura burst into laughter.

When they got out of the car in front of Macy's, Laura took her arm and whispered in her ear. "So do I know who you're shopping for?"

Georgia giggled. "Read my mind."

The guys were following close behind until they got into the store then the distance grew a bit. Still when Georgia turned around, she could see Trevor several aisles down turning to look at her. She smiled then ducked.

"Have you decided what you want to get him?"

"I don't know. He's rich, so he probably has everything. A sweater maybe, green to match his eyes."

Laura pulled her into the men's department. They looked at different cardigans. Georgia was uncertain as to size, so Laura mindtalked with David and found out. That's when Georgia learned that lifemates could speak to each other's minds, hear their thoughts and feelings.

"Oh." Her eyes widened when the light of the matter hit her. Then her eyes narrowed.

"What's wrong?"

"When . . . I mean I heard what Trevor was thinking last night."

Laura laughed. "You know when you pause like that and leave stuff out, I hear it anyway. I'll have to try extra hard not to hear your thoughts."

"I thought only lifemates could hear each other."

"Vampires can hear each other and most of the human world. Believe me it's not that exciting, but it does clue you in fast when there's danger."

Georgia laughed when she thought about what Laura heard. "What is the deal with the word 'mine'?"

Laura grinned and leaned back against a display. "Oh, the 'finally mine' deal, or the 'you're mine'. Yeah, it's a male trait."

"You mean with vampires?"

"No, with all males. Only human males are smart enough to keep it to themselves."

Laura and Georgia burst into hysterical laughter. Before she knew it, David was nibbling on her friend's neck.

"My beloved, what are you up to? I couldn't hear you."

Georgia knew what he meant, and she quickly pushed her chosen cardigan under a stack.

"Nothing." Laura grinned all over the place.

"Ah, nothing. Trevor, always beware of women up to nothing."

Trevor was behind Georgia so fast it took her breath away. "So what were you buying?"

"Not any of your business." Georgia was glad she wasn't thinking of *the steamship, Pop Tart, whistle, monkey.*

Trevor looked confused evidently because he was reading her. Once he was further away, she'd have more freedom *in bubble bath, trains, teapots.*

Trevor laughed and kissed her on the cheek. "I'm going over to sporting goods. Shout if you need us."

The guys left, and Laura turned to Georgia. "What did you do? I missed it."

"I thought nonsense words when Trevor was reading my mind." She pulled his future cardigan from the stack beside her.

"Oh, no." Laura couldn't stop laughing. "You catch on quick."

"I need to know more. He can read my mind because. . . why, just because I'm human?"

"Well, yes, but your thoughts are clearer because you have a sex bond."

"So you're saying because we've been intimate, he can get more in my head."

Laura nodded. "And if he bites you, he'll know where you are even if you're halfway around the world."

"What if I bite him?"

"I don't know."

"Have you bitten David?"

"I've had his blood, since that's part of the transformation, but I haven't bitten him or anyone else. I just prefer not to bite. Come on, we've got more to get and it's getting late."

Georgia stopped walking in the jewelry department. There was a man's ID bracelet in the display. "I want to get that only if it can be engraved while we wait."

"What do you want engraved on it?" Laura asked, although she was already giggling.

"Mine." Georgia was so nonchalant; it made the idea funnier. The two moved on. "Laura, will I lose my power if I become a vampire."

"David and I went into the library to research your kind when Trevor called us. As far as I know, you won't. But the world's an unpredictable place. We do know the Shades won't bother you, once you are a vampire."

"Why?"

"They feel the undead to be worthless with no lasting effect on the human race. You're a target because they can sense that living beating heart of yours overflowing with joy and spreading it out into the world like sunlight."

Georgia sighed.

"Has a Harmony ever become a vampire before?"

"We're still researching that. Come on, we have to hurry and finish before the store closes."

Georgia checked out with the cardigan, slippers, and a copy of DRACULA. They were wrapped and back in her bag before Trevor arrived with David.

Walking out into the moonlight, the two couples were like all couples on December 23rd, filled with the excitement of coming romance. The snow glistened and reflected back all the shimmering lights and colors making the city look enchanted.

Laura hugged Trevor and kissed Georgia on the cheek. David did the same, and then the two went into a waiting cab. Right behind it was Trevor's car. Keith waited with the opened door. Georgia got in, then Trevor, and they were off.

She'd had an interesting, horrifying, sad, and wonderful day all in one. As Georgia reviewed the day's events, Trevor's arm tightened around her and he kissed her head.

"Georgia, I want to talk to you about something when we get back to your place."

She looked up into his face. "I have something I need to talk to you about, too."

When they got to the apartment, Trevor opened the large box he had been carrying. It was a tree and together they sat down to figure out the directions.

"Why do they always have to write these in Japanese?" He threw down the paper in frustration.

"You're telling me that you can't read Japanese?"

"Why did you think I could?"

"You're a vampire."

He tugged on her hair playfully. "Laura's been a bad influence on you."

"I think she's great."

"Here hold this." He handed her the trunk where all the pieces had to stick into.

After an hour, they had all the boughs sticking in the right places and then put on all the ornaments Trevor bought. Then the lights were tested and the presents went under the tree.

"I have to admit it does look beautiful."

"Almost," said Trevor. He placed her directly in front of the tree. "Now it looks gorgeous."

She laughed and he swept her up into his arms. "It's time for a late dinner and then bed." His lips found all the places on her neck that sent her mind reeling with rapturous thoughts. "I'm really looking forward to bed."

"You know I'm not really hungry at all."

"Yes!" Excitedly, he scooped her up and carried her into the bedroom, placing her gently on the bed. But then he remained with his arms around her, kissing every visible inch of skin and unbuttoning her blouse.

She put her hand on his to stop him.

"First, we talk."

He frowned and sat up.

"You want to say something to me?" she reminded him.

"You go first."

"Okay, does it hurt to become a vampire?"

"Yes, it hurts a lot from what I've been told. Why do you want to be a vampire?"

"Well." She bit her lower lip. "There's a chance I can keep my Harmony power and the Shades won't bother me."

"That seems reasonable, but it is a drastic act. I'm sure we can protect you without resorting to that, besides the ring protected your uncle for many years successfully. There's no reason to think it won't protect you."

"I have another reason."

He tilted his head, looking at her.

She felt him withdraw from her thoughts leaving them private. "I love you, Trevor, and I want to become a vampire just like you."

A wave of immense happiness spread across his face. "Aw, Georgia, I love you so much. But I don't want to take your life when it isn't necessary. We can live very happily together without you becoming a vampire." He moved her so he could gaze down at her, his fingers playing with the curls in her hair. "If I made you a vampire, you wouldn't be like me. You'd be dead or undead as the world calls it. You'll sleep during the day and can't go out, unless you are completely covered. You would be restricted to a diet of blood for the first one hundred years." He kissed her. "I love that you would want to change for me, but I don't want you to die. I don't know that you'd be happy that way."

His fangs were down and they weren't the only part of his body that was excited. He grinned as he picked up her thoughts, which she was practically shouting to him in her mind.

I want you. Are you listening?

Absolutely.

He unbuttoned her very fast. She had trouble unzipping him so he helped. In the blur of flying clothes that followed, they got under the covers.

"Trevor?"

"Yes, sweetheart." It came out as a mutter as his mouth was enjoying her breast.

"Would you bite me tonight?"

He leaned back on his elbows and stared down at her with concern like a cloud on his face. "Why, Georgia?"

"In case something bad happens, and we get separated, I want you to be able to find me."

"I would tear the world apart, if we got separated, Georgia."

She was more than ready to spend her life with him. "So you'll bite me?"

He nodded.

"Just don't tell me beforehand, okay?"

"Okay."

Now he went slower, every touch determined to get a reaction whether it be a sigh or whimper. Georgia reached for him and fondled him, teasingly, tenderly. His mouth consumed her one inch at a time. She stroked him, her thumb and fingers in concert gently, soft like a feather over him. He moaned.

"Georgia," he shouted as he moved suddenly out of her reach then entered her. Now there was no such thing as slow. He wanted her pressed like glue, his body to hers. He kneaded every muscle in her body pushing her to new limits. She returned the compliment over and over, sorry to have lost the one plaything that drove him crazy, Georgia searched for any vulnerable spot, nipping there, caressing here.

She pressed hard against him. He kissed her and drove them both into a frantic race for bliss. Georgia was beyond breathing; each pant was desperate, hungry, then . . . like a million stars behind her eyelids, she felt the peak and fell into somewhere dark, warm, and wonderfully embracing.

His fangs pierced one breast. She felt him suck her nipple and there was a twinge, but she was too numb with pleasure to mind. He licked her then moved again to kiss her, to command her lips, but he didn't possess her mouth this time. She claimed him and Trevor shivered all over.

Georgia heard it in her mind. *I worship my goddess. I am yours. Always.*

Smiling, she struggled to open her eyes. "Wasn't there something you wanted to tell me?" Georgia blinked but her eyes were not seeing and her body was asleep.

He smiled then kissed her again. "Tomorrow, sweetheart. We have tomorrow."

Relaxing back into the dreamy paradise, she embraced her lover and surrendered to sleep pillowed by a million soft kisses and whispers of love.

Smoke.

"Georgia, wake up! Georgia, now!"

Trevor shook her. She threw open her eyes. Where was the smoke coming from? She leapt out of the bed.

He threw on some clothes. She did the same and grabbed the mink coat off the chair, her purse and her portfolio in the corner.

Trevor's hands were on the door. She reached to open it and he stopped her. "No. The fire's out there." He rushed to the window.

"It was painted shut last summer by the contractor."

"That's crazy." He picked up a chair and threw it through the glass window. Then he grabbed Georgia and climbed out onto the fire escape. Taking her into his arms, he leapt to the ground. She was shaking. It was snowing again and she stood barefoot in the alleyway.

They looked up. People screamed, beating on windows in the rooms above them.

"Trev, you must help them."

"I can't leave you alone. It's too dangerous."

"I'll stay right here and wait. Please, go help them."

Trevor leapt up the fire escape, bashing windows as he climbed. People carried out children and pets and precious things. "Get out now," he shouted as they scrambled out and past him.

The first and second floors were totally engulfed.

Georgia didn't want to move. A man dressed in a yellow jacket with reflective strips came over to her.

"You can't stay here. You're too close to the building. Come over here."

Reluctantly, she followed him, the whole time keeping her eyes on Trevor as he helped her neighbors. He led her across the street behind some trucks.

Then he pulled out a knife. She screamed but the sound was lost in the sirens wailing. She tried to get past him and run back across the street. He rushed at her and she ran down the alley. It turned into a wall and in the cold gloom, Georgia turned to face her attacker. His knife shimmered then plunged, stopping inches from her chest.

A sick expression twisted the man's face. He stabbed again and again, each time stopped by some invisible field that surrounded her. She pushed him and he fell into the opposite wall. Screaming he rushed at her. She raised her fists to defend herself. Georgia roundhouse kicked him into a clutch of garbage cans. But he leapt to his feet and came at her again.

The vampire crunched down on the man from a height. He lay in the alley like a broken toy. The knife shimmered in the garbage.

"Are you hurt?" Trevor examined her quickly, looking for any cuts.

"No. He couldn't hurt me." Looking down at the ring on her right hand, she said, "It's the ring. It works."

"Let's get you out of here, before more Shades show up. I knew I shouldn't have left you."

Mindful that she had no shoes, Trevor carried her. The Red Cross had set up a station and was wrapping people in coats and blankets.

"Do you have any shoes or boots?" he asked.

Georgia shivered uncontrollably. She didn't know if it was fear or shock setting in or the fact that she was barefoot. He rubbed her feet while the woman went through some boxes in the back of the truck. She handed him a pair of boots. Georgia put them on. They were too big but fluffly and warm.

"Where's Mrs. Polasky?" Georgia asked a neighbor.

"Who's that?" asked a police officer that was writing down information.

"She's our landlady. She lives on the first floor."

One of the firemen shook his head.

"No one's come out of the first floor. Maybe she wasn't home. Do you know if she had any friends she'd visit?"

"I didn't know her that well." Georgia trembled.

"I'm so sorry this has happened to you."

Georgia turned to find Bart. "Yeah."

"Bart, I'm taking Georgia to live with me."

He nodded. "So I guess you won't be able to work for me?"

Georgia looked up at Trevor. He shook his head. "No. Sorry, Bart. But thanks for the job."

"No problem. I'll send your check to the address on Trevor's business card."

"Thanks. That will work."

The fire roared and despite the attempts of the fire departments on the scene, the blaze destroyed the building. The police took down her name and her apartment number. Trevor said that they were going to his place, and the officer took down that address as well.

More trucks arrived, as Trevor took her hand to leave. A woman holding two small children rushed up to Trevor and hugged him.

"Thank you for getting us out."

"You're welcome."

The woman and her children walked back to the group gathered around the Red Cross volunteers. Trevor led Georgia further down the street.

"So why am I losing my job?"

"Because the Shades know you're here. I think they torched your building. Do you want Donut Haven to be next?"

She sniffed and shook her head. He held her tighter and tighter.

Next, they were in the air. Georgia clung to her purse and portfolio while burying her face in his chest. When she gained some nerve, she looked out at the night sky. Her tormented heart eased a little, as they floated with the beauty and peace of the moment. Suspended like two teardrops, they hung in the night while snowflakes twirled and danced around them.

Oh, to be a snowflake in some future life.

But such a short life.

It's worth anything to join the dance.

Trevor kissed her forehead, his lips causing a fire that tingled throughout her body. She closed her eyes, quivering. Georgia should have been freezing but not with Mae West's fur around her, not wrapped in Trevor's strong arms.

Landing on his doorstep was easy. She didn't notice they were there, until she opened her eyes. Georgia turned. Yes, she could see Trevor's dilemma. Another building stood between him and his view of the Statue of Liberty.

The butler answered the door, and they were admitted to the grandest house she'd ever seen. Everything was white marble--the floors, the columns, the living room fireplace, and that was huge.

The butler took her coat and boots.

"Are you feeling okay? Nauseated at all?" asked Trevor.

"No. I'm still in shock from the fire but that flying thing was just great."

He laughed. The butler left.

"Take me flying anytime. It's really fun."

Grinning like a little boy on Christmas, he pulled her by the arm. "Come on. I want to show you something." He led her up the marble staircase with its soft, red carpet. The plush felt so good against her feet.

The first door on the right was a bathroom. On the left was a bedroom. The second door on the left was a library. They stepped inside and he turned on the lights. There were books from ceiling to floor in dark mahogany bookcases. Georgia loved books, the way they smelled and felt under her fingers. She sighed. So did Trevor.

"It's my second favorite room." Then he took her arm. "Come on, you haven't see what I want to show you."

The second door on the right was his bedroom. It was huge. As a matter of fact, all the furniture in it was huge too. The room was a combination of creams and whites, dark browns and black. She rubbed her hand along the smooth polished, black bedpost.

“It’s ebony. I had it imported.”

The bedspread on his enormous bed was cream with little ivory eyelets. “Isn’t the bedspread a tad feminine?”

“I had the room re-done about a month ago. I guess I was already feeling your presence in my life.” He sat down.

So did she and then flopped back. His mattress was down, the softest she’d ever felt. He leaned over her and kissed her. “Oh, I so want you, but first things first.”

“Huh?”

He hopped over to one of the two huge, ebony, carved armoires in the room and opened its double doors. Then he started going through clothes. He threw a black plush robe on the bed. Then he went over to a chest of drawers that matched the armoire. A pair of dark blue pajamas flew at her. She caught them. Silk. Then he rummaged through the armoire again and came up with two slippers.

Back at the bed, she pulled the pink sweatshirt she grabbed in her rush over her head. Instead of doing what she knew he wanted to do, he put the pajama top on her.

“Hmm, just as I thought. You’re short.”

She frowned. “You’re not getting anything at this rate.”

He laughed and helped her on with the bottoms. There was a drawstring, and he pulled it very tight. He made it into a large loopy bow.

“Are you thinking I’m a Christmas gift, because don’t go there.” She sighed on the verge of tears. “As it is, I’m upset that I lost all your presents tonight.”

He hugged her. "We can do some last minute shopping tomorrow. We're going to have to anyway to buy you some clothes."

Georgia sighed. "I can't. I don't have any money."

"Let's not think about that now. I have something to show you." He held out the robe for her to put on and he slid her very small feet into his furry, werewolf slippers. "Now come over here." He had her stand next to a Chinese ebony and red, old-fashioned room divider. Then he turned off the lights and a light came on behind it. Moving the room divider revealed a short Christmas tree sparkling with white lights. A red bow was the only ornament and it tied a very small, black box onto the tree.

"What is it?"

He walked up and untied it. Then he dropped down on one knee holding up the box to her. "Georgia Elizabeth Blake, will you marry me?"

Her mouth fell open as she took the box and opened it. The ring was exquisite. It was a diamond, of course, but flanked by two dark blue stones. She smiled. It looked so much like a star in the night sky. Then she jumped on him, knocking him to the floor, and kissing him. After several minutes of lustful preparation with lips, tongues, and fangs, Trevor gasped for air.

"If that's your answer, I like it."

She giggled, reaching inside his robe. "Yes."

He was about to continue where they left off, when he heard someone knocking. Quickly, he got up from the floor and brought Georgia up with him, straightening her robe, and flattening her hair.

"Come in."

The butler stepped in. "Your parents have arrived."

"Oh, yes. Please, tell them we'll be right down." As soon as the man left, Trevor went over to the mirror and straightened his clothes. "It wouldn't do to share with my parents that we were rolling around on the carpet."

"Won't they know by reading our minds?"

He laughed. "Of course, unless we think of nonsense things like teapot, steamship, and monkey." Trevor raised one eyebrow.

Georgia grinned. *I wouldn't know anything about that, beloved.*

Trevor pulled her into his arms. *I want to hear your voice forever in my mind.*

She tilted up her face and they kissed.

"Now that we're presentable, it's time for you to meet my parents." He took her hand and led her out the door slowly, as it was tough for her to walk in the werewolf slippers.

"Why are your parents here?"

"I called them."

"I didn't see you use a phone."

"No, that's not how I called them. Remember I am their blood too."

"Oh." Yes, they mindtalked. Sometimes it took Georgia a few minutes to catch on.

When they reached the stairs, she took off the slippers and carried them. He helped her put them back on at the bottom.

Georgia was trembling. Wrapping an arm securely around her waist, Trevor ushered her into this grand living room with its white marble décor. The handsome, young couple waiting by the hearth stopped her dead. It was the expectation on their faces that struck her. Trevor pulled her along.

"Mom. Dad. This is my fiancée Georgia Elizabeth Blake."

The woman who rushed toward her was blonde, dark-eyed, elegantly dressed, and twenty-something.

"Welcome to the family. You have a great name. I'm an Elizabeth too, but everyone calls me Betsy." She hugged Georgia with such exuberance, it nearly knocked her down. Then she indicated a steamer trunk propped up in the corner. "Trev told me how you lost everything in a fire."

"Well, I have a few photos of my family in my purse. . ."

"I mean clothes, dear." Looking at Trevor, his mother waved her hands about. "Has she eaten? She's clearly flustered."

Before she could go on, his father interrupted with a huge bearlike hug. "I'm Thomas Stenwood. We're so happy you accepted Trev's proposal. He's been mooning over you for months?"

Georgia frowned at Trevor. "Months? You said . . ."

Trevor took her hand and whisked her over to the sofa to sit. "Dad, Georgia is a gifted fashion designer. You should see her sketches."

The butler appeared in the room, and Georgia began to put two and two together, the driver, the butler, they were all susceptible to the vampire's powers.

"Benjamin, please, get Ms. Blake's art portfolio from my bedroom." The man left.

"Trev, you can't call me gifted. You haven't seen my designs."

"Actually I did peek at them while you were sleeping."

Benjamin returned with the portfolio, and Trevor opened it and spread the sketches across the coffee table. The three vampires leaned over to examine them.

"I especially like the midnight blue evening gown in the Greek one-shouldered style, with the starburst of sequins at the breast below the strap and a smaller burst on the opposing hip." His mother pointed out each positive feature. For Georgia, the pearl like fangs that had protracted in Betsy's otherwise lovely smile was a strange juxtaposition of beauty and death.

"I prefer this white lace dress." His dad emphatically pointed to his choice.

"That's a negligee." Georgia was trying hard not to giggle.

"I'm thinking I'd like to build a house of fashion." Trevor moved the designs on the table like chess pieces.

His father put his hand to his chin. Then the two men nodded in unison. Georgia was conscious of another layer of communication. She heard snippets in her head. The only clear voice was Trevor's.

So Dad is this a venture you'd get behind?

"Yes. We'll call it Stenwood."

A rush of pride flowed over Georgia like a waterfall. One day she's a waitress in a donut shop and the next the designer for a new fashion house.

Georgia got up and wobbled. Oh, the room spun. Catching her, Trevor eased her back to the sofa.

"A lot's happened at once." He explained to his parents.

His mother was by her side in an instant, putting her hand on Georgia's forehead. Worry lines etched Betsy's face. Her hand was cold. So there was something to what Trevor said about the warm touch of a lifemate.

Benjamin came in with a tray. Trevor quickly scooped up the sketches returning them to her portfolio. Each vampire received a goblet of blood. A bowl of chicken soup was placed on the coffee table in front of her.

"You'll feel better if you eat." His mother coaxed, as she patted Georgia's hand. Then she got up. "Please, excuse me."

Betsy left the room. Then Trevor followed. Georgia couldn't help but wonder, if his mother approved of her after all. Georgia really wanted to fit into this family.

As soon as Trevor walked into the kitchen, his mother blasted his mind with anger. *What were you thinking to make her pregnant?*

"Georgia's pregnant?" His grin widened with each passing second.

His mother glared at him. "What's wrong with you? Your love's in danger, so you double the risk."

He sighed. "Mother, I was trying to . . . I mean. Damn." He threw his arms up in exasperation. "Should I tell Georgia?"

"No." She grabbed his arm. "The poor dear has had enough."

"What should I do then?"

"Love her."

"That's how she got pregnant."

Betsy Stenwood huffed past him back into the living room.

Georgia was just finishing the soup with Thomas's help. Then she leaned back against the sofa. Trev's father kissed her on the forehead. "Get some rest, Georgia." He stood up. "Betsy, it's time we went home and left these young people alone."

Betsy opened her mouth and then closed it again, as Thomas helped her with her coat. She walked over and placed a kiss on Georgia's head. "We'll see you for Christmas dinner. I'm sure you'll feel better soon." Then the two vampires left. Benjamin and another servant moved the steamer trunk.

Georgia got up and walked to the window. Out on the street, Christmas lights were twinkling like multicolored stars. Watching them soothed her. Snowflakes swirled near the lights and tiny rainbows reflected on their faceted faces.

Trevor put his hand on her shoulder. "Are you feeling any better?"

"Yes. It's just so amazing—everything's that's happened. You don't have to create a business to get me, Trevor Stenwood." She turned and kissed him. "You already have me."

He couldn't stop kissing her, small tender kisses, a little sugar at a time. Waving his hand, the lights in the room went out and they were illuminated by the Christmas lights and the sparkling snow. Finally breathless, she moved from him and stared out into the mystical night. A tear wound a crooked path down her face.

"I can't get it out of my head. Mrs. Polasky died in that fire tonight. Who knows how many others?" Raising her face to his, she softly touched her lips to his. "Even though they can't harm me now, they're going to be out there, aren't they? And they killed others to get to me."

Trevor nodded.

She escaped into the warmth of his arms. He lifted her, cradling her like a baby and carried her out of the room.

"But there's so much to say."

"Not tonight." He floated up the stairs.

She giggled. "Did your mother yell at you in the kitchen or something?" It was a weird notion that had come into her head.

"Yes. She felt I wasn't taking good care of you."

"You just need more practice at it."

At the top of the stairs, he paused, frowning. At least she thought it was a frown.

"Did you just challenge me?" He put her down to stand.

She ran down the hall and into the bedroom and pushed the door shut.

"Ah um."

Georgia turned. Trevor stood directly behind her. "You were challenging me." Pulling her into his arms, they sped to the bed with him on top. "Do you have anything you want to say before I take care of you?" His imitation of a movie mobster was hysterical.

"Tsk. Tsk. Why are guys so mafia? Men use 'The Godfather' for everything."

"Of course, we do. It's a brilliant movie. Through it, you can understand life better."

Georgia laughed and scooted out from under him. "Well, my last words are: I want to check out this streamer trunk your mother gave me."

Trevor sat on the bed, defeated.

If only he could mesmerize her, she could be his sexual supplicant. But Trevor knew better. Lifemates could not be entranced. Their will was totally their own. He lay on the bed watching her open the trunk like a child on Christmas Day. Her face lit up as she pulled out the first garment.

"Isn't it gorgeous?" Georgia held up the low cut, blue silk blouse. She took off the robe and pajama top and slipped on the blouse, but it couldn't quite button in front.

Trevor chuckled. "Obviously, you have more on top."

She carefully took it back off and reached for a lavender, cashmere sweater instead. It fit perfectly to her curves, and parts beside his teeth were aching for her now.

"Georgia, honey, come to bed."

She took out a pair of jeweled, black shoes. "Look at this. They fit perfectly."

Trevor could only think of starting at her toes and making his way up her thighs. "Georgia, come over here."

"There's like a year's worth of clothes in here."

"You're not going to try everything on tonight, are you?" His mother's taste was excellent and would prove his undoing if he couldn't get Georgia away from that trunk.

Her giggles washed over him like a hot inviting shower. "I'm just looking for something special."

"Like what?"

She pulled out a black lace nightgown and held it in front of her. "Like this. What do you think?"

He smirked easily imagining her wearing the barely there gown. "I think you should put it on and come to bed." Trevor reached out to her.

Georgia never undressed and dressed so fast in her life. Trevor chuckled as he lifted the covers for her to join him. The black lace floated around her as she leapt into bed, and he enclosed her with the down comforter.

"Hmm." He sighed as he drew her closer. Kisses and nibbles on her neck and face evoked the same mixed reaction in her of contentment and growing excitement.

Georgia giggled as she straddled him.

Even with a massive grin on his face, he eyed her suspiciously. "Now what are you up to?"

"I am madly in love with you."

Giving his words back to him was so delicious. If there was any part of him that was unsure of her, it vanished forever in that second. *Finally mine.*

"You're doing it again. What is this 'finally mine' stuff? Are vampires all about possession?" Her fingers danced up and down his manhood, and he squirmed.

"Um, no." Then he laughed because she had caught him like a little boy with his hands in the cookie jar. *Oh, I so want your cookies.*

She shook her head laughing. "You know that more and more I'm starting to hear your thoughts now. You know that right?"

"I don't mind." He grinned from ear to ear and possibly down to his toes or other erect appendages.

Georgia put one hand to her breasts to hold in the giggles. He leaned up replacing her hand with his.

"That hand has better things to do?"

"Oh, you think so, huh?" She bent over and applied a soft, wet kiss to the tip of his shaft and then continued stroking, her fingers gently played up and down like he was a piano.

Gasping and quivering, he gritted his teeth. She was not going to get the better of him in her game.

Georgia narrowed her eyes and smiled—wickedly. *Oh, yes, I am.* She moved, her core hovering over him. Then one sixteenth of an inch at a time, she lowered herself

onto him. His gaze locked on hers. His fangs protracted. His control was slipping. He would not give in to her sexually exquisite tease.

Halfway down, he sat up and went to his knees embracing her, so she wouldn't fall back. He drove into her.

"Not fair."

"Very fair."

With each thrust, she moaned and he felt ecstasy building.

"I'm yours forever." His whisper hit a nerve, and tears streamed down her face amidst sighs of passion. He felt the tremor race through her body. Her face fell into his shoulder and she bit him. He was laughing when he climaxed. Still in control, he slid them both, still joined, onto their sides, onto the down mattress. She nuzzled his neck and fell asleep.

He closed his eyes. Knowing that his home was a fortress against intrusion from humans and supernaturals alike gave him ease. Knowing that Georgia loved him made his barely beating heart dance.

Georgia woke to Trevor stroking her hair. "Is it morning?"

"Afternoon."

She yawned. "So we should have lunch and go shopping."

"I don't need any presents, Georgia. I have what I want." He cuddled her close.

She sighed with contentment. He was all she wanted, almost all.

He kissed her one lip at a time, until she swooned. "Georgia?"

"Huh?"

"Would you like to have children?"

Her eyes snapped open. "Oh, that's right. Your parents had you. How exactly do vampires have children when they're dead or undead?"

He leaned up on one elbow and caressed her face with the other hand. "There's a potion called Shuma which was developed by a vampire in ancient Babylonia. He was married to a human woman that wanted children."

"I take it that it was successful."

Trevor's eyes twinkled with amusement. "Fourteen children later, he declared it a success and started mass producing it."

"Fourteen children! It's a wonder she didn't die in childbirth."

"Actually she was dying after the eighth, but he changed her into a vampire."

Georgia giggled, her fingers playing with the hair on his chest. "I'm just a sucker for happy endings."

"Yes, it sure was happy. Shuma is now sold internationally to the supernatural population. It makes vampires fertile, but for others it's a birth control medication instead."

"So all we'll need is some Shuma."

He leaned in and kissed her. "Not us. I was born not changed, remember? I don't need Shuma."

Georgia got an uneasy feeling in her stomach. She hadn't been on any birth control since the last boyfriend, and she noticed that Trevor didn't use condoms. With everything that happened, it just didn't enter her mind. She could already be pregnant.

Before she could say anything, he pulled her out of bed. "We have to get going, if we're going out." Trevor, still without a stitch on, stood over the steamer trunk and

started going through things. "Hmm, we'll have to buy you bras and underwear. You're a little wider in the hips than my mother too."

"What?"

He threw her a bright blue, cashmere sweater, a pair of beige slacks that had some stretch to them, natural wool socks, beige boots with matching hat and gloves. Georgia wasn't a good catch and was covered in clothes when he turned around. Trevor chuckled. "Need some help?"

"I'm fine. You get dressed unless you want to make love again."

He frowned at her. "If I start up again, honey, we're in for the night."

"But it's only 1 P.M."

"That's what I mean."

She pulled the cashmere sweater over her head. It fit and that's what she was going for. A glance in the mirror confirmed that it did show off her curves.

"Don't get me started on your curves or we'll never leave this room." He nibbled on her neck.

Reluctantly, she nudged him away and got dressed, but it wasn't easy with his hands interfering every chance he got. Soon she was dressed and ready to go out except for the coat. He was still naked. She couldn't help fondling him with her gloves on and then she ran out the room and down the stairs.

It took several minutes before he appeared in the kitchen. She was already eating some eggs the cook whipped up for her and drinking tea.

"That wasn't right at all." He complained as he buttered his toast. "I'm going to have to get even later." He winked at her and took a bite of his eggs. Under the kitchen table, he rubbed his foot up and down her thigh.

Georgia was grateful he was dressed. Otherwise she wouldn't have had any restraint. He chewed his food slowly, locking eyes with her, as if it wasn't food he was thinking about at all. Georgia blushed and hurried through breakfast. Racing to the foyer, the butler was already waiting with her coat. Trevor caught up and put on his coat, hat, boots, and gloves. When they walked out to the waiting car, it was snowing.

The car pulled in front of Bloomingdale's. Georgia's stomach flipped. "I don't have any money."

Trevor pulled out his wallet and gave her one of his credit cards. "Honey, don't worry about it. Buy anything you like."

Hand in hand, they entered the store. After shopping in the women's department together for some clothing essentials and other items Georgia loved putting on, it was time for them to split up. Trevor turned to Georgia. "Now we'll meet in front of the Chanel cosmetic counter. Do not leave the store without me, got it?"

"Yes."

"Promise?"

"Yes."

He kissed her, then turned and headed back into the women's department. She went toward the men's. In no time, she found another green cardigan, some slippers, a new robe, and a pair of silk briefs. Going into the stationary department, she bought him a fine leather journal and a desk set. Georgia figured he had to have a home office somewhere in that huge house.

A blur caught her eye, as she picked up her bags from the checkout. Trevor rushed out of the store. Gripping the bags, Georgia ran after him. Once outside, she

turned to find him. The car wasn't there. She tried to use her mind to call to him.

Trevor, where are you? He didn't reply. Something had to be wrong, but why would he leave her there? Then she spotted him down a block. She raced in his direction. When he turned the corner and disappeared, she picked up speed and spun around the same corner.

It led smack into several men in an alleyway. Trevor was nowhere to be seen. She tried to back out but they surrounded her. One reached out to touch her, but the ring again provided its shield. Another rushed her and with one punch, he flew backwards into the opposing wall. Another jumped her and she kicked him into the wall behind her with a sickening crunch. Still they got up and came at her again. Kicking and punching her way through a flurry of Shades, she recognized them even though they dressed as homeless men. Georgia screamed in her head first for Trevor and then for David.

Trevor landed on two Shades just as more men appeared adding to the growing legion. They kept attacking her from every angle, and each time she used what she'd learned in her kickboxing classes and her uncle's ring multiplied her strength tenfold. Trevor plowed through them, but more came to replace them. A crowd of Shades held him fast, and one Shade held up his hand. The rest around her moved back.

"Little Harmony, take off that ring!" He bellowed into her face. Monstrous piranha teeth replaced the human mouth.

"No."

"We'll stake your vampire then."

They held a stake against Trevor's back.

"Don't do it, Georgia." He struggled against them. "They can't touch you. They're defeated. Push right through them and go now. You have a wonderful life ahead of you."

Tears filled Georgia's eyes. She shook her head. "Not without you." The ring slipped from her finger into the snow.

The Shade slammed a blade into her chest. Trevor screamed and struggled against the hold of so many demons. They released him, and he rushed to catch her as she slumped to the ground.

She looked up. "I love you."

"I'm just a vampire. You could have found someone else to love."

"No." She shook her head. "It wouldn't be you." She wheezed and went limp.

Trevor moved her hair and bit her neck. One heartbeat left before she was done forever. Then he hurriedly bit his tongue and kissed her, hoping his blood would catch her before death did.

Georgia could barely see him. The snow fell around everything now, Trevor, the Shades milling about like those stuck on the edge of heaven. Whether they were stuck or just didn't want to go, she would never know. Trevor's green eyes peered into hers with questions she couldn't answer. His teeth pierced the skin on her neck and she felt the sudden rush through her body, but no pain. She had expected pain, even cold. No cold. Every part of her was warm as if embraced by a toasty blanket.

A Shade stepped behind Trevor, but she couldn't scream with his tongue in the way. The demon stabbed her vampire in the back. Trevor's eyes went wide. Georgia

tried to reach around him to pull out the stake, but her arms wouldn't work. Trevor slumped against her. Still he held her unwilling to let anyone take her.

Suddenly, an army of vampires fought with the dark legion. A battle for life. Lightning strikes lit up the snow. Georgia was interested in the outcome, but she fell asleep. Yes, that happened before when she stayed up late for movies. She was always missing the endings.

"Trevor!" She woke, screaming.

Georgia tried to sit up, but Laura and David held her down on the bed. It took them both. *When did I become so strong?* Her tongue hit something sharp and pointed in her mouth, it moved to check the teeth more closely. Sure enough, she was a vampire. Then the memories flooded into her. The knife. For a second, she relived the sharp pain. The bite. Trevor warm against her neck. She didn't feel the pain. Her body couldn't react at that point. His mouth on hers. Her mouth filled with blood. The stake. Seeing the Shade stab her mate in the back and the scream trapped inside her. Blurry visions of David, Laura, other vampires fighting the Shades, and the words, Trevor's words: Save Georgia and the baby. Trevor! Despair filled every part of her with rage, and she threw the vampires off.

"Where is he?"

"Calm down." David threw his hands up. He looked to the right and her eyes followed his gaze.

Trevor lay on the far edge of his huge bed, his face pale as marble, his body peacefully still. Betsy sat beside him, holding his hand and weeping.

"Is he dead?"

Laura and David looked at each other. "We don't know." David shook his head. "Day walkers die like humans, and he was dying when I reached him so I changed him. We've been feeding him lots of blood so it should have taken, but he hasn't moved. Being already a vampire, he should have awakened by now."

Georgia moved to get up.

"You must rest."

She wasn't going to heed Laura's request. Getting Trevor back was all that mattered. "Are you kidding? I don't need rest. I'm as strong as an ox, several oxen."

A smile curled David's lips.

Georgia crawled over to Trevor and placed her hand on his cheek. He was very cold.

"Trevor Stenwood, you get up right now. How dare you try to leave a mate and child! Wake up!"

He didn't move. No eye flutter. Nothing.

Betsy sobbed away.

Georgia peered up at David. *How do I change him?*

You mindtalk?

Trevor taught me.

Then listen. He spoke to the deepest part of her with specific instructions.

She nodded. "All right, everybody out."

"What?" Betsy wiped her face, confused.

David ushered the two women out. "Georgia knows what she's doing. Let's leave her to it." They left and the door closed.

Georgia caressed his face while thinking of the tenderness they had shared in this bed. "Trevor, I can't be without you." A tear coursed down her cheek. Then Georgia bit him on the neck. She instinctively knew the spot and listened for the faint thump of Trevor's vampire heart. She sucked his blood. She didn't want to but David had said to suck until she heard the last beat.

There it was. She pulled out her fangs. Now came the final step, the step that should have worked when David did it. Maybe Trevor needed her instead. It had been an odd thought that came to her.

She kissed him forcing open his closed lips with her tongue. Then Georgia chomped down on her tongue as hard as she could. The metallic taste filled her mouth and she urgently pushed the steady stream of blood into his mouth moving her tongue to coat his fangs with it, stroking up and down.

His body shuddered. He moaned into her mouth and returned the kiss, sucking on her tongue eagerly. Trevor flipped her onto her back, his hands frantically caressing her through her clothes. Tearing apart any hindrance, he made shreds of their clothes as he moved from her lips to her breasts nibbling his way.

Swept away by his enthusiasm, she kissed any part of him she could reach, kneaded his muscles and nipped his flesh. He chuckled, lifted her legs to wrap around his waist.

Her voice now husky with excitement, she whispered in his ear. "You know there are other ways of . . ."

"I want to watch your adorable expressions as . . ."

"You make me squirm?"

He grinned, his green eyes flashing with fire, something she'd never seen before. While entranced by his gorgeous eyes, he dove into her. Georgia gasped, but he captured that little puff of sound and air by possessing her mouth. They pushed against each other over and over again. Each cry, moan, and sigh escalating into a . . . Everything went warm and liquid and black for Georgia, as if she was in some other world of night, her body satiated and happy. Tiny sparks of fire filled her every part, tingling and glowing.

A kiss on her head. On her nose. On each eye. Then her lips. Georgia awoke to Trevor's tender ministration of her face. "Wake up, sleepyhead, they're having the party without us. Christmas Day will soon be over."

"Trevor, you're okay?" He gave her room to sit up.

"Yes, I guess David had to change me over to a night walker instead."

"Um, not exactly."

He looked puzzled. "Didn't David bite me and give me his blood?"

"Yes, but it appeared that you were stuck and not waking up. He suggested I try."

"Then I didn't imagine your blood in my mouth." Grinning from ear to ear, he kissed her. Then he moved to the jaw line.

Gently she pushed him away. "Shouldn't we go to the end of the Christmas Party?"

"You're right?"

Trevor went to his armoire for something to wear. Georgia rummaged through the bag and boxes that she had purchased. The Arnhem Knights had evidently rescued their belongings as well. After taking out some lingerie, she spied her Uncle Mick's ring

on the dresser. She was so relieved to see it. If her child was born human, he or she would need that ring.

In no time, they were dressed and made their way down the hall and staircase. As they stood in the entrance of his living room, Georgia was astonished by the complete change in its appearance. Take away the hundred or so vampires milling about and the room was wildly decorated in gold, red, and green. An evergreen reaching the high ceiling was awash with tinsel and lights, ornaments of everything imaginable. Evergreen garlands graced the mantle and cornices and valances. Had they been invaded by the holiday fairy in less than twenty-four hours?

No, my mom did that.

Thomas and Betsy were the first to greet them, hugging them extra hard or so it seemed. Then David and Laura came up. After hugging, David showed off Laura's present. It was an engraved ID bracelet that read: MINE. Georgia and Trevor exchanged a glance and laughed.

"What? What is it?" David just didn't know, and Georgia wasn't about to let him in on it.

"So you're having a baby. That's so exciting." Laura looked like she would burst with happiness.

"When are you getting married?" asked Betsy.

Laura bit her lower lip. She just hadn't given it any thought. "Um, you'll have to ask Trevor. Any time is fine with me."

Betsy stared at Trevor. "Soon?"

"New Year's Eve."

"Can you have a wedding that fast?" Georgia only had the slightest idea of everything that went into creating a wedding.

"Absolutely." Betsy just beamed with joy. Now Georgia knew where Trevor got that expression he used so frequently. Betsy was over the top with excitement. "I'll set it all up. We'll have it in the society hall and the whole place will look like an ice cave with blue and white icicles. It will be gorgeous. Laura, you'll take her for her dress. I know just the place. I'll call them tomorrow. It will be exquisite."

Thomas tapped on his glass until the room was quiet. "Attention, everyone. Tonight the Stenwood family welcomes its newest member, my son's eternal mate, Georgia Blake. You are all invited to their wedding on New Year's Eve at the Society's hall." The room broke out in cheers. When order was restored, Thomas continued. "I would like to propose two toasts. The first to Trevor and Georgia, may your eternity together be filled with love." Everyone drank.

Georgia drank from the champagne flute handed her. It wasn't champagne at all, but blood and it felt so cold and good going down her throat. She sighed with serenity and leaned against Trevor. He kept one arm around her waist.

"The second toast is to the Arnhem Knights, without whom we would not have Georgia and Trevor with us tonight."

The room broke out in celebration. Music. Dancing. A strange game of levitation that Georgia couldn't figure out. Then as the clock struck twelve, one vampire began handing out the presents from under the huge tree. When Georgia received a small box, she was astonished. It was a pair of diamond earrings.

"Betsy and I wanted you to know how much it means to us that you're joining our family." Each one kissed her on the cheek.

Just as she finished one drink, Betsy handed her another. Only this wasn't blood, unless blood came in bright blue. "This is Shuma Moot. It will help support you and the baby you carry. I've filled your refrigerator with it." Georgia almost cried as she hugged her mother-in-law. "You're not alone anymore, Georgia. You have us."

After the presents were opened, the party resumed. Trevor danced with her and for the first time, she experienced what it felt like to float on her own. She made friends, had fun, and bonded more closely with her family. When the clock struck four and the last vampire left for home, Georgia was a little sad it was all over.

"It's not over, darling, we're just beginning."

He scooped her up in his arms and floated up the stairs to their room.

On one chair was the coat that started it all, the brown and black coat she loved.

"When did that get here?"

"Probably yesterday while we were out. I said you would get it back."

"But now I have to return the mink."

Trevor kissed her. "Don't you dare. I bought the mink for you as well."

Georgia nuzzled his neck. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Let's get dressed for bed before we open our gifts to each other." Trevor changed into pajamas and a robe and Georgia put a robe over her white diaphanous nightgown.

"Trev, we have a lot to talk about."

"Like what, honey?"

"Well, for instance, you knew I became pregnant and didn't tell me."

"I was getting around to it."

"You were stalking me for months not weeks like you said."

"I wasn't stalking you. I wanted to ask you out to lunch." He grinned and she shook her head, knowing she couldn't fight it.

"Let's open our presents to each other." He took her hand and pulled her to him.

"Some of them aren't wrapped."

"That doesn't matter." He kissed her hand.

Then they sat on the floor in front of their own little tree and exchanged presents. The last ones opened were the green cardigan sweater for Trevor and black lace negligee, panties and bra for Georgia.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "I think this present is really for you."

He grinned with mischief. "Absolutely."

As they moved to the bed, Trevor reclined still wearing his robe. Only a bow now rested on the tie. "Georgia, you have one last present to unwrap."

"Trevor Stenwood, you're a bad boy."

"You don't know how bad."

Georgia slowly took the bow off his robe tie and untied it. He had a bow on the drawstring of his pajama bottoms. Sighing and giving him the look, trying hard to stifle a chuckle, she removed that bow and untied the drawstring too. Georgia couldn't help but burst out laughing. He had wrapped up his manhood like a gift with candy striped paper.

"Are you crazy?"

"I noticed how much you enjoy unwrapping presents."

She couldn't stop laughing. Taking off her own robe, she slid under the covers.

"Georgia, honey, what are you doing?" He joined her under the covers but still in his wrapped condition.

"I'm saving that present for tomorrow." She giggled and rolled over so she wouldn't have to face him. "Besides I need my vampire sleep. There's a lot to do next week: go to my Uncle's funeral and set up the wedding."

"Actually my mom is taking care of the wedding. We'll just have to show up."

She yawned.

"Um, Georgia, I'm very uncomfortable."

She giggled so hard she was shaking. It was a good thing she wasn't facing him.

"You're a wicked woman, Georgia Blake Stenwood." He turned her and seeing her laughter, kissed her neck and pulled down the top of her gown, fondling her breasts. "Come on, Georgia, unwrap me." He whispered in her ear and then chewed on it.

His fangs against her ear lobe sent shivers of delight coursing through her veins. She reached and ripped the paper freeing him at last. *Mine.*

"Yes, I am always." Trevor claimed her lips over and over. She moaned under his every touch. "Forever yours." Then he pulled the comforter over them and nibbled every square inch of her into submission before planting himself within her.

Georgia knew that outside the world was cold with snow swirling all around, but this Christmas changed her life giving her love and warmth forever. She remembered one dark winter watching a Mae West movie on her tiny television in her hole of an apartment. The actress swung her hips and said, "Too much of a good thing is wonderful." Georgia grinned as Trevor sent wave after wave of pleasure rushing through her. *Yes, he's definitely too much of a good thing.* She giggled, gasping at they climaxed and collapsed.

Absolutely. He chuckled stroking her hair. *Mine.*

The End

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