



Midnight Dream Girls 1: The Scent of Evil

By Savannah Madanelle © 2006

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## **Midnight Dream Girls 1: The Scent of Evil**

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### **Midnight Dream Girls 1: The Scent of Evil**

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## **Dedication**

As always, a huge hug and kiss of thanks to my ever supportive hubby. You are the man of my dreams! Thanks for giving me the most perfect first date a woman could ever ask for AND letting me immortalize it in this story!

And a HUGE thanks to my editor Michelle. You gave this story the unbiased polishing it needed and much more, and your insights and spot-on suggestions will forever be truly appreciated. Thanks for all your hard work!

And finally, to Taylor and Mira, fellow members of the Yahoo Erotic Romance Crit group...thanks for your excellent feedback on the early stages of this story!

### Chapter One

The emergency workers tried everything they could to bring Brianna Cochoran's boss back to life. But the former owner of the Midnight Saloon was too far gone.

She watched them, numb with horror, as they shook their heads and slowly loaded John McCannon onto a gurney, then into the ambulance. As the van drove away, lighting up the city streets with revolving red and blue lights, she ran a shaking hand through her thick red hair. *How could this have happened? And now, of all times?* Heedless of the watchful eyes of her fellow employees, she buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

She just became a murderer.

"Miss Cochoran, tell me again how you found your boss tonight," the detective asked a few minutes later, his beady hazel eyes drilling into her emerald green ones. His voice was cold, unsympathetic, and unyielding to her tears.

Brianna dragged in a slow, ragged breath, then let it out in increments to steady her nerves and rein in her emotions. She swiped the tears off her cheeks and nose, fighting the temptation to tell him the whole truth and nothing but. Then again, who'd believe she was a vampire just trying to share her immortality with her boss in return for ownership of his bar?

She could just imagine the detective's face when she explained that her boss, after witnessing her kill a rapist in the parking lot several nights

ago, had tried to blackmail her into giving him immortality. True, she'd stood firm and demanded ownership over the Midnight Saloon in return for turning him into a vampire, even though the bar wasn't anything like the dance studio she'd dreamed of owning someday. Her pride had demanded she make it more of a trade; she'd refused to cave into blackmail. But she doubted that anyone on the police force would find this moment of courage very noble or inspiring.

No, she would watch her words carefully tonight. If she said the wrong thing here, she could end up spending the rest of eternity behind bars. And boy, wouldn't that raise a lot of questions nationwide when she became the longest living, youngest looking inmate ever?

Too bad she was a really crappy liar.

So she stuck to the truth, or most of it, leaving out only the part where she'd drained John dry before he collapsed and her CPR attempts were unsuccessful.

"That's when I ran for the phone and called for help," she finished, keeping her hands shoved inside her jeans pockets so she wouldn't give in to the urge to fidget.

He made a few last notes, then flipped his notepad shut. "Okay, that's all for now, Miss Cochoran. We've got your home address and phone number if we need to ask any more questions. Unless there's anything else you want to tell us now?"

Brianna stared at the floor's scarred hardwood. What if they decided to further investigate this case for some reason? Maybe she'd better tell them a little more truth, at least the parts they would find out about soon enough.

"Um, yeah. I just bought this place from Mr. McCannon." She cringed as his eyebrows shot upwards, and he scribbled something in his notepad. "He was going to announce the new ownership to the rest of the crew tonight."

"Uh huh. And do you have any paperwork to validate this claim?"

Brianna nodded. "We signed the ownership title for the bar over to me on February 1<sup>st</sup>. I paid Mr. McCannon most of my savings at that time as well. He was supposed to give me a copy of the title tonight since I got

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my alcohol retailer's permit approvals today. The title copies are in his office safe, I believe."

Once more, he flipped his notepad closed, then tucked it and the pen into his inner jacket pocket. "Okay, we'll check into it and be in touch."

She nodded and tried not to shiver until after he walked away. She told her hastily concocted story out of sheer necessity tonight. Now all she could do was hope, pray, and try to keep all of the information straight. And try not to dwell on the fact she'd accidentally killed her boss tonight.

She went home and took shower after shower, trying to wash off the filth she felt coating her skin. But no amount of soap or water could ever wash the guilt away. So what if she'd only become a vampire three weeks ago and had no clue what she was doing tonight? She thought she'd remembered every step of the turning process her maker had used on her. But she must have missed some crucial step.

And because of her ineptitude, she'd killed another man tonight and not some stranger this time.

Two hours later, she fell into an exhausted sleep that offered no refuge from the night's horrible accident. She tossed and turned as her dreams were filled with memories of her vampire maker, Kilo. In her dreams, she was forced to relive those fateful two days a month and a half ago when she fell into his dark, life-changing web of evil...

\* \* \* \* \*

*She'd just left the Midnight Saloon after another January night of bartending and was crossing the blustery, shadowed parking lot when a flash of something pale and moving caught her eye. She turned her head and took a couple of steps in that direction, her grip tightening on the padded edge of her motorcycle helmet. Two feminine, bare legs kicked out into the night air. Between them, a man in a black duster-style coat held their owner pinned to the crumbling brick wall of the neighboring building.*

*She heard no screams, but her gut told her those legs weren't kicking out in passion. The woman was being attacked. She was fighting for her life.*

*Brianna never hesitated, never considered the risks. She simply ran at the man. Her motorcycle helmet made a heavy cracking sound as she slammed it against his right temple. Such a blow could have killed any normal man; it should have at least knocked this one unconscious. Instead, the bastard turned and sneered at her.*

*Dear God, were those fangs in his mouth? Past his face, she saw blood pouring down the woman's neck above her soft, flower-printed dress. The dark fluid trickled down along the edge of the dress's v-neck collar to pool within her cleavage. Her coat lay in a dirty puddle near her feet, a crumpled heap of cream colored fur and tan suede soaking up the winter's filthy moisture.*

*The man dropped his first victim, and Brianna had a moment's rush of fear. He grabbed Brianna's throat and pulled her up in the air with one hand so that only the toes of her boots dragged along the graveled lot. Then she was enclosed within his dark embrace. Blinding pain exploded within her as his horrible, scowling face bent over her neck. The world turned black.*

*When Brianna awoke, she was sprawled on a satin canopied bed, her wrists and ankles loosely encased in old-fashioned manacles. Aching all over as if she had the flu and utterly exhausted, even lifting her head to look around was a supreme struggle. She managed this small movement, though, gritting her teeth against the pain while she studied her surroundings.*

*Three taupe colored walls decorated with antique-looking swords formed her new prison. She couldn't see what the fourth wall behind her head held. On her right, cold night air billowed gauzy white fabric on either side of a set of French doors. The fabric blew towards her like two long, beckoning arms begging her to run towards them. The same chill wind brushed icy, unseen tendrils over her body, making her shiver with sudden awareness that all but her bra and bikini cut panties had been removed.*

*Her attacker appeared. Fear returned along with him to rise up in her throat and choke her. Appeared was the only way she could describe his entrance. He came through no doors, made no sound to warn of his impending approach. One second Brianna was the only person in the room. The next, he was standing between her and the French doors.*

*What the hell...? her mind stumbled over the thought.*

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*"My name is Kilo, and you can not escape. At least, not until I am done with you," he said, his fangs glinting like tiny white stakes as they stabbed against his thin lower lip.*

*She glared at him, instant hatred boiling in her chest. Refusing to be intimidated into a quick reply, she kept her mouth shut and took her time studying this gothic-loving vampire wannabe. He'd certainly studied well for his obsession. Long black hair pulled back into a ponytail with a black ribbon revealed Kilo's pale white face and cruelly hooked nose. His eyes flashed a pale violet, which had to be fake.*

*"Nice contacts, asshole," she spat out as her teeth began to chatter.*

*"They are not contacts, I assure you," he murmured with a smile, reaching up to idly finger the lace edges of his white shirt.*

*"Your shirt looks like one of those pathetic tuxes from the eighties. Did you have to pay extra for the nerdy ruffles down the front, or did they come free of charge?" she blurted, then winced. Antagonizing this guy wasn't the way to go. Not if she wanted to make it out of here alive. She clenched her teeth to stop them from clicking against each other. Goose bumps covered every inch of her skin and the muscles along the tops of her thighs cramped painfully.*

*He only smiled and sat down beside her on the bed. As his long nailed fingers reached out to touch her bare body, her stomach rolled and threatened to heave.*

*"Get your hands off me!" she hissed out between her teeth. Should she scream? Would someone come to help her if she did? Or would it push him to kill her?*

*Despite the venom in her voice, Kilo continued to smile. His hand reached out towards her right breast, then hovered a fraction of an inch over its black lace covering.*

*"Brianna, you will come to crave my touch. There is no need to fight me, for you cannot withstand me." His voice whispered over her body like stealthy fingers that traced her every curve before stealing into her mind to leave her paralyzed with mind numbing fear.*

*"No, I won't," she gasped out, stunned to find her body would no longer respond to any of her commands. Fight, hit him, kick him, anything, she*



*screamed within her mind. No response came from any of her limbs though, no matter how hard she tried.*

*She couldn't stand to see his leering, beady eyes devouring her body, so she closed her eyes in a futile attempt to shut him out.*

*Brianna, I will make you scream with passion, Kilo's voice twisted through her mind.*

*Get out of my head, you son of a bitch, she screamed without words at him. Oh God, how could he be inside her head like this?*

*Ah, but your mind is the most lovely part of you. Why do you fight your body's wishes so?*

*Incredibly, she felt her body's hormones kicking in. It had been so long since she'd had a lover, so long since she'd even brought herself any physical pleasure. She'd thought that part of her was under her complete control. Yet somehow he managed to make her body awaken at his command.*

*My mind is in control of my body, she argued mentally with him, fighting valiantly to prove it true.*

*But you are missing out on so much. I can make you feel so much, Kilo's voice whispered inside her head. Relax and let yourself feel. Feel me. Feel my hands caressing your breasts.*

*You're right, I can't physically fight you, she agreed through her hatred for him. But I promise you, someday I will kill you.*

*The vision of his touch was replaced with his cold, all-too-real one, and she tried to think about anything but his touch, his body looming over hers.*

*Brianna, I will make you mine. Say you want me.*

*Never, she answered, wanting to die.*

*Say you want me, his voice demanded again, grating against the softness of her mind, filling her mind with icy knives that shredded the one part of her she though was untouchable.*

*I want to kill you, her mind replied, and she strained against the manacles. The metal bit into her wrists, giving her a different physical sensation to focus on. Anything to feel on her skin besides him and the hated tears sliding down her cheeks. How could she win this fight?*

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*His laugh reverberated through her mind, and she wanted to scream aloud. Brianna, you will always be mine. Physically as well as mentally. Even as I take your body, I claim you as mine for all eternity.*

*Then she felt the physical invasion of him, cold and unyielding as marble, and she did scream. Her pain, fury, and humiliation poured out of her lungs even as her heart shattered beneath the crushing weight of his darkness. She would never be whole again. Never.*

*Just when she thought she couldn't endure the attack any longer, when her soul cried out the first form of desperate prayer for death, Kilo bit her neck again.*

*The pain from this bite was a thousand times worse than the first one in the parking lot at the bar. Every other sensation left her as her pain receptors focused on those two searing points on her neck. Then the stabbing sensation faded away as well. Brianna seemed to have no worldly body anymore as everything turned black around her. She'd never seen such an absence of all light or color like this. And why couldn't she feel her body or the cold winter air anymore?*

*"You have a choice now, Brianna," she heard Kilo tell her from far away. "Either will yourself to drink, or die."*

*I can not feel my body, Brianna thought with a new kind of terror. Am I dying? Why must I drink?*

*Drink and live forever or die. That is your choice.*

*She wasn't sure she wanted to live forever. But she was certain she wasn't ready to die. With no other choice for survival, Brianna told her body to drink. And fell headlong into an all encompassing pain she'd never felt before and hoped never to feel again. She drowned in the pain as if flailing helplessly within the ocean on a moonless night, sucked under as wave after blinding wave of darkness crashed over her.*

*Within that darkness, a world of someone else's memories filled her vision until she became that person. She was a little boy trying to save his mother from a too big man who turned his fists on her instead. She was a teenager who scavenged through trash cans day and night to try and assuage the never ending hunger that clawed at her stomach like the rats that surrounded her in the alleyways. The vision quickly changed again, and she was a young man now who*

*thought of himself as Kilo, strong, tough, never to be anyone's punching bag again. Then a dark shadow appeared from nowhere like a black dust cloud, surrounding her, taking all light with it as pain exploded in the side of her neck.*

*The pain receded with the darkness, and finally she found herself prowling unfamiliar city streets for food. But she no longer searched the trash cans for her sustenance. Now she fed upon the weak, the poor, and the rich alike. Young, old, male, female, none of it mattered. They were no longer humans. They were cattle, fruit on the vine waiting to be plucked, their bodies filled with a dark juice sweeter than any wine. And she could feel Kilo's unquenchable craving for it.*

*The visions of Kilo's life faded away, bringing Brianna back to the reality of where and who she was. Kilo's life had been so hard, so relentlessly filled with sorrow, anger and hurt. But even as a small part of her pitied the harsh life he had been forced to live, her hatred grew almost too large to hold inside her. Just like his maker, he had taken her life and forced her to make a choice no one should ever have to make...die, or become a vampire who fed off humans.*

*Out of a desperate will to live, she'd chosen a different kind of existence. And probably damned her soul to hell. She realized how wrong that choice had been as, over the course of the next two days, Kilo intoned all the rules of her new life. Contrary to her earlier belief, his fangs were all too real. So was the brand new pair she discovered hidden within her upper gums, which extended whenever she willed them to. Or at Kilo's demand. Vampires were real, and she'd become one.*

*But unlike the vampires of legend, they were not affected by garlic or sunlight. Kilo told her she would indeed be impervious to disease, aging, or any wounds except being stabbed through the heart, decapitation, or being set on fire. She would have to drink a full human body's worth of blood once a month in order to keep her immortal strength equal to ten or fifteen men. Or she could have sex with a human once a week and exchange her immortal energy for their sustaining human energy. Kilo also told her she'd develop the ability to communicate telepathically with humans within a few months. Her spell-like vampire charm, however, would be immediately effective on any human near her within a few short weeks.*

*And with every development of her vampire powers, a little more of her humanity would be lost forever.*

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*Though she pretended to be the meek student, Brianna's heart churned with the desire to escape. But every time such thoughts tried to rise to the forefront of her mind, she pushed them away. What if he could still read her mind despite her new immortality? Her hatred for him, however, couldn't be stored away. It was burned into her very being, eating away at her from within. She made no effort to hide it when she looked at him, but he only laughed at her as if he found her searing looks to be expressions of endearment.*

*On the second day of her captivity, Kilo announced it was time for her to learn how to hunt. He carried her out the French doors and down to the ground below the balcony to a nearby park. In the weak winter rays of sunshine, he pulled her over the rain soggy grounds to a woman sitting on a bench with a small, golden Cocker spaniel. The brunette was young, perhaps only in her early thirties, content to read a book while her dog slept.*

*I want to do a little experiment, his voice whispered through her mind as they watched the woman idly stroke her dog before turning another page in her book. I want to know how soon a new vampire can pick up the memories of their victims.*

*Their...victims? Her mind stumbled over the word. She didn't want to have any victims. There was no need for it. He'd told her she could have sex with a human instead for her survival.*

*His smile darkened into a sneer.*

*Sneaking up behind the woman, Kilo reached out and broke her neck with a quick twist of her head. Then he killed her barking dog in the same manner.*

*"Bite her throat and drink her blood," Kilo commanded, his voice harsh and grating.*

*No, oh please, no. Brianna tried to back away in horror, her hands to her mouth, sickened further to feel small fangs slide down out of her gums above her regular incisors and pierce her lower lip.*

*"Drink now, before someone sees!" he demanded again.*

*Then the hunger hit her in rolling waves, cramping her stomach like a giant fist squeezing her internal organs to the point where she wondered how she still lived. A red film seemed to wash over the scene before her. Her body once again rebelled against her mind, moving her closer to the dead woman in its crazed hunger for human blood.*

*And Lord help her, but she drank that woman's blood, was filled with that woman's innocent, lonely memories. She wanted to truly die for what she was doing even as she gulped down entire mouthfuls of the woman's rich, hot blood...*

\* \* \* \* \*

Brianna woke up crying, her upper body rocking in the dark of her tiny apartment with some primordial effort to soothe her ravaged mind. It wasn't just a dream. It had all happened. She had really drank...

"Don't think about it. You're alive, Bri," she whispered, trying to fight the urge to lose all sanity from her guilt. "You did what you had to in order to survive. She was already dead. Kilo killed her. You stayed alive, and you escaped down that drain pipe from the balcony. You're free."

She grabbed the blankets up from her lap and held them to the pounding pulse in her throat, letting her hair fall forward into a swaying curtain around her face as she continued to rock herself. "He's gone. You're here, you're okay. You're in control now, and you're strong. You'll never drink blood again. You can be normal again if you try."

A small voice inside whispered, *Ah, but what about that man you caught trying to rape the woman in the parking lot? Didn't you enjoy draining him dry?*

"No," Brianna whispered, knowing it was a lie even as she said it. "He was trying to hurt that woman. I saved her. He was evil. I didn't enjoy it at all. I'll never do it again. I swear it."

Brianna repeated these thoughts like a mantra until her breathing slowed, until her tears stopped flowing, until the urge to throw up passed. She was in control of herself, both her human mind and her immortal body. She would never lose control like that again, never take another human's blood, innocent or otherwise. She would remain forever more in control, she promised herself. She needed to, for the sake of her very sanity.

## Chapter Two

"No, Aunt Nora, I won't be able to come home for quite a while. I've just got too many things to do right now." Brianna clutched the phone so hard she heard the plastic crack. Wincing, she loosened her grip. Great, now she'd have to buy a new phone. Well, that was one purchase that would just have to wait. The bar had been closed for four days now, and she had zero funds left for anything other than a case of colas and some ramen noodles.

"Okay, Brianna, though I don't like it. I know I taught you to be independent, but you need family too. You at least call me every now and then so I know you're okay, all right?" Her aunt's age roughened voice murmured through the phone, thicker than usual with some unnamed emotion.

Sighing, Brianna agreed, then gently ended the conversation and hung up the cracked phone. A wave of guilt threatened to swamp her from lying to her aunt. But what else could she do? She couldn't go home until she learned how to control her dark needs. She couldn't put the only parent she'd had for years in jeopardy.

A knock at her apartment door made her gasp in surprise. Had Kilo come back to torture her again?

*No, think straight, Bri. He would never knock on the door so politely; he'd just break the door down and barge right in. You're still safe.*

Settling her racing heart, she opened the door and felt her pulse take off once more. It was that same detective who'd questioned her after John's death.

He held out a large brown envelope. "Here's the deed to the Midnight Saloon and keys to the building."

She couldn't help it. She grabbed the doorjamb as a long sigh of relief rushed out of her.

But he never missed a beat while continuing on with his explanation. According to him, John's weak heart was a well documented condition at the local hospital. Too bad the late bar owner hadn't seen fit to let her know about his condition too. She might have been able to prevent killing him with it.

But there was no time to dwell on her mistakes in the past. She thanked the detective and barely had the patience to wait for him to leave before she shut the door and flopped onto her worn couch.

She was the official new owner of the Midnight Saloon.

As if churning its way free of mud, her mind found traction in the thought, "now what?" She needed to make a list; there was too much to do now. Obviously she had to get the bar open again for business. There were too many people dependent on the saloon's income for their financial support, Brianna concluded. She needed to make a lot of calls, let everyone know about the change in ownership, frame and post her alcohol retailer's permit at the saloon, and get next week's work schedule lined out. There were a million and one other details she needed to take care of as well. And all of it required her presence at the bar. Alone.

Her heart lurched at the thought, but she forced it to calm down again. After all, she hadn't sensed Kilo around the bar since that fateful night almost two months ago when she'd fallen into his special brand of hell. True, her immortal strength was growing at an alarming rate with every passing day. Soon it could become a real problem around others, yet another secret she'd have to remember to hide from everyone somehow. But was she strong enough to hold her own against Kilo now? Hopefully, she'd never have to find out.

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Half an hour later in the Midnight Saloon's tiny office, Brianna discovered she was in danger of an altogether different kind. John had been more than just a little secretive about his business affairs. She'd heard of discretion, but this was something else entirely.

The profit and loss records for the Midnight Saloon showed that the bar was a sinking ship. And she was the sucker who'd just spent every last dime to acquire it. Worse, she found bank deposit slips that revealed Mr. McCannon had already spent all her money to help pay off back-payments on the bar's mortgage.

She'd bought the rights to captain the Titanic, the ship had already left port, and there was no turning back. If she didn't help this place float, she'd be forced to file for bankruptcy at the ripe old age of twenty-two. This would be even more pathetic since she had three and a half years of college education towards getting a degree in business management, with a minor in entrepreneurship.

Somewhere in the world, she imagined entire groups of business magazine editors laughing their asses off at her right now.

Later that night, worry over how to save the Midnight Saloon from the brink of bankruptcy filled the darkness of her bedroom, making it impossible to sleep. She gave up trying and decided to watch her favorite movie, *Cocktail*, instead. Maybe focusing on something else would help her relax enough to sort through her churning thoughts and figure out a plan.

Within minutes, she slipped into the movie's plot, caught up as always in the hero's never-ending ambitious drive for greatness. When she became a bartender for the Midnight Saloon three years ago to help pay for her college education, she fell in love with this movie. The hero and she had so much in common...they were both accidental bartenders with grandiose entrepreneurial dreams. Unlike the movie's hero, though, she intended to stay in college and finish getting her degree. She always figured that having a business management degree could help her get a loan to start up her own business.



And now here she was, already the owner of her own business, and not in the least proud of it. What the hell was she going to do to make it a success?

On the television screen, she watched Tom Cruise jump up onto the bar at a nightclub to yell out a poem. At one point, he swiveled his hips, making the female portion of the rabble scream with delight. Hmm. Too bad most of the Midnight Saloon's customers were male. Otherwise she could hire some stud to stand on the bar and swivel his hips to bring in the customers.

Well, why not have a woman do the same thing? Spouting poetry to the local lug heads would never get those wallets into the joint. But the sexy hip movements might work. Though they'd have to keep their clothes on. No way did she want to own a strip joint. She could just imagine the phone calls from her aunt if she went that far.

She glanced around her room, feeling the fire of inspiration smolder into life. Her gaze skittered to a stop on the glittering silver and green pile of pom poms by the front door. A symbol of her status as a member of her college's pom squad, tonight those metallic plastic strands called to her in an altogether different way. She couldn't tear her eyes away from them.

Then the perfect idea slammed into her with all the rush of a tsunami, an idea that was sure to open the floodgates and get those customers pouring in through the saloon's doors. And she knew just who to ask for help with this plan.

\* \* \* \* \*

The faint smell of fresh paint lingered, temporarily replacing the usually smoke filled air at the Midnight Saloon. But Brianna figured the smell was well worth it just to see the walls' dirty taupe surfaces become this vibrant, smoldering shade of red. True, she had to do all the painting herself late in the evenings after pom squad practice all week in order to save money. Spending the twenty-five dollars from the bar's till on paint

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supplies was a bit of a gamble. She just prayed tonight's grand reopening paid off.

She turned on the multi-deck stereo system hidden under the bar and cranked up the volume, filling the building with a changing selection of classic rock and roll, techno, and contemporary country music. No waiting on customers to choose ancient country music from the old jukebox to add to the atmosphere tonight. This was probably her one shot to get priceless word-of-mouth going about the Midnight Saloon's new look and ownership. If they couldn't get the joint hopping tonight, she might as well sell off the liquor supply and try to recoup her losses.

But Brianna refused to go down without a fight first.

"All right, ladies. Get out in that parking lot and do your thing," Brianna told the five chatting college pom squad dancers nearby. They grinned, nodded, and filed out through the bar's propped open door into the late February twilight. Pamela Jones, as close a friend as she had, turned in a flurry of her long blonde hair to give her a high five as she passed. As practiced, they spread out in a line across the front of the building so everyone driving past could see them. Then they hit their beginning pose.

Brianna brought her portable jambox outside, then hit the play button and turned on the bar's exterior lights. Instantly, all five women moved in unison through the dance routine. *My dance routine*, she thought with pride.

She watched them closely, making sure no one faltered on any of the steps so carefully chosen for their sex appeal. And the first Midnight Dream Girls definitely looked sexy in their homemade dance uniforms. Right now, the best Brianna could come up with for their unified look was matching tight white T-shirts with their sleeves cut off and their necklines cut asymmetrically, plus skintight black dance shorts underneath sacrificial blue jeans cut at the crotch and insides of each thigh to look like chaps. Thank goodness she'd followed Pamela's suggestion to glue sequins on the T-shirts and down the outer length of each pants leg. With this small addition, the dancers' every move caught the building's lights and reflected it back out to each passing motorist.

The cheap advertising trick must have worked because within an hour Brianna needed to pull the pom squad dancers back into the bar to make room for more cars in the parking lot. She gave them a half-hour break, then had them perform their real jobs...unique dance routines on top of the bar.

Sure, other bars had tried this trick before in larger cities across the U.S. But none of them had ever uniformed their dancers in matching outfits like this. And none of them had ever used a group of seasoned dancers already experienced at performing together as a team. Brianna's MDGs already had three years of experience dancing together before some of the rowdiest crowds possible at their college's home football and basketball games. Dancing before only a few hundred intoxicated people at a bar should be no sweat for them.

After only two hours into the grand reopening, Brianna sighed in relief. The joint was completely packed, both with appreciative college guys and their dates. She had a hunch that most of those women were friends of the bar dancers, but that was just fine by her. Later on, once those female customers got drunk enough, she'd get them up on the bar to do a little freestyle performing of their own. That would help spread the word among the local females and get them in the door.

She watched her dancers perform on the bar and couldn't stop smiling. *My dancers. My dance team.* Pride swelled within her chest, threatening to burst her lungs. It wasn't quite the dance studio she'd always dreamed of owning, but it was as close as she could afford to get.

Her smile slipped a little. *No, no owning a dance studio for you anymore, Bri. No way could you be trusted around a bunch of little innocents. What if you...?* She stopped that thought in its tracks and shuddered. No, she'd never lose control again. But still, it was better to be safe than sorry.

Someone shouted out her name over the bar's microphone. Her head popped up in surprise to find one of the dancers yelling at her to come up and dance with them.

Brianna shook her head frantically. *No, I can't get up there and dance!* She was the owner of this establishment. What in the world would everyone think of the bar owner dancing on her own bar? How many

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times had her aunt drilled into her the importance of developing a business owner's image in the minds of the customers? Her aunt would never do anything so crazy in front of her customers at her pottery shop. Brianna was already pushing the limits by dressing in a matching MDG uniform to blend in with her dancers. Dancing on the bar with them, however, was something altogether different.

But her fellow pom squad members wouldn't stop shouting and pointing at her. Within seconds, every rowdy patron there joined in, some even going so far as to tug on her bare arms and nudge her towards the bar.

Well, as the routine's choreographer, she did know the steps better than anyone else. And the urge to dance was so tempting.

Before she knew what she was doing, Brianna found herself up on the bar, hitting the beginning pose and waiting for the music to begin. Though it was a bar top and not their usual football stadium or basketball court, she still couldn't help but feel like she'd come home. That familiar thrill of excitement before the beginning of a performance raced over her skin, making her grin. Damn, she loved to dance!

Then the pumping beat of *Cherry Pie* by Warrant blasted around them and through her head. She didn't even have to think about which move came next. Instead, she focused on getting into the song, feeling sexy, and hopefully convincing every guy there to tell ten more friends to come back with him tomorrow night.

Still, as lost as she was within the moment, nothing could have stopped her from feeling like she'd just been punched in the gut when the new guy entered the bar.

His head stood out above the crowd. She guessed he was at least six foot three. His worn blue jeans and long-sleeved, green button-up shirt fairly screamed the casual clean look. She couldn't see his face at first because of the black baseball cap he wore over his clean cut dark brown hair. But something about him magnetized her focus to him, refused to let her look away.

Then he looked up at her, and she stopped breathing. Blue gray eyes, the color of a stormy ocean, stared back at her beneath thick black

eyebrows and even thicker black eyelashes. Thin yet sensual lips curved up in an easy smile, causing another punch to her gut.

*Damn. Look what just came through my door.*

On automation, her body continued to move her through the steps of the routine without help from her paralyzed brain. She turned around as practiced hundreds of times this week, breaking their eye contact and the hold he had on her mind. Remembering where she was and what she was doing, she quickly returned his smile, then turned her back to him as rehearsed and twisted herself down onto her knees.

Steven Daniels watched the redhead's taut, lean body undulate down onto the surface of the bar and felt his jaw drop. Now resting on widespread knees with her perfectly molded butt to the crowd, he couldn't see even an ounce of fat on that body.

The dancer grabbed the sides of her head, whipping her luscious, dark red hair from side to side wildly, then threw her head back, arched her back, and looked at him upside down. So much for his just coming here for a drink and a pool game or two.

"Oh hell, I'm screwed," he whispered and sensed his resolve to stay focused on his studies beginning to fade away.

He'd always been a sucker for a redhead, but this one had a body made for sex and molded from sin. And those emerald green eyes, the way they flashed and locked onto him, making him feel like the only man in the entire building... Yep, he was a lost man, and he was man enough to admit it. He only hoped she was taken by one of the other many men so obviously lusting after her body right now. Preferably she was even married to one of those jokers. Better yet, if she could just be married and a blithering idiot, he'd be doubly safe from her sex appeal. There was nothing like a dumb girl constantly running her mouth about nothing at all to totally turn him off. Maybe he'd get really lucky and this particular firebrand would be one of those types. Then he wouldn't be so damn tempted to throw his studies to the side and get involved, seriously involved, with a certain flame haired bar dancer.

When the song ended, he watched the redhead jump down behind the bar and start serving drinks as if there was a sudden national water

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shortage. Deciding to play it cool, he eased through the crowd to the bar and laid down a five dollar bill.

“What’ll it be?” the redhead yelled out to him, curving her shiny red lips into another one of those mischievous looking grins.

“A beer and a dance,” he yelled back, then almost groaned out loud. So much for playing it cool and staying focused on his studies.

### Chapter Three

Brianna tilted her head. Oh boy, this one came with some confidence for a change. Damn she loved a confident guy! Maybe he'd be an arrogant ass too, though, and she wouldn't have any more problems to deal with. Nothing like too much arrogance to turn her off completely. Besides, she definitely did not have the ability to keep a relationship going right now, at least not until she sorted out all the recent changes in her life. Becoming the owner of the Midnight Saloon being only one of them.

"We don't have a dance floor here," she yelled back, taking his money and giving him a beer with change back.

"Trust me, I'll find room," Steven promised, taking a long swig of his beer. His eyes never left hers, though, sending a thrill skittering over her skin.

"Maybe later when things calm down," she agreed without thinking, then wanted to slap herself. She didn't have time for a dance, no matter how good looking the partner. But the logical side of her brain had disconnected with her mouth. "What's your name?" *Great, Bri, encourage him some more, why don't you?*

"Steven. Yours?"

"Brianna."

Steven nodded, grinned at her again, then slid away from the bar. "All right, Brianna. I guess I know where to find you later."

Brianna watched him move through the crowd. She liked the way he managed to get through all those tightly pressed bodies without any

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sign of hesitation, yet apparently was polite enough not to tick anyone off. He must not be *too* arrogant. Getting through a half-drunk crowd wasn't easy as a scantily clad, good looking woman. Getting through a testosterone filled group like this one as a tall, good looking man was another feat altogether.

*But I don't need a complication like this in my life right now, maybe not ever.* What if she let down her barriers around him? What if one night she lost control of her immortal side and ruined his life forever? Or ended his life completely?

Sighing, she tried to focus on just taking care of her customers, serving up drinks as fast as her arms could move, often pouring several drinks at the same time. Yet still the frantic pace couldn't make her stop smiling every time she remembered their brief conversation.

After an hour, she decided enough was enough. Maybe the cure to get him out of her head was to talk to him some more. Hopefully he had the intelligence of the pool stick with which he was now playing billiards. Yep, that'd fix her racing heart and help blow him from her mind.

She let her employees know she was taking a break, then exited at the end of the bar and slid through the crowd. Several times, she had to stop and listen to excited men's compliments, but she didn't really mind. They all looked happy to her, and that's what mattered most. Everyone in this city could use a lot more happiness like that. Her included.

Though he was bent over the pool table lining up another shot, the curve of his grin revealed he'd seen her approach.

"Ready for that dance now?" he asked, pocketing the six ball in the left corner.

"Sure. But first I'd like to see just how you propose to make room for us to dance. There's gotta be at least a hundred people packed in here tonight!" All around her, she felt people constantly bumping into her. The repeated innocent contacts made her mouth water and her knees weaken. Damn, it must be almost time to drink blood again, whether she wanted to or not. But that was a problem she'd deal with later. For now, she shook her head and tried to refocus.



Steven handed the pool stick to another man nearby, then held out his left hand to her. The stereo system switched to *Iris* by The Goo Goo Dolls, one of the few slower songs Brianna had set up to play in order to bring the frenzied crowd down a bit for a short change in pace. But her heart rate sped up as she took his hand and eased closer to him until one of her feet rested between his. Brianna felt his right hand gently hold the small of her back while his other hand relaxed in an opened position, allowing her to hold on around the base of his thumb.

His hands were dry, large enough to dwarf her own, and lightly sprinkled with dark hair across the back of each. Only inches away from her face, she noticed matching dark hair at the base of his throat, barely revealed by his shirt's opened collar. He must've grown hot in the close quarters of the building; he'd rolled his sleeves halfway up his forearms, revealing more finely spaced hair that brushed and tickled her arms.

In the brief silence between them, the sad, yearning words of the song crept through her senses, insinuating themselves within her heart. She almost laughed out loud at the impossibility of it all and had to wonder if she'd lost all her good sense. Why in the world was she dancing with him? Like the song, she too wanted to hide from the world. How could anyone possibly understand what she'd become, when she couldn't even understand it? But God what she wouldn't give to be with someone normal, to be known and accepted for what she was.

"Hmm, you're kind of short," Steven joked, lifting her out of her sad thoughts. A surprised smile grew on her face. He was right; the top of her head barely reached his broad shoulders. He ducked his head, bringing his mouth closer to her ear and allowing them to talk more easily over the noise of the crowd around them.

"I'm five foot three. How tall are you?" She tilted her head to look up at him and was surprised to find their faces were now only inches apart. The brim of his hat formed a partial shade from the overhead lights, making their part of the room feel dimmer, more secluded.

"Six foot four. So, worked here long?" Steven used light pressure at her back to guide her into a slow sway in time with the music.

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A customer bumped into her back, pushing her forward against him. The sudden feel of her breasts firmly thrust against his broad chest as his jeans zipper bumped into her lower stomach had them both inhaling sharp breaths. Brianna looked away, trying hard not to blush. She didn't know why she suddenly felt so nervous or excited with this guy. After all, she wasn't a virgin. But he was starting to make her body feel like one. Too bad her thoughts were anything but virginal.

"Um, yeah, I've worked here for going on four years. It's paying for my college education. So what do you do for a living?" With the conversation safely pointed back at Steven, she felt brave enough to look up and meet his eyes again. Did he know she was the new owner? Was this the real reason behind his come on? Something about the heat within his eyes told her otherwise.

"Bronsville U, fourth year," he said, naming the local university she also attended. "Then I'm off to medical school for another four years."

He stared down at the curve of her bare shoulder and wondered if he could convince her to let him count her freckles sometime. They looked like a fine dusting of brown sugar on vanilla ice cream. Would they taste as sweet too? He tried to force away the carnal thoughts his body kept serving up.

Brianna shook her head. He thought he heard her mutter something to herself like "of course he'd be a smart one" but over the loud music and even louder crowd, he couldn't be sure.

"What?" he asked, leaning in closer until they were almost cheek to cheek so he could hear better.

She shook her head before responding, "I don't know how you can stand the thought of being in school for so long. I can't wait to graduate at the end of this year and get on with my life."

Steven laughed. "Yeah, sometimes it does feel like I've signed on to be a career student. So what are you majoring in?" He tried to remain focused on her replies, but kept getting distracted by the way the sides of their boots brushed against each other with each shuffling step. It made him think of other anatomical parts he wished were brushing against each other. He pushed those thoughts away, struggling to focus on their

conversation. Damn, she was making him think like some kind of horny high school kid.

"Business management, with a minor in entrepreneurship." Her nose accidentally brushed his cheek, and her face turned a pretty shade of pink.

A customer bumped into Brianna again, harder this time, shoving her into Steven roughly enough to make her lose her balance. He held her up until she found her footing again, then pushed the guy off her a little. When the drunk still seemed oblivious, Steven tapped the guy's shoulder to get his attention.

"Hey, buddy, that's twice now that you've knocked into this lady. Do you mind giving us some room?"

Brianna liked the way Steven said this firmly, yet without growling at the poor kid. A quick glance up at his face showed that he was no longer smiling, but he wasn't giving the drunk an ugly look yet either. Kilo would've lost all control and ripped the guy's head off. Literally. She heard the guy mumble an apology and sensed the customer move away from them a little.

Steven sighed, then returned his touch against her lower back and smiled down at her once more. "Now, where were we? Oh yeah, you were telling me that you're basically a business genius in the making, right?"

She laughed, lightened by the way he fed her craving for the normal. "Not exactly a genius. So much of business management isn't taught in school." The song ended, and she frowned, reluctant to leave him. But her break time was over and they were short on bartenders tonight. "Speaking of which, I'd better get back and spell one of the bartenders."

He nodded and lowered his arms. "Would you consider dancing with me again on your next break?" He seemed to want to ask her something else, yet hesitated for some reason. Could he be considering asking her out? Or was it too soon for him to want to ask her for a date?

She grinned up at him, catching the faintest whiff of cologne, something cool and clean smelling. "I'll try. But I can't promise you

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anything. The owner doesn't always get a break like everyone else. Thanks for the dance, Steven."

He watched her go and blew out a long breath to steady himself. As his younger brothers liked to say...holy moly. He was going to have to go to the bathroom and adjust himself now just from dancing with her. And sweet lord, but she was smart too.

Then he thought about her last reply. Did she say she was...the owner of this bar?

\* \* \* \* \*

Brianna almost dropped a bottle of beer for the second time that night. She didn't know how she knew it, but she could feel Steven watching her all night long. Every time she looked up and out across the room, he was just taking a shot at the billiards table or drinking his beer. A couple of times he waved briefly at her. She always found that easy going grin aimed right at her.

It was enough to make any woman drop stuff right and left.

Eventually she gave up trying to serve drinks. Despite her years of experience behind the bar, she wasn't doing anyone a bit of good tonight. And she was the owner, for heavens' sake! So she decided a little customer schmoozing might be a better idea. Making her way through the crowd, she stopped to tell the patrons a quick thanks for coming to the grand reopening and checked to be sure they were having a good time. With every enthusiastic response, her grin widened. She was doing it. She was really making a go of this place!

Bolstered by the crowd's excitement, she decided to go talk with Steven again. After all, tonight was turning out to be the best night she'd had in a long time. Maybe she ought to give him a chance and really put the icing on this cake.

"Hey, how's the pool playing going?" she asked, bringing two bottles of beer in the brand he'd ordered earlier. She handed him one, noticing that his first bottle was at last empty. Amazing, the guy had

managed to nurse one beer for several hours now. Most men she knew chugged them down too fast to even taste them.

"Thanks," Steven said as he accepted the fresh drink. He started to take a sip and she blushed with embarrassment. Damn, she'd forgotten to open them. Grinning at her, he deftly twisted the sharp ridged metal caps off both beers. "The games are going okay. I'm a little rusty though. Been too busy studying to play much lately."

"Where do you usually play?" She took a long gulp of her beer, feeling its cold liquid cooling off her suddenly heated insides. Too bad it couldn't slake the dark thirst that seemed to be steadily growing inside her. *Don't think about that now*, she told herself while redirecting her focus back to the conversation.

"Back at my parents' home. We've got a pool table in the basement that me and my brothers like to play on sometimes." Steven shoved one hand into the pocket of his jeans while taking another drink of his beer, unknowingly making the worn denim fabric stretch tighter across his crotch and its subtle bulge.

Brianna suddenly felt the need to gulp her beer a little faster.

"Hey, wanna dance while we talk?" He tapped his fingers against the side of his beer bottle in time with the music.

"You must really like to dance," she teased even as she stepped closer to him.

"Yeah, I do. Though I figured you might too, considering how well you danced up on the bar. Have you had training or something?"

"A few years. I also dance on the college's pom squad."

Steven tilted his head back a bit in surprise. "Really? Well, I'll have to look for you at the next game." He took a quick swig of his drink to fortify himself, then took the plunge. "Listen, would you consider—"

"Brianna!" Pamela called out across the bar with the help of the microphone. The blonde held her wrist up, then pointed at her watch.

Damn. Steven bit back his frustration.

Brianna nodded and waved her off. "Looks like it's time to announce last call for drinks and get ready to shut this place down for the night. Amazing how many people came tonight, don't you think?"

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He nodded. "Yeah. Though I'd definitely have more performances up on the bar. Entertainment like that tends to make guys thirsty, you know?"

She laughed. "Which reminds me of something I meant to do earlier. Catch you later?"

He grinned and gave a short nod, then watched her hurry back to the bar. Hungry for more of her, he watched her every movement as she climbed back up on the bar with the microphone.

"Ladies and gentlemen, my name's Brianna Cochoran. I'm the new owner of this fine establishment, and I just wanna say a big thank you to everyone for coming out here tonight!"

"You rock!" A drunken male voice yelled out, causing her grin to stretch wider.

"Why thank you! I happen to think this crowd rocked tonight too! Now listen, the law says we've got ten minutes before we've got to stop serving drinks. Which means it's time for the last call of the night. But the fun's not quite over. After last call, I want to see some of you ladies in the crowd show us your moves up on this bar."

Brianna looked out over the shining faces below her, spotting several girls who looked eager to be up there with her. Yep, they looked toasted enough to do a bar dance or two.

"So with that announcement...last call of the night!"

She turned the mike off, then hopped down off the bar and helped the other bartenders serve up the mixed drinks. She let the Midnight Dream Girls handle all the beer orders since none of them had any bartending experience. Later in the week while the bar was closed, she'd work with them on handling money and pouring shots. For tonight, she was so dang proud of their dancing that she struggled not to hug them just yet in thanks. As fast as the orders for last drinks were coming in, there was no time for anything but serving up drinks.

Joe flicked the lights for her when the ten minutes were up. Having no desire to see her bar shut down by the local authorities just when it appeared to be on its way back up, she yelled out to her staff to stop

taking orders and finish filling only the orders they'd already accepted money for.

Once the last drinks were handed out, Brianna ignored a few groans from customers who hadn't gotten their orders in quick enough, and climbed back on the bar. "Okay, you hot mamas in the crowd. Your guys wanna see you shake your stuff up here! So who's going to get up on this bar with me and shake it already?"

She held her breath, a little worried that none of the females below her would be brave enough to come up. Then she cheered into the mike as several solicitous men helped three ladies up onto the bar. Her staff started the music on an eighties classic rock song, cranked up the volume, and yelled out encouragement to the amateur bar dancers.

Within half a minute, all three ladies had loosened up, let their inhibitions go, and were giving the crowd a real eyeful with every bit of curve they had. When one woman started to remove her shirt, Brianna groaned under her breath and signaled for her staff to help that lady down. Just what she needed, to be fined on her first night as the new owner for allowing lewd behavior to take place on her bar in the form of one amateur stripper. But a Midnight Dream Girl replaced the intoxicated woman, laughing and dancing with the remaining two amateurs until the song ended.

"All right everyone. Give these hot ladies a hand!"

The bar erupted in appreciative hollering, punctuated by more than a few wolf whistles as the volunteer dancers got down off the bar. The energy from the crowd zinged through her blood, rushed to her head, and made her feel a little tipsy with laughter. All five of the Midnight Dream Girls took over the bar once more to perform their final dance of the evening to the song *Pour Some Sugar on Me*. Feeling high on success, she agreed to join them, laughing during the intricate foot stomping sequence, pretending to be naughty and tough during the mock fist fight.

Then they got into the real meat of the routine, which used footwork and hip grinding from one of their old pom squad sideline routines. Glimpses of matching movements from the line of dancers on either side of her made her heart clench up with a feeling of pride, and

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more than that, a sense of family. When she was dancing with her team, she never felt alone. Too bad the sensation couldn't last.

It was over far too soon. The end of the song signaled the end of what had been a truly successful night of business. Just how much of a financial success, though, they'd find out after they cleared the customers out and counted up the money they'd taken in.

An hour later with a lot of Joe the bouncer's help, they managed to get every last customer on his or her way home. Most of the time Brianna spent on the phone calling up taxis for the more intoxicated customers who could afford the cab fare. With as much business as she was sending the taxi company tonight, maybe she could get some kind of a sales commission from them. She made a mental note to check on this. If the Midnight Saloon couldn't get some compensation from the customers it was sending the taxi drivers, at least the bar's customers ought to get a discount.

"All the customers are gone," Joe announced as he returned in from the parking lot. He spotted a lone figure remaining near the pool table. With an ominous scowl, he headed in that direction.

Then she recognized the familiar green shirt and black cap. *Steven.* "Joe, wait, he's with me."

Nodding, Joe turned around and began throwing away beer bottles instead from the tables lining the bar's walls. While the rest of her staff cleaned up, she headed over to that last, remaining customer.

"So you waited for me after all," she said with a smile, trying to hold back the giddiness threatening to squeeze out the air from her lungs. *Settle down, Bri, it's no big deal. It's not like you haven't flirted with guys before.* For some reason, though, this felt like a lot more than just simple flirting. More like skirting along the edge of a cliff.

"Yep, told you I would," Steven replied. He stood up and helped her put away the pool sticks and cubes of blue chalk.

They worked together quietly to clean up the back end of the bar. Once every surface was cleared off and ready for a wipe down, she smiled and jerked her head towards the bar's front entrance. He followed her out



to the parking lot, then skidded to a halt beside the cherry red motorcycle near the front door.

He let out a low whistle. "Now that's a sweet ride. One of your employees'?"

Brianna shook her head, stroking the bike's black leather seat lovingly. "Nope, it's mine."

His eyebrows shot up, making her grin. "You ride a crotch rocket? Now that's an interesting bit of information. What else should I know about you that's wild and different?"

*Oh, maybe the fact that I'm a vampire too?* She didn't voice this thought out loud though. No sense scaring the guy off so soon. "Only one way to find out."

"Which I was actually going to ask you earlier before we were interrupted." Steven drew in a long breath and shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "Would you be interested in seeing me sometime outside of the bar?"

She wanted to say, "It's about damn time you asked." Instead, she gave him what she hoped was a calm smile. "Sure. What'd you have in mind?"

"Well, maybe we could go on a real date, just the two of us, somewhere we didn't have to yell at each other to be heard?" He stepped closer to her and gravel crunched beneath his boots.

*Yes, finally! But play it cool, Bri.* She nodded her head. "That would be nice." Digging in the back pocket of her jeans, she pulled out one of the bar's coasters and a pen she'd grabbed in hopes of just such a need. She wrote her name and phone number in large print for him so none of the numbers could be mistaken, then handed it over.

Surprisingly, he read the numbers out loud. "Did I read your number correctly?"

"Yes," Brianna replied with a chuckle. "I have to say, that's the first time a guy's ever double checked my phone number before."

He shrugged with a smile while sliding the coaster into his back pocket. "I like to double check the facts. Prevents mistakes that way. For instance, it'd be a shame if I tried to call you in a few hours and found I

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couldn't read one of the digits in your phone number." Steven moved a step closer to her until their toes were touching.

She gave a brief nod, realizing once more that she had to look up to see his face. "Yeah, that would be a shame. For the both of us."

They were so close that, when he sighed, she could feel his warm breath caress her cheek. "Brianna, I know we just met tonight. But I'll regret it if I don't at least ask. Can I kiss you?"

Her mouth opened of its own accord as if even her lips would answer for her without any input from her brain. She wanted to say "oh hell yes, please do." But she stopped herself from answering just in time.

Steven was right, they had just met tonight. With only two short dances and as many brief conversations between them, it was too soon to get so physical. And yet everything in her body still demanded she say yes.

Instead, she just managed to shake her head no. "Not until our first date. A hug would be all right, though."

She felt her insides warm up in response to his slow smile. He wrapped his arms around her as if hugging fragile glass, then surprised her by softly kissing the top of her bare shoulder. The sensation of his lips softly pressing against her skin imprinted itself within her mind and stole her breath, and she knew she'd be thinking about it for the rest of the night. When he released her and took his body warmth with him, she shivered.

"I'd better go." She ducked her head, not wanting him to see how his sweet gesture had affected her.

"Talk to you soon," Steven promised, watching her walk back into the bar. After the front door swung shut behind her, he stared at her motorcycle and subconsciously rubbed a hand over his still tingling lips. Oh yeah, he was way in over his head with this one. But he'd be damned if he wasn't looking forward to the ride and where it could take them.

## Chapter Four

Her phone rang at three o'clock the next afternoon just as she was trying to get the energy up to roll out of bed. Thankful for the excuse to stay horizontal a little longer, she grabbed the cordless phone and mumbled a sleepy hello.

"Good morning, sunshine," a sexy voice rumbled through the receiver, instantly quick-starting her heart into high gear. "Or rather, good afternoon. Did I wake you?"

She had high hopes as to who this caller might be, but didn't want to look like an idiot by assuming his identity. "May I ask who's calling?"

A short pause filled the line. "Uh, it's Steven. Steven Daniels. We met last night..."

A smile automatically spread across her face. "Yes, I remember who you are. I just wanted to make sure it was you and not..."

"Not one of the five hundred other guys who had the hots for you last night?"

Her laughter was equally quick and just as automatic. "Oh, so you had the hots for me last night?" she couldn't resist asking. Excellent. His calling the day after meeting her, instead of waiting a couple of days, meant he wasn't playing games with her yet. Maybe she was being too optimistic, but she hoped they could start right off without the game playing and stay on that honest track with each other. There was nothing

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more exhausting, frustrating, and stupid than trying to keep up with someone else's mind games.

"Maybe. With an outfit like the one you had on, though, who could blame me?"

"Well, thank you for the compliments." Brianna played with the ends of her hair, letting their tips brush over the crest of each breast above the spaghetti strap tank top she'd slept the day away in.

"Anytime. So listen, I had an idea for our first date."

Brianna closed her eyes, letting his voice rumble through her mind and over her body. Good grief, the guy could make a fortune at phone sex with his voice alone. He could be reading the phone book to her right now and just about bring her to orgasm! Or maybe this was just a symptom of her having gone without sex for the last two years. She peeked down at her breasts and visually confirmed what she'd suspected...yep, her nipples were completely hard just from talking with Steven.

Then she realized he'd fallen silent, and she had no idea what he'd just said. Embarrassed, she reminded herself not to lose focus like that again. "I'm sorry. I got a little distracted there. Could you repeat...whatever it was you just said?"

Steven hesitated, wondering if maybe he was losing his skills in the charm department, then gave her the summarized version. "I said I'd like to cook for you at my place if you're interested. Would Sunday night be too soon, or do you have to work at the bar then?"

"Oh. We're not allowed to serve alcohol on Sundays, so a Sunday night date would be perfect. Hang on a second and let me grab some paper and something to write with. I'm still in bed and..." Damn, now why had she revealed that to him?

"Oh really?" he asked, his voice deepening a notch. "At three in the afternoon? You must've had a lot of cleaning up to do last night after I left."

"Yeah, we did. But it was worth it." Actually, what had kept her out so late was counting up all the cash they'd made. Which definitely had made the entire night worth it.

She searched her messy side table's round glass surface in the dim afternoon lighting, then ended up yanking on the tasseled cord of the lamp to help her see better. Finally, she found some paper and a pen to take down his address with. For good measure, she also wrote down what time to be there at his place. Knowing her, she'd get busy with paperwork tomorrow afternoon and forget if she was supposed to show up at his place at six or seven o'clock.

Brianna figured he'd hang up after setting up the date with her. But he surprised her again by staying on the line to talk. They ended up spending an hour on the phone, sharing funny stories about his little brothers' latest antics and some of the funnier moments she had witnessed while on her pom squad. She wished she could have shared more stories about her own family, but she didn't have any. An only child, her parents had died when she was in kindergarten, leaving her to grow up with her always serious aunt, from whom she'd gained so much of her strength but not a lot of funny memories. Too bad her aunt hadn't taught her how to fight off nasty vampires at least.

Thankfully Brianna was able to dodge certain facts and recent memories about herself so she wouldn't freak Steven out. After all, up until two months ago when she'd run into Kilo, she'd been as normal as everyone else. So she'd simply steer clear of anything recent in her past while talking with Steven, and they shouldn't have any problems.

Speaking of problems, she wasn't feeling tired only from working late this morning. She had a sinking suspicion her unmet immortal needs played the larger part in her sagging energy today. Her vampire body's internal clock practically ticked within her head now. But what could she do? Without the ability to read human minds yet, the only way she could drink blood with a clear conscience was to catch an evil doer in the act. And what were the odds of that happening again two months in a row?

Taking an innocent's blood wasn't even an option. So unless she happened upon a bad guy in the act of committing a heinous crime soon, she had only one other option to keep her flagging energy up. And that was to have sex with a human and exchange a little of her immortality for their human energy. But she wasn't the type to sleep with a stranger. And

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she'd just set up her first date with Steven for tomorrow night, so they couldn't be ready for that anytime soon either.

Sighing, Brianna gently brought the conversation to a close, pleading a massive amount of laundry to do before she had to be back at the bar at five-thirty. Steven said he'd see her Sunday night, then waited for her to hang up first, leaving her with a lingering smile.

Though the Midnight Dream Girls didn't perform in the parking lot this time, Saturday night at the Midnight Saloon was even more crowded than the grand reopening. So much so that Joe the bouncer actually had to count heads and turn a fair number of latecomers away in order to keep the crowd under the building's legal limit. Brianna had the Midnight Dream Girls perform several times on the bar throughout the evening and allowed amateurs to join them in freestyle dancing for two songs halfway through the night. Apparently, word had spread among the city's females, as tonight's group of customers was more evenly balanced in gender. Brianna also had to limit the number of volunteers who could dance on the bar. She could already see that the bar's surface needed to be sanded down to provide a less slippery performance floor, and its internal structure would need additional support before too long.

All night long, she found herself searching the bar, looking for a particular tall man in a black baseball cap. But Steven was nowhere to be found. She didn't know whether to be happy he wasn't stalking her, or disappointed that he hadn't come tonight. In his absence, performing with the Midnight Dream Girls wasn't nearly as fun, so she only performed with them during the first routine of the night. By the time she washed the stench of cigarettes and alcohol off her body at the end of the night and fell into bed around 4 a.m., she was desperately looking forward to her date.

Tired as she was without any human blood or sex to sustain her vampire needs, Brianna still couldn't sleep past noon. Her eyelids popped open of their own accord hours before her alarm went off, and all she could think about was her date with Steven that night. Unable to go back to sleep, she ended up spending the entire afternoon getting ready for her date, then realized she had no clue what to wear.

Since she would be riding her motorcycle over to Steven's, a skirt or dress wouldn't be very practical. But she wanted to look sexy for him. Finally she opted for loose black slacks over her knee-high black leather boots, plus a soft pink sweater that had a crossover design in the front which would subtly accentuate her cleavage. She braided her hair for the ride over so the wind wouldn't whip it into a frenzied snarl, added her jacket and helmet, and was ready to go with plenty of time to spare.

Thank goodness Brianna left early for Steven's house, because she'd never been good with directions. Even his detailed directions had her more than a little lost until a helpful boy working at one of the gas stations along the way straightened her back out. At two minutes after seven, she pulled to a stop in front of an olive green and white duplex.

Double checking the address Steven had given her with the black numbers on the right side of the duplex, she parked in his driveway between his black Toyota Sequoia truck and the front yard, then took a deep breath and let it out to calm her jittery nerves. It was just a first date, for Pete's sake, and not even a blind one. What was *with* her nerves tonight?

Brianna removed her helmet, unbraided and finger combed her hair, checked her makeup in the bike's side view mirror, then headed for the apartment's brown painted front door.

She pushed the doorbell and waited. After a minute and no response, she rapped her fist hard on the door. Yet another minute went by. She had just raised her fist to knock again when the door flew open to reveal her ultimate fantasy.

Steven stood before her in a bright white v-neck T-shirt which stretched tightly across his impressively wide shoulders and flopped a little loosely at his narrow waist. The undecorated cotton disappeared into worn blue jeans. A plain brown leather belt featuring a rectangular gold colored buckle added a touch of class to the otherwise overly casual outfit. Her gaze traveled down his gorgeous length, then skidded to a halt at his pale white bare feet. With some effort, she pulled her eyes back up his body, pleased to find his close-cropped dark brown hair free of any hat

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tonight. Though she had to admit she was even more thrilled at the sight of the wooden spoon in his hand.

*Be still my heart, a barefooted man with a cooking utensil in hand.* Good lord, how could her hormones or her mind possibly fight against this?

"Hey, come on in," Steven said, ducking forward with a smile to give her a quick peck on the cheek before striding back inside and disappearing around a corner to the left.

Trying to steel her resolve for the evening to come, Brianna wiped her feet on the thick tan-colored welcome mat, then stepped into Steven's territory.

"Make yourself at home," he called out, his voice accompanied by the severe sound of clattering metal.

To Brianna's practiced ear, it sounded like an oven door being thrown open and something being pulled out of the appliance, possibly in great haste. At least, every time Brianna tried to use an oven, she'd ended up removing the attempted dish in great haste. Of course, in her case, she'd never quite managed to watch the dish close enough and always ended up burning it. A few seconds after thinking this, the smell of something sweet and burned wafted her way.

Stifling a chuckle, she strolled around Steven's small living room with its miraculously stain-free beige carpeting, studying his apartment to pass the time. The furniture fairly screamed owned-by-a-college-student, including the typical futon couch. At least this one featured a beautiful mahogany frame with a mattress covered in spotless black. Not an inch of clutter met her eyes, which was somewhat of a concern for her. She'd never been known for her cleaning or organizational skills. What would he think if he ever saw her place?

To distract herself from her nerves, she focused on the living room's wall art. A small, darkly stained wooden shelf held a statue of an eagle carved from matching stained wood. Then the shelf itself caught her eye. The portion of the bracket that was nailed to the wall was formed out of black painted metal which featured the silhouette of a bear walking between two pine trees. Interesting. In addition to this shelf, the rest of the living room's three walls featured framed prints of eagles, wolves, and



one oddly out-of-place painting depicting a rainy rural street scene. Very interesting.

"Well, the cookies are more than a little done," Steven said with a soft chuckle as he joined her in the living room. "Sorry about that. They were in the midst of burning when you arrived."

"I appreciate your valiant efforts to save them," Brianna replied with a laugh. Wow, he'd gone to the effort to make her cookies too?

"So, would you like to eat while it's hot off the stove? Or I can put it on to warm if you'd rather sit and talk for a while first." Steven rested his hands on his hips, looking utterly charming and relaxed. Great, so she was the only one nervous about tonight.

"I've gotta admit, I'm a little hungry for something home cooked," she confessed.

"All right, we'll eat now and talk later, then," Steven said, nodding his head to the right. She followed him over to a small, green and wood veneer topped table on the opposite side of the apartment, then sat down in the matching chair he held out for her. With a silly flourish that made her laugh, he presented her with a paper napkin, then took two long strides into the kitchenette to grab a bottle of wine.

He had her wineglass half filled with the dark red liquid before he paused. "Uh, I'm sorry, I should've asked. Would you like something besides wine? I've got soda, beer, milk, and water, too."

Brianna smiled and shook her head. "No, the wine'll be great. Thanks for asking, though."

Steven filled his wineglass, left the bottle on the table, then headed back into the kitchen. Sneaking a glance at the nearby stove, she spotted a cooling rack filled with semi-charred brown and black circles. The fact that he'd even attempted to bake her some fresh cookies for dessert was unbelievably cute. She ducked her head to hide a smile while her hands stayed busy arranging the napkin across her lap.

He quickly returned carrying a large pot to the table. Inside, she spotted spaghetti and her stomach growled.

"Was that yours, or mine?" Steven asked with a laugh.

Brianna grinned. "Mine, I think. Told you I was a little hungry."

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"Then please, allow me." Steven used two wooden spoons to transfer a ridiculous portion of spaghetti onto her plate, then did the same with his own plate.

"Uh, Steven, no matter how good your cooking is, there's no way I can eat all this," she felt compelled to warn him.

"That's all right. Feel free to eat however much of it you like. Garlic bread?"

Brianna accepted a slice of the buttery golden French bread, then paused. Hmm, had he intentionally chosen to make garlic bread as a sign that he didn't plan on kissing her good night later on due to their garlic breath? Or was this a typical guy-type of choice and he'd just prepared what traditionally went with spaghetti?

Lost in these thoughts for a moment, she tried the spaghetti and hummed with pleasure. "This is really good. Can I ask what brand of sauce you used?"

"My own. I made it from scratch."

Brianna arched an eyebrow at him in surprise. He had to be joking.

"Okay," he corrected. "Not totally from scratch. I mean, I didn't hand squish the tomatoes or anything. I just used tomato paste and my own seasonings. I can teach you how to make it sometime, if you like." Steven dug into his own spaghetti, heedless of the tiny drops of sauce that splattered onto his white shirt.

The contrast between those red drops and his white shirt suddenly caught her gaze and had her staring in fixation. They looked similar to blood droplets on pale skin. She tried to swallow past the rising thump of her heartbeat in her throat.

"Brianna?" Steven asked, snapping her back to the present. He glanced down at his shirt with a small frown. "Crap. I hate it when I do that. Aw well, that's what they make bleach for, right?"

She cleared her throat, nodded her head, and returned to her spaghetti. Damn, her vampire side sure was making its needs known loud and clear tonight. But it would just have to wait.

Desperate for something else to think about, she mentioned the painting of the neighborhood scene on his living room wall.

"Oh, that's my dad's work. He painted that for me, oh, three or four years ago, I think." Steven sipped his wine briefly, then tore into a slice of bread.

"Your dad's a professional artist?" Brianna sipped her wine extra slowly. The last thing she needed tonight was to lose control of herself from too much alcohol. She had no desire to drink Steven's blood on their first date, if ever. If she did, she had a feeling she could pretty much rule out any chance of getting another date with him.

"No, it's just his hobby. He likes to make hand painted copies of calendar art. Not forgeries, of course, just his own version of someone else's work." Steven finished eating, wiped his hands off on a paper napkin, then leaned his elbows on the table and drank some more wine. "So tell me more about you. I've gotta admit I'm more than a little impressed that you're still in college and yet already own your own bar. How'd you come to own the Midnight Saloon, anyways?"

*Oh boy, she thought. Now how to answer this one.* "Well, I started working there as a waitress, then a bartender, during my first year of college to help pay the bills. Then a week ago, my boss made me a deal I couldn't refuse for the bar. And I accepted."

"Unless you managed to get a heck of a business loan, you must have saved up for a long time. Or did your parents help you out?"

Brianna shook her head, trying to keep her face expressionless. "My parents died when I was six from a car accident. I grew up with my Aunt Nora. She's got a huge old Victorian mansion, but she's definitely not what you'd call well off."

"So you bought the Midnight Saloon with your life's savings." Steven nodded slowly at her. "That's pretty damn gutsy of you. Though I think your gamble's paying off already, judging by the number of people who were there for that grand reopening."

"I noticed you weren't among the returning customers last night," Brianna mentioned, hesitant now. Should she have said that? Was she revealing too much of her feelings now?

"I wondered if you'd realize I wasn't there." Steven reached out to her face and gently wiped away a bit of spaghetti sauce from her lower

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lip. "Glad to hear you did. Actually, I spent yesterday trying to figure out what to cook for you."

Brianna smiled though her breath hitched in her chest at his soft touch. "It's really sweet of you to cook for me. No one's ever done that for me before. Well, no guy has, at least."

Steven nodded in satisfaction. "That's good to hear. I'd hate to be like all your other boyfriends. If you haven't noticed here, I'm trying to make an impression."

"I noticed," she teased, though she felt anything but light and teasing. "The feeling's mutual."

Their eyes met and held.

Taking a chance, Steven covered her small, pale hand with his larger one and was pleased to see Brianna's sweet lips curve up into a slow smile.

In response, he felt the blood rush down to his dick, reminding him to tread carefully. Regardless of Brianna's choice of business to run, he could tell this woman had a lot of class ingrained within her. She deserved a lot better than a one-night stand, and he wanted a lot more from her than that. In fact, his instincts told him this one was definitely a long-term keeper. And his instincts had never failed him before.

Since he doubted his instincts were failing him now about Brianna, he slid his hand away from her and tried to refocus his thoughts away from his wayward cock. This wasn't some flash in the pan he was trying to create tonight. He wanted to see if he could build something stronger with her. So he'd just have to rein in his raging hormones and get a grip on himself.

## Chapter Five

"Would you like to watch a movie?" Steven offered, sliding his chair back from the table.

"Sure," Brianna replied, wiping her mouth one last time with her napkin before following his lead.

He led her into the living room, got onto his knees in front of his television, and searched through his video collection. He read off each title to her, figuring since he'd seen them all at least seven times, she might as well choose for the both of them. She had a hard time actually considering the selection he listed, though. Her imagination was too busy picturing him on his knees like that, but straddling her hips instead of the carpet. She'd never wanted so badly to be a piece of flooring.

She suggested one of the *Star Wars* movies since it was the only title she registered hearing. "I've never seen any of them before."

"Are you kidding me? You've never seen any of the *Star Wars* movies?" Steven asked.

This launched them into a long discussion of the many merits of the movie series, its genius creator according to Steven, and the improvements of modern technology used in the recent episodes versus the timeless classic acting depicted in the first episodes produced.

But she ended up not seeing much of the movie as they lounged at opposite ends of the couch. She was too engrossed in learning about him and his family, the closeness they took for granted, and why he'd decided to become a doctor.

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Steven shrugged at this question. "Dunno. I've just always wanted to fix people when they get hurt. I used to bandage up my buddies when we'd play too rough and someone would get cut or scraped up. It saved everyone a lot of grief from our mothers. Then I did the same for my two little brothers over the years. By my junior year in high school, I knew I wanted to be a family doctor and which secondary schools I wanted to attend."

Brianna shook her head in amazement and more than a touch of envy. "Must be nice to always know what you want and where you're going. I've never been so blessed, that's for sure." Facing him on the couch, she crossed her legs Indian style, then lifted his feet and rested them in her lap. The more they talked and joked together, the more touching him seemed natural to her.

Steven stretched his long body down the couch, laced his hands behind his head, and studied her. "You're kidding, right? You seem incredibly focused on what you want. Your bar is evidence of that."

She shook her head again, idly massaging his calloused feet with her warm hands. "No, that was just an accidental opportunity that fell into my lap. I mean, yeah, okay, I've always known I wanted to own my own business. But up until last week, I had no clue what kind of business that would be. I just chose my college major and minor in the hopes that the degree would help me get a better business loan someday."

Steven closed his eyes and groaned. Did she have any idea how her hands were affecting other parts of him too? "Mm, that feels good. Maybe you shouldn't own a bar at all. Maybe you should become a masseuse instead."

She laughed. "Glad you like it. My aunt has really bad circulation in her feet, so she taught me how to give foot rubs when I was still just a kid."

"I've never met your aunt, yet already I love the woman," he said with a moan. Between the magic touch of her fingers and the teasing sensation her hair made as it brushed his ankles, she made it hard for him to think clearly. "Uh, so what about the rest of your life?"

"What about it?"

"Well, you probably already know whether you want to get married and have kids or not, right?" He managed to crack one eye open so he could study her face.

Her hands paused, then resumed their kneading. "Sure, I guess I want to get married someday. I don't know about kids, though. Being an only child, I guess I never thought about it. And you?"

Steven opened both eyes to better watch her face now. A tiny frown had formed between her eyes and at the corners of her mouth. It was both adorable and intriguing. He decided to push for its cause by staying on this topic. "I'd like to settle down eventually with the right woman. And kids would be nice once I go into practice and we can afford them. I'd be happy with two, I think. Of course, in the end it's the woman who really gets to decide since it's her body having to bear each pregnancy."

"You seem pretty sure you'll be able to find that perfect woman for you."

Though Brianna continued massaging his feet, her pressure lightened, becoming less focused and more of an idle gesture. And those green eyes looked like the hills of Ireland, a million miles away and in another world.

"I've always trusted my instincts, and they've never let me down yet," Steven said. "I'm pretty sure I'll know my soul mate when I see her. Getting her to agree that I'm the right guy for her will be the bigger challenge."

He wanted to tell her what his instincts had been blaring at him since the moment he'd walked into her bar this weekend, but it was way too soon. Not everyone had the ability to trust their instincts so easily. His friends' many trials and errors in life had taught him that. He didn't want to scare Brianna away. So he'd just have to have faith that her heart would eventually tell her mind what he already knew. Of course, he also intended to do everything he could to help speed up that particular realization for her.

Brianna looked up at him, searched his face, then smiled and shrugged in a noncommittal way. "Glad you're confident, at least. So...can I try your cookies now?"

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Steven sat up. Yeah, there was definitely something going on in Brianna's head on the topic of kids and marriage. Her offer to try the burnt cookies, which she couldn't have missed the stench from, supported this hunch. But their first date was much too soon to probe her any further about it. He decided to back off and lighten the mood.

"You want to try my burned cookies? Are you nuts? You know that in order to be a gentleman I have to grant your request, even though my chef's pride will forever be destroyed in the process."

She laughed at him. "Yep. I want to try them. Should I get them for us?"

He swung his legs off the couch and stood up. "Now what kind of host would I be if I let you do that? Just keep that pretty little butt of yours right there on my couch, and I'll bring you some damned cookies. Oh, wait, then again, you may want to wash your hands after handling my stinky feet."

Her laughter followed him into the kitchen, making his chest feel tight inside. He shook his head at himself, knowing full well he was a goner for this woman. His only hope of salvation was that she wouldn't realize his feelings too soon. Otherwise she'd have him completely wrapped around her finger, whipped, and begging for her commands.

Transferring the cookies from the cooling rack to a plate, Steven paused and grinned to himself. *Hmm, whipped...* He pictured Brianna wearing a black leather corset, black lace thong, garters, spiked heels and cracking a whip over him. Instantly his cock stiffened painfully with a flood of heated blood.

"Shit," Steven muttered under his breath. He was going to have to go to the bathroom to adjust this little problem if he stayed on that particular train of thought. Speaking of bathroom...

"Sorry, forgot to tell you, the bathroom's down that hall and through my bedroom." As tiny as the apartment was, he knew she'd be able to find her way to the other end of the apartment. While he heard her head for the facilities and wash her hands, he stayed in the kitchen to get some semblance of control over his hormones. Only after he heard her



return to the living room did he leave the quiet kitchen with dessert in hand.

Steven laughed at Brianna later as she made a valiant effort to eat his burnt concoction. He was further impressed with her courage as she ate not one, but two of the lumps of chocolate chip charcoal with a smile. Finally he took the plate back into the kitchen despite her protests that they weren't that bad. A man's pride could only take so much of a beating, and every bite she took of those damned burnt atrocities was another kick to his ego.

He took a chance and asked her to snuggle with him on the couch. When she smiled at him with a single arched eyebrow, he just grinned back. Let her think he was trying to sneak in a few moves and trying to seduce her to go to bed with him on the first date. If she assumed he was like all the other pricks she must've dated, it would be all her fault when she was surprised. She lay down along the edge of the couch, obviously trying not to relax against him. But he reached around her taut abs and pulled her snugly up against him.

"Relax, I won't bite," he growled in her ear, resisting the urge to do just that to the pink shell beneath his lips.

Then he registered the perfect fit of her sweet little rear against his cock, and mentally slapped himself. For a man determined not to seduce her on their first date, he had to be a glutton for self-inflicted punishment.

He willed his cock back under control again, refocusing his thoughts by slowly burying his nose in her thick cloud of hair. The scent of his favorite brand of shampoo filled his senses, making him smile.

"You use Pantene, don't you?" he murmured, nuzzling her hair a little more.

"Yeah. How'd you know?" she asked, turning her head quickly.

Their noses bumped, her eyes widened in surprise, and he grinned. "Because I do, too. I recognized that smell."

She stared up at him, so close now he could count the freckles on her cheeks and the eyelashes surrounding each of those emerald green eyes. Which reminded him to ask her something he'd been wondering about for a while.

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"Do you wear contacts?" Their mouths were so close he practically murmured the words against her lips.

"No. I should since I'm incredibly nearsighted, but my eyes dry out. Why?" Or she used to be nearsighted before Kilo so nicely turned her into a vampire with unnaturally sharp eyesight that seemed to grow sharper every day. *Don't think about that, Bri.*

She wanted to grab the back of his neck and pull him down to her. Somehow she resisted, determined to let him be the first to make a move. If he seduced her tonight, she didn't want to look back and remember it as being her fault for starting it.

"Just wondering. Your eyes are so green, like jewels or something." Slowly, he rubbed the tip of her nose with his own, changing the angle of his head, mentally toying with whether now was the right time for their first kiss. He really should wait until she said goodbye at the end of the date.

Then she licked her lips.

That quick little nervous swipe with the tip of her tongue ended his debate. To hell with the right time. He was kissing her now.

Brianna watched his pupils dilate further and knew he was going to kiss her. She was more than ready for it. She closed her eyes and parted her lips as she felt the tip of his nose slide along the side of hers and touch her cheek as his mouth captured her bottom lip. She caught his upper lip between hers, then daringly traced along the upper edge of it with her tongue.

She heard him groan, then his mouth parted and their tongues met, tentatively at first, then with steadily bolder strokes. Her hands slid up his chest to his neck, circling around so her fingers could bury themselves in his thick hair at the back of his head and pull him down closer to her.

Rough hands tried to be gentle on her body as he held onto her waist, kneaded the curve of her hip, and coaxed her to roll completely over towards him until her breasts pressed against his chest. When her already hard nipples came into contact with him, even through three layers of fabric, she moaned with the exquisite torture and wound her arms around his neck.

She felt his hands slide up the side of her waist and over her ribcage to where she wanted them most...on her breasts. Since his other arm was trapped beneath her head, she had to be satisfied with only one hand massaging her breasts, lightly pinching and teasing her nipples through her shirt and bra. His other hand buried itself in her hair to cradle her head.

He felt her hips rocking forward against his rock hard dick. Desperate for control over himself, he threw his head back for air and cursed out loud.

"Steven?" she whispered, her voice hoarse with her own needs.

"Damn it, Brianna, I swore I wouldn't try to seduce you tonight. It's our first date. I want...I want more than just a quick fuck."

Brianna blinked, swallowed thickly a couple of times, and tried to regain control over her body. She turned her head, staring at the dimly lit walls, searching for something else to concentrate on besides Steven's hard, utterly masculine body beside hers. She didn't want to think about what he was really saying either. "I should go."

"No, please stay. For just a little while longer, 'till I can prove to myself that I can stand to be around you for a few hours and not want to pin you under me."

This drew a heated image that had her humming deep within her throat with need.

"Uh, but you can't purr like that. A man can only take so much temptation."

Brianna's eyes flew open to find Steven grinning at her despite his obvious underlying discomfort. She nodded. "All right. I'll stay for a little while longer."

"With no purring," he added as she rolled her back to him.

"With no purring," she agreed with a grin of her own.

Letting his breath ease out through his nose, he focused on the profile of her face, wishing he were an artist like his dad and could draw her. He mentally traced the curve of her cheek, the straight line of her nose that ended in a little rounded tip, her soft lips, the way her eyelashes rested against the top of her cheeks.

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Once his raging cock had subsided and he thought it was safe, Steven gently pulled her back up against him one more, wrapped an arm over her waist and around her stomach, and buried his nose in her hair again. Eyes closed, he listened to her breathing as it gradually slowed down to a more even pace. And with the sound of her deep breaths sighing in his ears, he fell asleep.

## Chapter Six

When Brianna awoke, she had no idea what time it was. It felt like at least a couple of hours had passed. Behind her, Steven snored gently, making her smile. Good grief, she knew she had problems if she thought the guy's snoring was sexy.

Shaking her head at herself, Brianna eased his arm from around her waist so she could sit up. She turned to look down at his face, so perfectly relaxed within his dreams, and didn't want to wake him.

No, she just wanted to screw his brains out. To hell with it being only their first date.

She stood up, intending only to go to the bathroom, then paused, suddenly aware of just how exhausted she felt now. Oh hell, she'd waited too long to take care of her hunger. Kilo had said she only had a month until...

Kilo. Just remembering her vampire maker's name reminded her of what she was, filling her with thoughts that refused to be pushed away. She was the same as Kilo. A killer who would live forever, preying on the blood of humans for nourishment, stealing life from others so she could keep her own immortality going.

Steven deserved someone better than her.

He was the type of guy who wanted to take care of others. Hell, the guy already knew he wanted to be a father someday.

She glanced down at her hands and frowned. *Of course I'd want to date a guy who actually wants kids.*

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How would he react when she revealed the fact that she could never give him those kids? According to Kilo, vampires couldn't give birth. What if Steven was one of those types who didn't want to adopt and only wanted their own biological children? He was so even-tempered and calm that she sort of doubted it. But then again, people could get inexplicably weird about this issue.

She was all wrong for him.

This thought galvanized her into leaving, pushing her into searching around for her motorcycle helmet. She started to pull her hair back into a braid, then opted to simply tuck it inside her helmet instead. So it'd be a mess by the time she got home. So what? At least she'd be out of here before Steven woke up.

She had to get out of here. Now.

Her hands were shaking so badly with the need to run, to get her sickening secrets away from Steven before she could hurt him, that she almost couldn't open the front door. But she finally managed it, slipping through the partially opened entrance before easing the door shut behind her.

Brianna had to force herself not to run over to her bike, settling for a fast stride instead as she fumbled for her keys. Her hands shook so badly she dropped the keys into the grass.

Cursing in a whisper, she dug through the grass.

*He could be your soul mate, and you're running out on him,* part of her insisted.

This had her pausing in the dew dampened grass. Oh hell. Why did this have to be an internal debate? Why couldn't she just do the right thing and take her secrets far away from Steven? She could run, leave now, let him wake up alone with no goodbye, and he'd be safe. Safe from the threat of Kilo possibly coming after the both of them someday just for sadistic kicks. Safe from the revolting truth of how she continued to live.

Yeah, she had to keep Steven safe. Motivated back into movement once more, she found her keys in the full moon's light, then got up off her wet knees and onto her bike.

*Give Steven a chance. He might be strong enough to take the truth,* that damnable part of her whispered again.

Stubbornly she inserted the key into the bike's ignition, but couldn't bring herself to turn it and start the bike.

In the cool February night air, the heat of her breath began to fog up the inside of her helmet's visor. But not enough to prevent her from seeing Steven, standing sleepily in his apartment doorway, watching her wrestle with her internal demon of hope.

She expected him to say something, to say a few words that would only increase her embarrassment. But he remained silent, watching and waiting for her to decide what she was going to do now.

He was waiting for her.

She pictured him again as he'd said hello to her earlier tonight, with that damned wooden spoon in his hand as he'd burned chocolate chip cookies for her.

"Shit!" She breathed and closed her eyes.

*Time to decide, Bri.* But what was the point? She already knew what her body and heart wanted, despite every logical reason to run like hell from him.

She wanted Steven.

Sighing, she gave in to her body's wants and her heart's needs. There'd probably be hell for both of them to pay later. But she'd deal with that when she had to. For now...

Brianna slowly got off her bike, tucked her keys back into her pocket, and removed her helmet as she walked back towards Steven.

"Damn, I never knew a woman taking a helmet off could look so sexy," he murmured as she walked up to him. Her hair settled in a messy cloud around her face, tickling the sides of her cheeks.

Brianna blew a strand of hair out of her eyes and gave him a sheepish grin as she stopped in front of him. Only a few inches and her pride separated them now.

"Were you leaving without saying goodbye?" Steven asked, reaching out to caress her cheek.

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“Yeah, but I changed my mind.” Sure of herself now that all fear of the consequences had been pushed away for some other day, she reached up to hold the back of his neck, gently tugged his head down to her, and gave him a long, slow kiss. This time, though, it was her tongue inside his mouth, telling him without words exactly what she wanted him to do to her.

He backed into the apartment, turned them around so that her back faced into his home, and kicked the door shut behind him. Again, she reveled in their difference in heights, marveling that such a simple contrast could make her feel so treasured and protected. She dropped her helmet with a muffled thump to the carpet below, not caring where it landed. All she cared about was pressing her hands against his hard stomach, then tugging his shirt out of his jeans so she could press her palms against his bare skin beneath. She tore her mouth from his so she could kiss the hard plains of his abs through the finely spaced dark hair on his skin. Her mouth trailed moist kisses up his body, following the path his shirt made as they both pulled it up and over his head.

Unable to last another second wondering what his cock would taste like, she sank onto her knees. Frantically she unbuckled his belt, unbuttoned his pants, and nearly cried out in frustration when she met with a zipper and the layer of his underwear beneath his jeans. She didn’t even bother to pull them, just shoved the opened flaps of his jeans out to either side, then slid his underwear down enough to release his dick.

Steven’s cock bobbed out, fully erect from his body. She wrapped her hands around its length, filling her fingers and palms with his hot, smooth shaft. Her thumbs reached out to trace his cock’s rounded tip, caressing the smooth ridge that encircled it. She wrapped her hands tightly around his dick, simulating the tightness of her pussy, and slid her hands in towards his balls. Turned on as she was, it was hard to remember not to grip him too tightly with her immortal strength.

“Oh hell, baby,” Steven groaned out.

She looked up to find his head arched back, exposing his long muscular neck. With her immortal sight and a trace of moonlight creeping in around the edges of a nearby window, she could see a faint vein



pulsing just under the surface of his skin. But no, she couldn't think about that right now.

Her hands pumped his shaft once, twice, long strokes that had him gripping her shoulders. But it wasn't enough. Brianna's mouth ached to be filled with him.

She licked her lips, pursed her mouth to form a tightly puckered opening, then pressed her lips against the tip of his cock. In one forward thrust, she took in most of Steven's dick, wrapping her tongue around its shaft like a hot, wet blanket covered with nubs to pleasure him. The urge to tease him just a little overcame her, making her tongue slowly writhe, twisting, and sliding side to side along the entire length of his thick penis. She reached back with the tip of her tongue to trace tiny circles all along its tip, then without warning pressed forward even more so that the rounded end thrust against the back of her throat. When she moaned, her lips vibrated against his balls, and she sensed his knees trembling a little against her. Meanwhile, her hands frantically unfastened her slacks and shoved them down past her hips to pool at her ankles.

"Brianna, baby, you're gonna make me come right here," Steven said, using his hips to pull his cock out of her mouth with a soft, sucking sound. "I wanna be inside you when I do that."

Fighting the urge to whimper, Brianna yanked off her boots and socks before standing up. Then she stepped out of her slacks and walked away from him towards his bedroom, removing her sweater and bra along the way.

"Holy hell," Steven muttered, watching the sway of her cream-colored ass in the moonlight as she left him. Shoving his jeans and underwear off near the front door, he lengthened his stride, reaching his moonlit bedroom and his soon-to-be-lover in five steps.

He caught up to her from behind, wrapping his arms around her so he could grasp her full breasts while trailing kisses down her spine. He playfully nipped one perfectly sculpted ass cheek, then whispered, "Bend over the bed, my Brianna."

She bent forward, resting her hands on the edge of his squeaky mattress. With her ass up in the air, her pussy lay perfectly exposed to his

fingers, allowing him to easily pull aside her lacy panties with one hand and explore the edges of her vaginal lips with the fingers of his other hand. She moaned, nearly driving him over the brink with just her breathy little sounds of passion.

And oh, hell she was so fucking wet for him. He stroked her clit until her hips arched and bucked back against him. Steven slid his longest finger inside her, reveling when she cried out his name. Yet hearing his name so passionately called out in pleading tones also took away the last of his control and stripped him bare. He was at her mercy, and she didn't even seem to know it.

She turned around with wobbling knees, held his face within her hands, then pulled him to her as she sank onto the bed. Willingly, he followed her down onto the mattress, not even bothering to pull back the comforter. To hell with blankets, he was boiling over enough to keep them both warm even on the coldest day in Alaska.

At last, his entire length covered her much shorter one, and he heard her sigh.

"Oh damn, baby," Steven groaned as he grabbed a condom from the wooden nightstand beside his bed. "I wanted to take time with this, take care of your needs first."

He ripped the package open, his hands shaking like a kid's as he sheathed himself. Then he reached between their already sweat-slick bodies, gripped his pulsing cock, and guided it into Brianna's pussy. Steven planned to ease into her gently, but she wrapped her legs around his waist and thrust her hips up, taking him all in with one buck.

They both moaned as her heat surrounded him in pulsing tightness. He wanted to wait again, take his time, marvel at the way they fit together so perfectly, but she'd pushed him too far. His hips moved back, pulling his dick out of her until only the tip remained inside her. Then he flexed forward and filled her again.

Her arms wrapped around his back, hands formed into fists apparently in an attempt not to claw him up. "That's fine. You can make up for it by fucking me now until I scream." Her voice was husky with need, sexy as a kitten's growl.

Steven's head arched back. Oh hell, and she knew how to talk dirty in bed too! He was a lost, lost man.

"Steven, fuck me," she begged. "I can't take this teasing anymore. Come on, baby, please."

That was it. He thrust into her, setting a rhythm that quickly sped up to match their harsh breathing.

"Bri, baby, this isn't how I wanted the first time to be," he panted, feeling his orgasm approach.

"It's okay. It's how I wanted it to be," she gasped out, her head lifting off the pillows, her damp forehead pressed against his chest. She wanted him to take her even harder now, could feel that moment of sweet bliss coming just around the corner.

"Just...just remember who started it," he growled out between clenched teeth just before he lost control, fucking her hard and fast, the climax taking over all ability to reason or pace himself within her.

His release triggered her own shattering climax, driving her to whisper, to beg, to plead with him over and over to fuck her. Her own hips lifted, slamming into his as her heels dug into his buttocks, feeling his ass flex rhythmically beneath her feet as they both came until they forgot to breathe.

As soon as she could take a full breath again, she managed to gasp, "Yep, remember it was me who started this. And I'm damn proud of it."

## **Chapter Seven**

The difference in both their energy levels immediately after their love making together was markedly noticeable. Steven felt higher than a kite, but figured it was just a side effect of being in love, while Brianna realized that dragging feeling was gone. She felt like she was back to her usual self at last, and all it had taken was one quick mind-blowing bout of sex with this man.

Steven pulled the blankets back for them to slip in under, then they cuddled together and talked about their dreams. Eventually he wanted to go into practice with several other family doctors so he could share an office staff and overhead expenses. Listening to the deep hum of his voice was almost hypnotic, so Brianna continually asked him questions about his future dream practice to keep him talking. Besides, it was much easier to keep the focus on him so she wouldn't have to worry about answering difficult questions about herself.

She fell asleep listening to the murmur of his voice and awoke at sunrise, momentarily surprised to feel a long, hard, warm body curved along her backside and a muscular arm wrapped around her waist. Once she remembered where she was, Brianna smiled and wiggled her butt, enjoying the friction this created against Steven's crotch. To hell with the fact that it was Monday morning, it was still plenty early enough to enjoy her new lover at least once more.

His cock woke up a couple of minutes before he did, lengthening and hardening against her buttocks, almost right where she wanted it.

"Hmm, now that's the way to wake up a man," Steven mumbled with a smile. His morning stubble looked like a new form of dark cactus growing on his face. Okay, so maybe there were some ways that guys had it rougher in life than women. She rolled over and laid the palm of her hand against his cheek, confirming that his whiskers were just as scratchy as they looked. She noticed the whiskers continued most of the way down his neck too.

"Don't your whiskers hurt your neck?" she couldn't resist asking.

"Yeah. But I think I can survive the pain a little longer if you'd like to continue what you just started with that cute little butt of yours." Steven pulled her hard up against him, carefully keeping his face away from her so he wouldn't scratch up her skin.

"That could be arranged." Brianna slid her palm down his abrasive neck to the curve of his shoulder, further down his body to his hip, then forward to gently grasp his already hard dick. Experimentally, she pumped its shaft slowly, making him growl deep within his chest. He rolled onto his back so she could reach him better.

She wanted a better angle over him, so she got up onto her knees and knelt between his legs. This allowed her to wrap one hand around his cock and fondle his testicles with her other hand.

His hips lifted off the bed. "Oh, that's nice. Just like that."

Brianna smiled, wrapped both hands around his dick, then teased its tip with her thumbs. Between her own legs, she felt a growing ache within her pussy. Within minutes, this need had to be answered. So she straddled his waist, rubbed her clit up and down his cock to moisten it, rose up on her knees and slowly impaled herself on him.

"Mmm," she moaned as she felt every pulsing inch of him sliding into her until her pussy had taken all of him in. She let her head fall backwards, feeling her long hair tickle the small of her back, and closed her eyes. Oh how she wished they could just stay like this for the rest of their lives.

At first she didn't move, teasing them both by rhythmically contracting and relaxing her inner vaginal walls. In return, he teased her breasts, paying special attention with his thumbs over her rosy nipples in

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the soft morning light. She arched her back, filling his hands with more of her ample orbs, then covered his kneading hands with her own as she started to rock her hips.

Rhythmic creaks of the mattress and moans filled the air around them, forming an age-old music as Brianna rode him steadily faster and harder. And still it wasn't enough. She needed more of him. Needing to feel still closer to Steven, she leaned forward to grasp the tops of his shoulders while continuing to ride his cock. His hands slid down her body to grasp her hips, silently urging her on faster.

With every forward and backward motion of her body over his, Brianna's breasts swayed against his chest. She held her upper body up high enough so that only her stiff nipples brushed him, loving the teasing sensation his chest hair brought her sensitive buds. Not caring about his morning stubble, she kissed him until she was breathless.

As her orgasm hit first, she jerked her body upright, let her head fall back again with her eyes closed, and felt as if her body rocked in a boat on an orgasmic ocean. Wave after wave of exhilarating joy washed over her as she moaned until the feeling passed.

Instinctively her body stopped moving once the climax passed. Then she opened her eyes and realized from Steven's look of desperation that he was close to having an orgasm too, but hadn't gotten there yet.

She grinned to herself. Now this would be even more enjoyable. Since she'd already had her moment, she could focus solely on bringing him to his. Squeezing him tightly with her still contracting pussy, she followed the pressure and release of his hands on her hips to ride him again, letting him set the pace his body needed.

"Brianna, baby, I love it when you fuck me," he growled, his head pushed back hard into the pillows beneath him.

His hands tightened on her, hard enough in their grip to have bruised most mortal women. Glad her body couldn't be so easily hurt, she let him hold onto her as tightly as he wanted while his hips lifted and fell beneath her.

He seemed so close to climaxing, yet hovered on the brink, so she had an idea to help him along. Lifting one of his hands to her face, she

said, "Pretend my mouth is on your cock right now." Then she licked and sucked one of his fingers.

"Oh hell yes," he groaned, his hips bucking beneath her faster now. Within a minute, he growled, "Brianna, you're gonna make me come."

"That's it, baby, come inside me. Fill me up with your come," she encouraged, knowing the dirty talk would help him along.

Then he grabbed both her hips again, lifting and dropping her onto his cock as his seed filled her waiting pussy with its liquid heat.

\* \* \* \* \*

Brianna's schedule became filled to the brim with the addition of almost nightly sleepovers with Steven during which they used their bodies to bring each other to satisfied exhaustion. It helped that the exchange of her vampire energy with his human version during every shared orgasm was equal to drinking roughly five cups of coffee. Between each lovemaking session at night, they talked about Steven's childhood, their former lovers, what they'd learned in their college courses that day, and anything else they happened to think of. Unlike the few other lovers Brianna had been with, with Steven there were no mind games, no holding back between them, and no awkwardness. She felt she could tell him any idea that popped into her head at any given moment, no matter how crazy or goofy, and he'd never think less of her. Every thought except those related to her immortality, that is.

Thankfully, their lovemaking took care of her vampire needs. And since she hadn't seen Kilo since being turned into a vampire, it was easy for her to pretend she was normal like every human female she knew.

Yet she couldn't seem to shake the niggling fear that Kilo was simply biding his time before coming back to destroy her life, or what was left of it, once again.

Two weeks later as she knocked on his apartment door, Steven met her in the entrance with a newspaper in hand and a look of glee on his face.

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"Baby, look what I found in today's paper!" He held the folded back stack of pages to her, pointing to a color photograph and an article that read, "Made-over Bar Becomes City's #1 Night Scene".

"What?" Brianna accepted the newspaper, headed for the futon couch, and sank down onto it, tucking one foot under her other knee. She read the article quickly, then her jaw dropped. The photo showed the Midnight Dream Girls performing on the bar. Including Brianna.

Her immediate thought was of Kilo. What if he hadn't bothered her since her escape from him because he didn't know her full name or where to find her? Dimly she realized that logically this couldn't be the reason, as he could have simply stalked her at the bar on the weekends. But it was too late for logic; her survival instincts went into overdrive. All she could wonder was if this review of her bar and the photo of herself and her girls would put them all in jeopardy of Kilo's sadistic impulses and experiments.

Breathing almost fast enough to hyperventilate, she tossed aside the paper, propped her elbows on her knees, and held her head. And remembered something the bastard had said during her two day captivity with him...

*"Why did you turn me into...this?" she'd asked in self-loathing shortly after losing control with the victim in the park.*

*"Because you were so noble in the parking lot that night. You, trying to save my victim, small and weak as you are. Your head was filled with the black and white of right and wrong, and held no room for the gray in between. I thought you would make a grand experiment. Now we will see which will win control over you as a vampire... your dark needs and desires, or your precious human beliefs."*

He viewed her as an experiment, like some kind of lab rat. What had prevented him from messing with her up until now, she had no clue. But she couldn't shake the conviction that the newspaper's glowing review of her bar and her dancers, combined with that full color photo where so much of their skin had been revealed in their usual bikini tops and blue jean denim chaps, just might bring him out of the woodwork again.



And when Kilo came back out to play, they would all be in serious trouble.

"Brianna?" Steven touched her shoulder, making her jump with fear. He sat down on the couch beside her and put an arm around her shoulders. "Hey, baby, what's wrong?"

Brianna shook her head. She needed to tell him something, but how much could she reveal before she revolted him?

"Steven, I... My last...boyfriend was a real asshole." She swallowed back the urge to throw up. Kilo had been anything but a boyfriend to her. But how else to explain him to Steven without raising more questions? "Sadistic doesn't even come close to describing him. He hasn't bothered me in a while, but I'm afraid that this news review might bring him back again."

There, that sort of covered the problem. Of course, there was that little issue with Kilo's immortality and penchant for cold-blooded murder that she'd left out. Hopefully all of this was just a non-issue, Kilo would leave her alone for the rest of eternity, and Steven would never need to know the sordid details. Her gut told her otherwise, but for now she'd cling to what little optimism she had left.

"Hey, don't worry. If this ex-boyfriend shows up to cause trouble, I'll be more than happy to kick his ass for you." Steven grinned at her, kissing her cheek with an air of confidence.

*Lord, he really thinks he can protect me,* Brianna mused. Instead of coming across as cocky, Steven sounded just plain cute to her. Then she imagined just how badly a fight between him and Kilo would go, and mentally cringed. Unless Steven was prepared to stab someone to death with a wooden stake, cut their head off, or set them on fire, he could never live through a fight with Kilo.

She sighed, realizing she couldn't tell Steven the truth of just what a fight with Kilo would entail, and made herself smile for him. "Thanks, hon, I appreciate that."

"Anything I can do for the woman I love."

Brianna stared into his eyes, searching for the truth. But his love for her stared right back, warm and burning within the depths of his eyes.

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He loved her.

A wild joy filled her, and she couldn't hold back a smile. Steven loved her.

"I love you too," she confessed, torn between euphoria and the doomed sense that with these words she might be damning them both to hell. Kilo's hell, more than likely.

Steven kissed her, cupping her face tenderly within his large warm hands. She clutched his wrists, needing to hold onto the reality of him as the soft pressure of his lips over hers tried to make her forget everything but him. He slowly ended the kiss and hugged her for a long time, stroking her hair to soothe her shaking body.

But all the love, hugs, and kisses from Steven couldn't make her feel any safer, no matter how strong and noble he was. In the end, he was still just one human, with one man's strength, up against a vampire with the strength of fifteen men and several lifetimes worth of evil practice. Strange how she'd always imagined the future love of her life to be her knight in shining armor. Yet now that she'd found that man, she would have to be the protector for both of them. And though she loved Steven enough to be willing to fight to the death for him, she didn't know whether even that would be enough against Kilo's ancient brand of evil.

## Chapter Eight

Things stayed calm for two weeks, making Brianna wonder if she'd freaked out over nothing. No skulking shadows in sight, no feelings of impending doom, just the rainy approach of April. So she tried to relax. Doubtless Kilo had already had his fun just putting her into this eternal predicament and would leave her alone now. At least, so she hoped.

Then, after only two weeks, the shadows she feared most to see appeared around the Midnight Saloon. Shadows that moved too fast to be human. Shadows that reeked of Kilo's particular smell and nasty intentions. The scent of evil surrounded her slowly, stealthily, becoming a pervasive stench she couldn't get out of her nose or thoughts. And with the formation of those shadows on the first of April, she heard a familiar voice whispering in her mind...

*Brianna...*

"Ladies," she said in a group meeting with her entire staff before the bar opened that night. She hid her shaking hands between her knees. "I've heard some talk about this area of the city getting a little dangerous for women right now. So I need you to promise not to go anywhere around here at night without a friend. Preferably with Joe the bouncer or myself to escort you." And sent up a silent prayer that Kilo wouldn't attack more than one of them at a time.

Pamela, a petite blonde, laughed. "Oh, so you're gonna kick the bad guy's butt for us?"

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Brianna made herself smile despite her shaking hands, keeping the truth to herself as always. "Let's just say I'm pretty capable of handling the average bad guy and leave it at that." Of course, it was no average bad guy that had her heart tripping with anxiety.

She searched the faces of the employees around her, each individual's life so frail and precious, and was even more fearful. Not even a glimmer of worry darkened their confident expressions. They seemed to believe in their own capabilities for self-defense. But they could never have any chance against a raging lunatic vampire like Kilo.

And Brianna had to face her own limited strength. If Kilo did decide to attack, with his several centuries of age and accrued immortal strength, could she really protect her staff from him? She could tell them exactly what kind of evil intentions might be stalking everyone at the bar, but this would also reveal her own dark secrets. And if she revealed what she truly was to these people, these fellow co-workers and friends, how many of them would feel safe working with her at the Midnight Saloon? No doubt they'd become just as scared of her as of Kilo. Or they'd question her sanity.

And yet Kilo's possible stalking of the bar staff was more than likely caused by her running away from him. She'd hurt his vampire pride by turning away from his charms. If he was truly preying around her bar again, it was her fault for bringing Kilo's evil focus here. She owed these innocent humans whatever protection she could provide. So she would continually warn them in general terms about the possible danger, and maybe this would make them a little more careful than usual. Right now, it was all she could offer them. That and watch each staff's comings and goings in the parking lot like an anxious mother hen every night the bar was open for business.

Brianna never actually saw Kilo during that strained week and never knew for sure whether she was just imagining his presence stalking through her life again. But all around her, the air seemed tainted with the stench of his personality. She even wondered if her imagination had simply gone into overdrive.

Only when the tension of waiting and hoping against Kilo's return pulled Brianna to the breaking point—when the muscles in her shoulders became permanently kinked with stress and fear, when she frowned more than smiled, and even those few smiles were all forced—did she finally know for sure whether Kilo had come back for her or not.

As she lay next to Steven Sunday night, trying to relax with him in his bed while he slept, she jumped at every shadow that crossed the darkened room. It was then she felt an overwhelming sense that Kilo was there.

*Brianna... that hated, familiar voice snaked through her mind, causing her muscles to freeze up even further. Brianna, come talk to me at the door.*

She heard a faint scratching sound at the front door, as if someone raked their fingernails down its surface.

*Go away, she screamed within her mind. Leave me the hell alone!*

*Ah, but why, Brianna? Are you worried that I will harm your pretty little human? Or are you worried that you will succumb in passion to me again?*

*You son of a bitch, get out of my head and get out of my life!*

*Come talk to me and I promise I will leave you alone, Kilo's voice whispered. Or else perhaps I should wake up the human and chat with him instead?*

Damn. She knew what Steven wanted to do to Kilo. He would try to protect her with every good-hearted, noble bone in his body. And he'd die trying. Shaking, Brianna eased out from under Steven's arm, pulled on his terry robe, and headed for the front door. When her hand balked over the doorknob, she had to force herself to turn it, knowing full well what she'd find on the other side.

Finally, she yanked the door open, only to find the front stoop empty and dark.

"Shall we talk out loud or within our minds?" Kilo asked from behind her, standing in the center of the living room.

She whirled with a gasp. Somehow, he'd moved so fast through the doorway she must not have seen him enter. She drew in several slow breaths to try and calm her nerves. *Within our minds, please.*

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*Ah, so you wish to be quiet during this little talk then. Afraid for your human, are you?* Kilo walked over to the couch and sat down with a dark smile.

Brianna eased the door shut, choosing not to answer this question, then stood with her hands crossed over her chest to hide her trembling hands in her armpits. *What do you want?*

*I want to see how my little experiment is going. But I guess I already know the answer. You are cheating the moral choice by sleeping with a human instead of choosing your victims to drink from. Tsk, tsk, tsk. How will I know how my experiment is going if the little rat cheats?*

No, my sleeping with a human is my moral choice, Brianna argued. *I refuse to drink an innocent's blood.*

*Ah, then you still have not learned how to project and read human thoughts?* Kilo tilted his head, causing his greasy black hair to glint in the dim moonlit room.

Brianna shook her head in silence, wishing he couldn't read her mind so she could at least safely lie. She also wished he'd hurry up and leave so she could spray the room with a can of Lysol. Real or only within her imagination, his presence carried a stench of pure evil that seemed to cling to everything in sight. Including her.

*So have you told your human pet your dark little secret yet?* Kilo leaned back into the couch, crossing his arms over his chest. He wore the same ridiculous tux and duster coat he'd worn when he'd kidnapped her. Just the sight of the outfit made her feel sick.

*No, why should I?* Brianna asked with her mind. She made herself breathe through her nose in an effort to control its pace. Against her forearm, she could feel her heart pounding as if it wanted to burst straight out through her chest.

*To learn whether he truly loves you, of course,* Kilo replied, an amused smile stretching across his face. *Are you afraid of his answer? You know, you could simply come back to me. After all, you know I will never turn away from my own creation.*

*You didn't create me, you sick bastard. You just infected me with your disease!* In her anger, she found herself stepping towards him and made

herself step back near the front door again. Getting physically closer to Kilo was the absolute last thing she wanted to do.

*Now, now, let's be civil,* Kilo replied, his face turning into a dark scowl so fast she never saw the change.

*What do you want?* she asked with a sigh. Somehow, she would have to play his game, whatever it may be, and find a way to use it to get rid of him once and for all.

*I want you to tell him what you are.* Kilo was on his feet directly before her now. He reached out to touch her jaw line, but she jerked her face out of his reach in disgust and horror. *He does not love you, only I do. If he learns what you are, he will be disgusted. He will hate you. The sight of you will sicken him and make him afraid.*

Brianna wanted to argue that this wasn't true. But she didn't know for sure how Steven would react. Kilo was taunting her with her own fears.

She thought of her aunt suddenly, of the night when, as a child in her aunt's house, she had first learned to sleep without a nightlight. She'd confessed her fear of the dark to her aunt. And Aunt Nora had given her some of the best advice Brianna would ever receive...*face your fear and you will conquer it.*

*All right, I'll tell Steven what I am. Then we'll both know how he really feels about me,* Brianna agreed, hoping that placating Kilo would buy her more time to figure out a way to deal with the vampire. And suddenly the thought of being freed from having to keep secrets from the man she loved made her heart speed up in excitement. What if Steven could love her anyway and understand that becoming a vampire had not really been her choice? Surely he'd see that she was doing everything she could to retain as much human decency as possible?

That is not enough to prove the human's feelings for you, Kilo snarled. *Your vampire charms will override his natural reaction, causing him to forgive when otherwise he would not. You must truly test him to know the truth.*

*How?* Brianna asked, feeling a grim determination steal over her.

*You must go without sex or blood for one month. At the end of that month, your immortal strength will be weakened, and with it, your vampire*

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*charms. Your dark hold over him will weaken. Then you will see what truly lies within this mortal's heart.*

Brianna nodded. *All right, I'll do it. And you'll leave us alone in return?*

*But of course,* Kilo replied with an offended look. *I'm a man of my word, aren't I?*

Then he was gone, making her realize he must've never actually entered through the door in the first place. Somehow, he could materialize and vanish at will. When would she be able to do that too?

But she had other questions of much bigger importance to figure out right now. Namely, how could she not sleep with Steven for an entire month without breaking up with him?



## Chapter Nine

With no other excuse available, Brianna turned to her work to hold Steven at a physical distance. She tried to drown herself in finding more ways to better market the Midnight Saloon, working with the Midnight Dream Girls to create new dance routines, new team uniforms, and even specialty routines. One night they declared to be Artist Night and allowed customers who ordered certain tube shots to paint the dancers with neon paint using artist paintbrushes. The decorated dancers then performed on the bar lit only by black lights borrowed for the occasion.

Now certain that Kilo watched her every move, Brianna could at last feel comfortable with publicizing her bar to every entertainment news reporter within the state. Interviews with some of these reporters took up a good portion of her time, and had the added benefit of free advertising in several newspapers and magazines for the Midnight Saloon.

She also pleaded tons of homework and business paperwork as a reason not to sleep over at Steven's apartment anymore. Sometimes he came over to her place instead. After eating dinner together, she always returned to her work, making the paperwork stretch out long enough until he fell asleep on the couch watching her TV. But she could feel his growing restlessness with his every lingering kiss and touch. Once she no longer was sustained by sex at least once a week, Brianna felt her own energy stores begin to wane.

After two weeks, Steven finally demanded an explanation.

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"Nothing's going on, Steven," Brianna replied across her small glass topped dining table, hating herself for having to lie to him.

"Then why won't you sleep with me anymore?" He touched her hand, a concerned frown replacing his usual easy going smile. "Have I done something to upset you?"

Brianna bit her lip. *If he only knew how much I'm trying to protect him...* "I guess things just felt like they were moving a little fast for me. And things have been so busy with the bar and school that I just needed some space. It's not that I don't want to keep seeing you, but the physical part of it... Can we just kind of hold off on that part until I can get things straightened out?"

Though he didn't look happy about it, he nodded. "I've gotta admit, I've gotten more than a little spoiled to having you in my arms all night long. My bed's starting to feel pretty empty without you in it."

Brianna smiled sadly. "I miss you too. Just give me a few more weeks—"

"A few more weeks?" Steven repeated with a horrified scowl. "Damn, woman, are you trying to kill me with celibacy here?"

Brianna laughed while shaking her head. "No. Though I have heard that the occasional period of celibacy for a couple tends to add more spice to the sex afterwards."

"Well, I don't know about you, but I happen to think our sex life was plenty spicy enough. Like when you straddled me the other night while I was sitting up in bed, and the way you held on to the headboard..."

Brianna shivered against the sudden passion that flared from the memory. "Okay, I agree, our sex life is spicy enough. Can you just trust me that I have my reasons, though?"

Steven blew out his breath in a hard gust. "All right. But if you stop at least seeing me for dates, I'm going to have to wonder if you've found someone else or something."

"Never worry about that, baby," Brianna whispered, leaning over to kiss him. When she felt the familiar tingling in her breasts and pussy, she quickly ended the kiss and leaned back. Damn, resisting the urge to

jump him for an entire month was going to be much harder than she'd thought. When had she grown so used to the pleasure of his cock, to the feel of his hard body pressed against all her softest parts, to the satisfying sensation of his hands molding her breasts?

Over the final two weeks of Brianna's enforced month of celibacy, her energy continued to flag. Eventually, even getting up in the mornings to attend classes was a supreme effort, and dancing with the Midnight Dream Girls at the bar on weekends became out of the question. Dark circles formed under her eyes that required several layers of foundation, concealer, and powder to hide. Even her college grades slipped a little as staying up late enough to study became an unbearable duty she couldn't fulfill. She continued to manage having dinner with Steven almost every night, but fell asleep with her head in his lap on the couch more often than not. On those nights, Steven always carried her to bed, undressed her, and they slept together, secured against passion by her unending exhaustion.

She felt like hell and came to believe that if there were such a thing as hell on earth, she was living in it. To have the man of her dreams so patiently waiting for her, to want nothing more than to feel his kisses on her nipples and his thrusting cock filling the aching emptiness inside her... She decided her former hatred of Kilo paled in comparison to what she now felt towards him. He was the cause behind all this torture. The bastard had to die, no matter what the potential consequences might be from other vampires in the world. If there even were other vampires like them.

During April's last week of torture, spurred on by the strain of fighting their bodies' wishes for almost an entire month, Steven and Brianna had their first fight.

It started off innocently enough over a beautiful dinner at a local restaurant reputed for its excellent food and even better romantic ambience. Outside the picture window's pane, rain pattered softly on the sidewalk and street, shielding them from the world beyond. In the glow of two flickering white taper candles, Steven asked her if she would come with him to meet his family next weekend.

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But she had no clue if they would even still be together by the end of the week. "Why do you want me to meet your family?"

Steven seemed surprised and confused by her question. Frowning, he took a quick sip of his wine before replying. "Well, they've already heard a lot about you over the phone, and they're dying to meet you."

Brianna felt her chest tighten. "What did you tell them about me?"

"That I met the woman of my dreams. That I fell in love with you. That I want to marry you if you're willing."

"Oh hell." Brianna laid her knife and fork onto her plate, barely registering that the silver cutlery clattered a little from her trembling hands, and leaned back in her chair. "If this is because of the celibacy thing..."

"No, it's nothing to do with sex," Steven muttered, keeping his voice low so nearby patrons wouldn't overhear their conversation. "I've known from our first date that you were the perfect woman for me. It's natural for me to want to marry you, isn't it?"

"Natural, yes. But it's too fast. We haven't dated that long..."

"Long enough to know we love each other and we're good together in every way. So what else do we need to know?" Steven set his own knife and fork aside and leaned back in his chair, unconsciously mirroring her body behavior. "All right, Brianna, be honest with me here. What's really going on? I tell you I love you, you tell me you love me back—"

"Which is the truth," Brianna interjected. They only had one more week of celibacy. How could she get him to wait just one more week before she told him the truth as to why they couldn't get married?

Then a familiar, hated scent of evil wove its way through the restaurant past unsuspecting humans, reaching its intended target. Kilo was near; his stench filled her nose with sickening memories even as it filled her stomach with coils of dread and fear.

"First we have weeks and weeks of unbelievable lovemaking. Then you tell me you need a month with no sex, but you can't tell me why." Steven's jaw muscles flexed.

"And you told me you would wait," Brianna reminded him, fighting her rising panic. *Focus, Bri, Kilo won't do anything tonight. He's just messing with your mind.*

"Yeah, I did. And I'm trying to be patient, trying to give you your space for whatever reason you need it. Because I love you. But then I ask you to meet my family..."

"And basically just proposed to me in the process," she argued, pressing a trembling hand to her forehead.

*Brianna...* Kilo's voice taunted through her mind. She struggled to ignore its distracting intrusion.

"So? Why don't you want to get married if you really love me? And why the month of celibacy? I can be a pretty damned patient man if I'm given good reason to. But you won't tell me anything!"

Brianna clenched the white cloth of her napkin in her lap, desperately trying to hold back tears. "Steven, if you could just give me one more week, I promise I can explain everything to you then. Then you can decide if you want to see me again, much less marry me." Could he hear the panic in her voice? God, she hoped not for his sake.

Steven leaned forward to touch her shoulder. "Baby, why wait a week? Why not tell me now? You know no matter what you tell me, I'm still going to love you."

Brianna shook her head, the hated tears slipping down the sides of her nose and cheeks despite her best efforts. "You can't say that until you know the truth. And I can't tell you until this weekend. So please, if you really love me, just...just give me one more week, and I'll tell you everything immediately after I close up the Midnight Saloon Friday night."

She watched his face and his obvious struggle with a mixture of emotions. Worry, anger, and frustration all warred for control of his features. Finally, they all slid away to be replaced by a look she'd never seen him give since she'd first met him. Cool distance formed an impenetrable mask. Only his eyes remained watchful, the barest hint of love still remaining within their depths.

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"All right. But to be honest with you, I'm not sure I can see you again until then. I've always been nothing but honest with you, Brianna. Don't you think I deserve the same honesty?"

Brianna nodded. "Yes, you do. And I...I understand if you want to wait until this weekend to see me."

Steven's only reply was a terse nod before he drank the rest of his wine in one long gulp.

\* \* \* \* \*

The rest of the week only served to remind Brianna that no matter how bad things were, they could always grow worse. Steven had become her best friend over the last two months, her confidante as well as the love of her life. Torn between her need to protect him and the staff of the Midnight Saloon for as long as possible by playing Kilo's game, and her own aching heart's demands, she became no one anyone wanted to chat with. Her replies to all questions were clipped and dark with anger and worry, and she couldn't force a smile if her life had depended upon it.

And yet she knew Steven was right. The secrets between them couldn't go on. She wasn't sure if a long-term future was even possible between a human and a vampire, but it was a certainty that they wouldn't have a future together without total honesty every step of the way.

Her original fears of pushing Steven away with the truth of her secret had finally come; the day of reckoning and dealing with the consequences was here. Exhausted as she was, she couldn't sleep Thursday night, leaving her more hollow-eyed than ever on Friday. With the night's impending possible doom to her relationship ahead of her, she opted to skip her college classes and spend the day at the bar going over paperwork. But when the first of her staff arrived for the night's shift, they found her in her office staring blankly into space. Seeing her mood, they sent the bravest of the dancers, Pamela, in to talk with her. It took two tries for the dancer to pull her out of her thoughts.

"Hmm?" Brianna looked at her just as blankly as she'd looked at the wall.

"I said, did you want us to go ahead and start getting ready for tonight's crowd?" Pamela asked with lifted eyebrows. She frowned in concern.

"Yes, please," Brianna murmured, rising to her feet from behind her desk. Suddenly her knees threatened to buckle. She braced herself on her desk and waited for the stars in her vision to clear.

Pamela hurried over to her and held her shoulders. "Bri, are you all right?"

Brianna nodded quickly. "Yeah, I... I just got up too fast, I guess." Pulling in a long breath, she forced herself to straighten up and hold her own weight unaided. "I'm fine, really."

Pamela nodded uncertainly and stepped back. "Listen, Bri, have you been eating enough lately? You're looking a little on the too thin side."

Brianna laughed, her voice ringing hollow without real mirth. Had she been eating enough lately? Now that was a joke.

She looked up at Pamela, intending to reply. Then her eyes fell on the vein throbbing along the side of Pamela's neck. Within her own body, Brianna's heart pounded out a dull thump, its beat growing steadily louder in her mind. Around the edges of her vision, a red haze seemed to creep over the world.

Just like when she'd lost control and drained that woman dry in the park.

Brianna stepped back from Pamela and wrapped her arms around her own waist. "I'm fine, really. Thank you, Pamela, that will be all. Please tell the other dancers to get ready for the artist show. We'll need the neon body paints, paint brushes, and black lights set up again. And tell the bartenders to get plenty of the tube shot drinks ready as well."

With one last glance of concern, Pamela nodded and left the tiny office, her long blonde hair trailing out a little behind her in a lovely tempting cloud as she exited.

As soon as Pamela was out of sight, Brianna headed out of the bar and into the back alley to catch her breath. For the first time since being

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turned into a vampire, she'd actually craved someone's blood. And she knew Pamela was an innocent. She just couldn't lose control again.

Bracing her hands on her knees, she took in long breaths and blew each one out slowly. She could do this. Okay, so soon she'd be surrounded by humans, each one a blood-pumping, life-giving source of energy for her. But her morals were stronger than her dark side. She had to stay strong, at least until she revealed everything to Steven. Once she upheld her end of the deal with Kilo, hopefully Steven would still love her and everything would be okay on all fronts. If he didn't, well, she'd figure something out. One way or the other, though, she would withstand this bloodlust. She had to. Otherwise...

Hearing the pounding beat of the music begin inside the bar, she stood up, gritted her teeth, and entered the flickering black light world of the Midnight Saloon, already beginning to fill with human temptation. Temptation known otherwise as her innocent staff and mostly innocent, trusting customers.



## Chapter Ten

The Midnight Saloon was as packed as ever. Joe the bouncer eventually began turning customers away at the door in order to maintain their maximum building occupancy.

Surrounded by humans on all sides in the dark bar's flickering strobe lights, the urge to grab one of these humans, drag them under the bar, and drain them dry of blood was almost overwhelming. And a part of Brianna seriously wondered if tonight would be her final mental undoing.

*I'm stronger than my cravings, she reminded herself over and over. I can do this. Just like a drug addict gets through the withdrawals, I can get through this too.*

To keep her mind focused elsewhere, she helped serve drinks at the bar. Her dancers had only gotten in a few lessons on bartending, so her years of experience at mixing drinks was still an enormous help in keeping up with the demand. Plus, it kept her from anxiously scouring the crowd looking for Steven, whom she couldn't have spotted anyway due to the changing lights for the artist show her dancers performed all night.

When she thought she couldn't hold herself up any longer, Joe let her know it was time for last call and the final Midnight Dream Girls performance. With extra effort, she managed to crawl up onto the bar, stand on shaky legs, and announce that everyone only had ten more minutes to place their last orders for drinks. Then she gestured for her dancers to take their stage and perform the last routine.

Someone in the crowd yelled, "Come on, Brianna, dance for us!"

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Brianna shook her head tiredly. "Oh no, not tonight, I can't..."

"Yeah, come on and dance with us," one of the Midnight Dream Girls called out as they climbed up onto the bar.

She saw Pamela shaking her head at the other dancers, obviously telling them that their boss wasn't up to performing with them tonight. But the crowd began chanting for Brianna to show them what she had.

"Oh hell," Brianna muttered. *So close to the end of the night, and now this.* Well, it was only a two minute routine.

"Okay, okay," Brianna agreed into the mike. She turned it off, then squatted and handed the piece of equipment to another bartender below. Just the effort to stand back up left her gasping. She'd definitely reached the end of her immortal energy. *Just a few more minutes*, she reassured herself as the music began its thumping vibrations through the wooden bar and up into the soles of her well-worn lace-up boots.

Thankfully, the routine mostly involved a lot of gyrating with the other dancers. Brianna soon found her bare torso and black bikini top slick with wet neon paint transferred from the other dancers' bodies as they brushed against each other. Shaking from head to toe now as she continued to push her body beyond its capabilities, she glanced down in a daze and stared at the multitude of colors glaring brightly from her hands.

Those colors filled her entire field of vision, swirling and blurring, and she felt herself falling through empty space...

Steven's jaw dropped as he watched Brianna above. She was obviously on the brink of exhaustion. She looked as if she kept going by sheer will, her body swaying like a thin flower in a hard storm. He yelled up to her, trying to get her attention, but the sudden playing of the music and the cheering crowd easily drowned him out. Damn, he'd just have to wait until the bar closed to talk with her.

He watched her dancing with the other girls, noticed how her gorgeous abs were gradually covered in glowing paint, and fought the urge to reach up and yank her down to him. After this month's torturous waiting for the truth from her, he just wanted to get this talk over with and close this unendurable distance between them. Whatever it took,

tonight he fully intended to talk her into marrying him. Even begging was an option he was ready to use.

Then he had no time to think, only to react as he saw her falling towards him in the crowd.

He and two other men caught her dead weight. Yelling at them that he was her boyfriend, he almost came to blows with his fellow rescuers until they agreed to release her to him. After wrapping an arm around her limp waist while slinging her closest arm over his shoulders, he pushed through the crowd towards the back glowing exit sign.

The night air in the alley was refreshing. Hopefully she'd find it equally so and come around. What in the world had caused her to push herself to exhaustion like this? He let the swinging metal door close behind them, then sat down on some wood crates with Brianna resting in his lap.

"Brianna, baby, it's Steven. Wake up!" He gently tapped her cheek with the palm of his hand, trying not to hurt her.

His breath whooshed out in relief as her eyes drowsily opened. A slow smile spread across her face. "Steven?"

"Yeah, baby, it's me." He searched her face. So many secrets remained between them, so much mystery darkened this woman's eyes, and yet still he knew he'd love her until the day he died.

"Wh-what happened?" Brianna blinked hard several times, trying to clear her head. "I was dancing, then..."

"Then you passed out. When's the last time you slept? Or ate?" Steven had a long list of other questions he wanted her to answer too, but tried to be patient.

She eased up into a sitting position across his thighs. "It's been a while. You caught me?" His question about when she'd last eaten reminded her of all the secrets she had to tell him about. But the fear of losing him made it so hard to begin.

"Yeah. Well, me and two others. I almost had to thrash their asses just to get them to let go of you."

Brianna smiled weakly again. "My hero."

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"You know it, for as long as you want me," Steven promised, gently kissing her mouth.

She felt his cock instantly harden beneath her thighs and the responding spark leap within her. But first things first.

"Steven, I have some things I have to tell you. Things that I'm sorry I didn't tell you about before now, but...I was afraid of losing you. I'm still afraid of losing you, but what you said the other night was right. You deserve honesty."

"Just tell me what it is, baby. I'm not some wimp. I can take it. Unless you're married or cheating on me or something."

She shook her head quickly. The movement helped further clear her head. "No. Just that... I'm a vampire."

Steven blinked a couple of times, then laughed. "Yeah right."

This wasn't the reaction she'd been expecting at all. "No, really. Fangs, blood-sucking, immortality, the whole bit."

He hadn't stopped grinning yet. "Really? Can you fly too?"

"Not yet. Eventually I think I'm supposed to develop the ability to vanish and reappear like a mist, but that hasn't happened yet. And my vampire maker and I aren't exactly on good enough terms for me to ask since he did this to me against my will."

The back door to the Midnight Saloon flew open, its frame filled with the impressive dark muscles of Joe the bouncer. The glare on his face didn't bode well for anyone who had the balls to grab Joe's boss and drag her off into a back alley.

Brianna looked up at him in surprise. "Oh, hey Joe. It's okay, I just fainted from lack of sleep. This is... this is Steven."

Joe nodded silently to Steven, then disappeared back within the bar, pulling the door shut behind him with a metallic bang. Once more, Brianna and Steven were alone in the alley together.

Steven shook his head. "Maybe you should back up and tell me the whole story."

*Why won't he believe me?* Fueled by anger, Brianna stood up, slowly pacing with shaking arms crossed over her chest while she recounted the night Kilo kidnapped her. The cool night air formed goose bumps on her

bare skin since she wore nothing but a bikini top, matching black dance briefs, and denim chaps. Being cold was the least of her worries right now, though.

"And this vampire wannabe..." he began in confusion.

"No, he's a real vampire," she interrupted.

"Okay, this guy, Kilo, he seduced you and then bit you..."

"And drained my blood so that basically I had to either drink his vampire blood to live, or I would die," she finished, giving in to the impatient urge to drum her fingers on her upper arms.

"And now you think you're a vampire? But what about daylight?"

"Doesn't affect us. Neither does garlic. Crosses and churches bother Kilo, but I think that's just because he's so damn evil and has a guilty conscience or something." She stopped pacing before and stared down at him.

Steven jumped to his feet to pace the alley now. "So how do you know you're a vampire?"

Brianna glared at him. "How do you know you're a guy? I have fangs, real ones, and crave blood once a month if I don't get enough sex with a human. And one time I...I lost control and drained a woman dry. And look." She focused on her fangs hidden within her upper gums, willing them to slide down enough for their sharp points to show below her upper lip. As their tips stung her bottom lip, she felt both smug and doubly worried as Steven's eyes widened in surprise.

He stopped and stared back at her, his hands on his hips. "Holy shit. You weren't kidding. And...you killed someone with those?"

She used her willpower to force the fangs back up into hiding before responding, having no desire to slice open her bottom lips while speaking. "No, I didn't kill her, Kilo did. He broke her neck. But I'd just been turned into a vampire, and hadn't been fed, and just lost control and..."

"And you drank her blood," Steven finished.

Unable to look at him now, Brianna stared down at the dirty cement and nodded. "I promised myself I would never be like Kilo after that, that I'd never again lose control over my vampire side. So I ran away

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from him and tried to be normal again. But then there was this guy trying to rape a woman in the parking lot here after the bar closed one night, and I...I thought it was Kilo and attacked him."

She hesitated. Losing control once was one thing, but admitting to it twice was something altogether different. Could he trust her not to do it again? "I don't know what happened. I snapped. And my boss saw it and tried to blackmail me with it." She finished by recounting the truth of what had happened to John McCannon. "But I swear I haven't done that since then."

"So if you haven't...fed since a week before I met you, how have you survived?"

"We have to either drink human blood once a month, or else have sex with a human once a week." She waited through a long silence and dared to peek up at his face. He was frowning now.

"How does sex with a human work?"

"Kilo said that when a vampire has consensual sex with a human, the human's sustaining energies are released towards us when they have an orgasm. And vice versa. When the vampire climaxes some of his or her immortal energy is transferred to the human so the human doesn't feel wiped out afterwards." Brianna suddenly wanted to chew her nails, a habit she'd forced herself to break years ago. Weird how it was trying to make a comeback now.

"So you've been using me for sex all this time?" Steven demanded, his voice bordering dangerously close to anger.

## Chapter Eleven

Brianna scowled at him. "Of course not! I could sleep with a stranger for that. Right or wrong, stupid or not, I fell in love with you."

Steven searched her face, then shook his head. "So if you physically need sex once a week, what was with this entire month of celibacy? To prove you could control yourself around me?"

"No. To lessen my vampire charms over you before I told you the truth. Kilo showed up one night and insisted that you couldn't really love me unless you knew the whole truth about what I am," she replied.

He cocked his head sideways, looking a little confused. "He's right. But I still don't know what you're talking about with this whole vampire charm thing."

Sighing in frustration, she walked over to the brick wall of her bar and leaned back against it, liking how the rough façade against her bare skin helped keep her grounded and alert. Despite her frustration and worry, she was starting to have trouble forcing back the fog again. "Every vampire has built-in charms that kind of put a trance over all humans they come near. We can't help it; it's automatically part of our makeup. I couldn't turn it off if I wanted to, but by going without sex or blood for an entire month, I become weak enough to lessen the spell's hold over you so you can think clearly. And you have to admit you're feeling a lot less in love with me now, aren't you?"

Steven looked down at the ground, seemed to consider his feelings for her, then shook his head. "Nope, I'm still in love with you, still want to

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marry you, still want to ravish your body right here and now. Are you sure you ever had this vampire charm thing working for you?"

"Yeah, pretty sure," Brianna retorted, feeling vaguely insulted now. Though the greater part of her wanted to jump and shout out her happiness. He still loved her.

He shrugged. "Well, I guess my feelings aren't based on your vampire charms, then, because I feel exactly the same way about you as I did before this month of no sex."

She bit her lip and watched his face. "Well, what now?"

"What now? You mean, for us?" he asked, taking a few steps closer to her.

"Yeah. Where do we go from here? I mean, can a human and a vampire even live together? You know I can't have kids, right?" Behind her back, Brianna's hands twisted together.

"So we'll adopt. You know, I could always become a vampire with you," Steven suggested. "It would sort of even things up."

Brianna's mouth dropped open. "You must be joking. Though it's not very funny. Becoming a vampire is very different from just getting married."

"If it'll make you more comfortable about marrying me, I'll gladly do it." Steven stepped closer to her again, closing the distance between them. "I told you before, I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, if you'll have me. That includes eternity."

"Steven, once you become a vampire, you can never go back to being a human. Ever," Brianna emphasized the word. Obviously, the man was out of his mind. How could she get it through his hard head that he did not want this kind of darkness in his life?

"But you can do it, right? You could make me a vampire. And afterwards, I'd be your vampire, right?" Only inches away now, he braced his hands on the bricks at either side of her shoulders, then leaned in closer to her. With their faces only inches away now, she could feel his every breath against her lips.

"No, you'd still be free to be with anyone you wanted. And I'm not sure if I can do a good job of creating a vampire. Remember, the last guy



who blackmailed me into trying it died of heart failure during the process." She looked up at him, almost losing herself in the dark blue of his eyes.

He seemed to consider this. "Well, I guess I'd just have to get a physical before we tried it."

"And we'd both have to sleep with humans every week in order to stay alive," she pointed out.

He leaned back a little. "Oh, now this isn't good. Sorry, baby, but I'm not into sharing. Couldn't we just be like superheroes and drink blood from the bad guys in the city? Sort of like a progressive task force, unpaid, that works for food?"

Brianna laughed before she could stop herself. "I guess that could work. We are supposed to develop the ability to read human minds after a while. So eventually we could read their minds and figure out which ones were bad."

"So then it's a plan?" Steven lowered his face the final few inches, covering her waiting lips with his, then kissed his way down her neck to nuzzle her ear. Damn he loved this woman.

"We'll see. I'm still not sure about the whole turning process," Brianna said, then giggled as his nose tickled the area where her neck met the curve of her shoulder. "For now, though, I've sort of got a problem I need a little help with."

"Oh, that's right. You're in need of a little TLC right now, aren't you?" He chuckled, skimming his fingertips over the crest of each of her breasts, barely encased in the black bikini top.

She shuddered with a rising need. "Yes. And if you keep teasing me like that..."

"What'll happen? Will you get mad at me and drink my blood?" Steven grinned.

"No, of course not. Being a vampire isn't an excuse to forget about what's right and wrong," Brianna replied, her voice a little snippy.

"Glad you agree. Hey, you know, you never showed me your office here. You do have an office here at the bar, don't you?" Steven waggled his eyebrows suggestively, making her frown turn into a grin again.

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"Why, yes I do," Brianna smiled, almost shy now as she laced her hand within his and led him back inside the bar. Somehow, the impossible had happened. Steven knew everything about her now, all her dark mistakes, all her dark needs. And he still loved her enough to want to marry her, enough even to want to become a vampire with her.

It seemed to take too long to close out the cash register, tell the staff goodnight, and lock up the building. She noticed Pamela was gone already, which was a bit of a surprise, but figured the blonde had just left for home early for some reason. With everyone safely in their vehicles and on their way home, Brianna flicked off the lights, dowsing them in complete, unrelenting darkness.

"Hey, don't we need a flashlight or something?" Steven protested in the sudden darkness.

She chuckled, still holding tightly to his hand as she led him easily around the room's many obstacles. "I can see just fine in here, dear."

"You can?" he asked, doubt evident in his voice.

Approaching a wooden column, Brianna stopped two feet from it. "Reach out in front of you and touch the wooden column."

He did with a sharp hum of surprise. "Okay, I guess you can see just fine in here."

Laughing again, she led him to the back of the building and to the left, down a short hall, and into her office. She didn't even bother to turn on the lights, just closed the door behind him and backed up to the desk while pulling him after her. Knowing the heavy metal desk could take both their weight and then some, she sat on its edge, spread her knees, and pulled him to stand between her legs.

"Actually I have to confess I've fantasized many times about being with you in here," Brianna whispered, her voice turning husky with need as she slid her eager hands up the front of his button-up shirt. She worked fast to unbutton this obstacle, not realizing just how fast she moved until he whistled low and long.

"Damn, woman, how'd you get that shirt open so fast?" His voice also sounded extra deep in the darkness, though she could easily see an

appreciative smile on his face. Being the only vampire in this relationship for a little while longer could definitely have its advantages.

Not answering him, she took his hands and placed them at her waist so he could find her in the dark. Immediately, his hands slid up to cup her breasts, his thumbs sliding side-to-side over her rapidly hardening nipples.

Papers made a crinkling sound beneath her hands as she leaned back on the desk to grant him better access. His fingers followed up the edge of her bikini top's shoulder straps, stopped at the top of her shoulders, then tugged the straps down to free the fullness of her breasts. His fingers trailed back down her chest, found her bare breasts, then gently rolled each nipple between his thumbs and forefingers. She moaned, then sighed. Oh how she'd missed feeling his hands rove and explore over her body.

"Damn, I missed you, Bri," Steven admitted, then bent his head down to suck and lick on her nipples. His hands cupped and lifted each breast in turn to his mouth.

Unable to help herself, she wrapped her legs around him and pulled him closer to her until he pressed against her yearning pussy. Too many layers still separated them, though. She needed his skin against her.

Sitting up, she unbuckled his belt, unfastened his jeans, then tugged them and his cotton boxer briefs down his legs and out of the way. Slowly the two layers of clothing slid the rest of the way down his legs to puddle around his ankles. His hard cock bobbed free, standing straight out towards her as if to say how much it had missed her as well and making her smile.

He slid his hands down her body towards the button on her denim chaps, but she brushed his hands away.

"No time," she muttered. "I need you inside me now." She reached forward, grasped his rock hard dick, and guided it with one hand towards her waiting pussy while her other hand pulled her tight dance briefs to one side. As the head of his dick touched the lips of her pussy, they both moaned in spontaneous unison.

"You don't have to be gentle tonight," she begged him. "Please, just take me now. We'll be gentle later."

Nodding since he now knew she could see him even in the dark, Steven grasped her hips and plunged forward, burying his aching penis within her waiting pussy until his balls met the cold metal edge of the desk. He pulled her closer so her butt hung over the edge of the desk a little, then pushed his cock deeper within her. This time, he didn't stop until his balls pressed against her warm ass.

"Damn baby, you never let me take time to do this right," he muttered, though he was only halfway irritated. The other half of him that had missed her so bad it didn't give a damn about finesse agreed with her. There was time for gentleness later. For now, there was only the goal to bring both their bodies to satisfying release.

"Seduce me later. Fuck me now," Brianna argued with a smile, lying back on the desk completely. She continued to hold her briefs aside so Steven could have easy access.

He thrust into her again and again, his speed rapidly increasing in response to the urgent pressure and release of her legs wrapped around his thighs.

She wanted to spread her legs wider for him, to take in more of him even as his cock repeatedly pressed against the limits of her inner vaginal wall. She wanted more of him, never again wanted to have to do without the sensation of his warmth inside her.

Steven leaned forward, finding and holding her breasts in the dark as he continued to thrust into her. He loved the way her breasts shifted forward and back every time his dick pressed into her. One of her hands reached out to grasp his shoulder as he heard her cry out loudly in perfect pleasure.

The little squeezes her pussy made as it contracted and released around his engorged shaft drove him the rest of the way over the edge until he was lost in moans and pants for air. Makeup sex on an office desk... Damn he loved this woman!

When they could breathe easily again, they managed to readjust all their clothing. Steven helped peel the papers off Brianna's sweat-glistened back after she sat up, making her laugh.

"Uh, I think you're going to have to redo some of this paperwork." He grinned.

"It was well worth it," Brianna replied, tugging the straps of her bikini top back into place.

Once dressed again, she suggested they go home and take a long hot bath together. Steven asked which apartment, and she said either. He thought he understood what she meant, too. As long as they were together, they were home. She locked the leather zipper pouch containing the night's take of cash into her wall safe, then led him back through the bar and out the front door.

She had just turned her back to lock the saloon's front door behind them when Steven grabbed her shoulder with a muttered curse.

Whirling around, she looked out across the deserted parking lot, then down to find Pamela draped in an unconscious straddle over her bike. How the bike had remained upright on only its kickstand under Pamela's dead weight was anyone's guess.

Brianna rushed over to the dancer in sudden fear, sure that she would find the girl dead and drained dry. But her neck was both bite-free and pulsing with a light heartbeat.

Sleepily, Pamela sat up and looked around in confusion. "Brianna? Where am I?"

Brianna continued to keep a supportive arm around the dazed blonde in case Pamela fell sideways. "You're in the parking lot at the Midnight Saloon. How did you get here?"

Pamela looked around her, her frown unchanging. "I don't know. I remember walking outside to help someone into a taxi. I was on my way back into the bar when a guy in a really ugly duster coat grabbed me. Then darkness and I ended up here."

Brianna felt suddenly unable to breath, could barely manage to whisper, "Kilo. It was Kilo."

## Midnight Dream Girls 1: The Scent of Evil

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"Are you okay? Do you need to go to the hospital?" Steven asked Pamela, his eyes quickly scanning her face.

"No, I'm fine. I think I just fainted or something. Maybe that guy in the coat put me on this bike for some reason after I conked out?" Pamela tried to get off the bike, but Steven gently pressed her back down.

"No, don't move for a little while until you're absolutely sure you're okay," he said with a frown, his eyes still scanning the blonde's face, neck, and bare arms.

Brianna tugged him aside a few feet, then whispered, "Did you see any bite marks anywhere on her body?"

He shook his head.

"Me either." She frowned in confusion. "Do you think he...?"

"Made her like you? I don't know. You don't have any scars from the process," he reminded her.

Brianna nibbled on her lower lip and tried to remember, then gave up. "I don't know if becoming a vampire immediately heals your body of the vampire bite, or if it takes time. She says she doesn't remember anything, and I can't exactly ask her if Kilo forced her to drink his blood without sounding like a nutcase."

"You know Kilo. What do you think he's up to?" Steven rested his hands on his hips, worry evident in his eyes as he waited for her to give him answers. Answers she didn't have.

"I knew him for all of two days, and only as his captive. We didn't exactly share friendly heart-to-heart chats. But I can tell you he's one sick son of a bitch. I wouldn't doubt it if he heard our conversation in the alley tonight. After all, it was his challenge, wasn't it?" Brianna's hands twisted in front of her, mirroring the knots forming in her stomach.

"And he's still a guy," he added. "Which means he's more than likely really pissed off that I didn't dump you and send you crawling back to him. So if I was a pissed off vamp who couldn't get rid of the competition, what else would I do to get my ex-girlfriend back?"

"I was never his girlfriend," Brianna admitted with a long sigh, making Pamela turn to look at them with a curious expression. Brianna forced herself to smile for Pamela's sake, then continued in a lower

whisper, "But if I was Kilo, I'd probably go to plan B at this point. Oh shit, Steven, what if his next strategy is to go after my staff one by one to try and blackmail me into returning to him?"

He shook his head and blew out a long breath. "It's probable. But is he going after your staff to feed on them, turn them into vamps, or just terrorize everybody?"

It was her turn to shake her head in confusion. "I honestly don't know. All I know is that my employees and customers are in danger now, and all because of me. Maybe I should..."

"Like hell you will!" Steven ground out between gritted teeth. "It's not your fault this asshole's playing some kind of sick game here. We'll just stay calm, warn your staff that your ex is trying to harass you and is a dangerous man, and keep an eye out for his next move. In the meantime, maybe we'd better hurry up and do you-know-what to me that we talked about earlier."

She frowned in confusion as she tried to figure out what he was so cryptically referring to. Then her eyes widened. "Oh, that. You mean, make you like me. Uh, let's wait on that until we know for sure what Kilo is up to. And until I know for sure I can complete the process without killing you."

He reached out and tucked her hair behind her ear. "Well, you'd better get sure about it really soon, love. I have a feeling Kilo's not going to wait long until he makes another move. And who knows who else at the Midnight Saloon might be next?"

### Author's Bio

Savannah Madanelle is the author of a growing list of romances, both erotic and sweet, in an ever-broadening list of genres. A formally trained dancer, her love for dance often finds ways to sneak into her plots (including this one!). She is a happily married wife to her one true soul mate and is honored to be the mother to two wonderful boys. She credits her family for keeping her continually grounded, humble, driven, and laughing (and contributing to her current author's theme to create protective heroines!).

Be sure to visit Savannah's website at [www.savannahmadanelle.com](http://www.savannahmadanelle.com) for news on her upcoming books and current works in progress, to read more about the Midnight Dream Girls Series and its individual characters, to join the MDG Society online group, and to get access to online excerpts, printable bookmarks, contests, and much, much more!



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## **Wicked Temptation by Cora Zane**

### **Chapter One**

The pounding reached Anya's ears through the haze of sleep—a loud, booming rattle much like thunder, like the deep, angry beating of a drum. A brilliant zip of lightning flashed right outside her window, and her eyes flickered open. She didn't know what triggered the knowledge, but it occurred to her that she had really heard it. The pounding noise wasn't a dream.

She sat bolt upright in the bed, her heart racing, her mind scrabbling as the pounding began again with a sudden, violent start. It was the middle of the night and the room was dark as pitch save for the intermittent flashes of lightning. It was frightening. Terrifying. Anya gripped the sheets as the noise bounded off the walls with an almost impossible force, each blow sending a stab of shock rippling along her nerves. It was so loud it was almost otherworldly, and she came to realize with horrible clarity—*It's coming from inside the house!*

Panic gripped her.

*Irina!*

In a rapid burst of movement, she flung back the covers and sprang out of bed. In less than a minute she was through the door and in the

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hallway, rushing toward god only knew what. Horrible scenarios flashed through her mind—burglars, rapists... Fear for herself, for her housekeeper lodged in her throat like a clod of ash.

She raced down the hall, snatching up a thick, blue vase off the sideboard as she passed it. She never missed a step as she hiked it over her head, fuzzy fronds and all, preparing to use it like a weapon if she had to.

She rounded the corner and at the end of the hall, she saw the light from the kitchen spilling out into the space between the bar and the den. Irina stood there facing the kitchen, her white night gown covering her from neck to ankle. In her right hand, she held a narrow butcher knife out in front of her, poised to strike.

"Irina, what's going on?"

"I don't know!"

Anya reached her and gazed into the kitchen. "Did you call 9-1-1?"

The housekeeper shook her head and fired off a rapid string of Russian that Anya couldn't begin to understand. Irina then made the sign of the cross and pointed the tip of the knife at the utility room door.

"There!" She gasped at Anya. "Someone is banging!"

Anya stared. Something thumped against the backside of the door, and her nerves bunched instinctively. An eerie tingling feeling crept over her. The door led into the garage at the back of the house. Only Irina ever used it. Anya always used the door facing the side street. She set the vase onto the counter and snatched up the cordless phone off the bar.

"You better leave!" Anya shouted at whoever was on the other side of the door. With shaking hands, she dialed 9-1-1 and put the phone to her ear. It went on ringing, ringing... She stepped closer to the utility room, Irina following close behind her.

"Did you hear me, motherfucker! I know you're in there and the police are on their way!"

"Anya please..." sobbed a small voice. "It's me. You have to let me in."

Anya froze, her expression shifting from fear to concern. "Shit. It's Eleni."

She shoved the phone at Irina and made a dive for the door, her fingers frantically working at the locks. "Hang on, Eleni, I'm getting it."

On the other side of the door, she heard muffled weeping. Anya got the locks off, and when she turned the knob, it flew open from the weight pressed against it. Eleni sprawled in a sobbing, disheveled heap at Anya's feet and curled up into a ball on her side.

Irina rushed in to help the fallen girl, but stopped short of actually touching her. Anya thought it was because Eleni was covered in bite marks—deep, runny puncture wounds on her arms and legs. However, when she looked up and followed Irina's gaze, she saw what had truly startled the housekeeper. On the back of the door, where Eleni had been pounding on it, thick bloody streaks trailed down the metal like clawing, elongated hands.

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"He promised me, Anya! He said I was to be his *matrinas*. Me. He said he loved me best!"

Eleni paced the living room like a caged animal, flecks of foam gathering at the corners of her mouth while she went on and on about Rubio's lies, his infidelities, about some new Acolyte named Sabilla who had apparently taken her place as the premiere protégé of the Rubio household.

Every few moments she screamed new obscenities and tore at her blonde hair in bitter anguish. Piled high atop her head, the dirty, disheveled mess looked like matted straw. Runny black eyeliner emphasized the dark circles smudged beneath her pale eyes which burned with a barely hidden fanatical gleam. Anya looked into those sparkling, over-bright eyes and she feared her, feared *for her*. She had heard of Biter's Addiction before, but until now, she had never actually seen it.

"I need you to drink this, Eleni. It will help calm you." Anya moved in closer with the snifter half full of cognac, offering it at arms length with the bowl resting on her palm and the stem captured between her fingers. She was afraid to get any closer. Eleni had already attacked her once.

"I don't want to drink! I don't want to be calm!" Eleni turned sharply and slapped the snifter from her hand as though it were a wad of paper. She then gripped her hands over her ears and began to scream hideously—a bloodcurdling noise that rose to crisp sharpness before plummeting away into raspy, wracking sobs. Gasping for breath, Eleni crumpled to the floor at the foot of Anya's couch, and pleaded in a raw voice, "Rubio! Oh, Rubio! Please, don't throw me out!"

Terrified, Irina would not come out of the kitchen. She stood behind the safety of the bar, tugging at the throat of her night gown, pulling it taut around her neck like a shield of protection. Her gaze darted to Anya, her eyes dark with fear. "Please, Madame, she is dangerous. Deranged. While she is like this you must do something!"

Anya knew Irina was right. She couldn't let this go on. Eleni was not only a danger to her and Irina, she was also a danger to herself.

While her sister was down, lost and grieving in one of her morose sobbing spells, Anya quickly crossed the den and snatched the cordless phone off the bar. Just as quickly, she marched away through the house to the study, a small room off the den that contained a heavy, oak desk and several towering cases of leather bound books that she never bothered to read. She left the door open, and went to her desk, where she sat down numbly on a corner facing into the hallway.

Until the moment her fingers started dialing Dominic's number, Anya had no idea who she was going to call. She had been out of Vampire Society some ten years, and when she left it behind, she had severed most of her old connections.

Regret surfaced now, haunting her like an old ghost. She hadn't anticipated anything like this ever happening. Not to herself and certainly not to Eleni. What if he wouldn't help her? What if *no one* would help her?

"Hello?"

The deep, masculine voice startled her. Lost in thought, Anya hadn't heard the phone ring, much less anyone pick it up. Now he seemed so close she felt a rise of hope. It was *him*. A high, anxious feeling gathered in her chest. All at once, she missed him and needed him, and for the life of her, she couldn't think of exactly what to say. She opened her mouth

and a little gasp slipped out as words failed her and her thoughts went spinning out into nothingness.

“Hello?” he asked again, his tone rough, impatient.

“D-Dominic?”

There was a long pause on the other end of the line, then, “Who is this?”

Heat flooded her face; her nerves frayed out just a bit more. “It’s... me, Dominic. Anya.” She hesitated, fear of rejection niggling at the back of her mind. “Look, I know we haven’t spoken in a while. Things went badly before...I-I said some things and...well, I mean, I thought–” Her throat closed around tears as Eleni began to rage again. From the den, there was the sound of shattering glass. Anya flinched and turned her back on the doorway, her voice thickening with sadness as she blurted out what she was thinking then, what she felt she most needed to say: “Please, Dominic. I need you.”