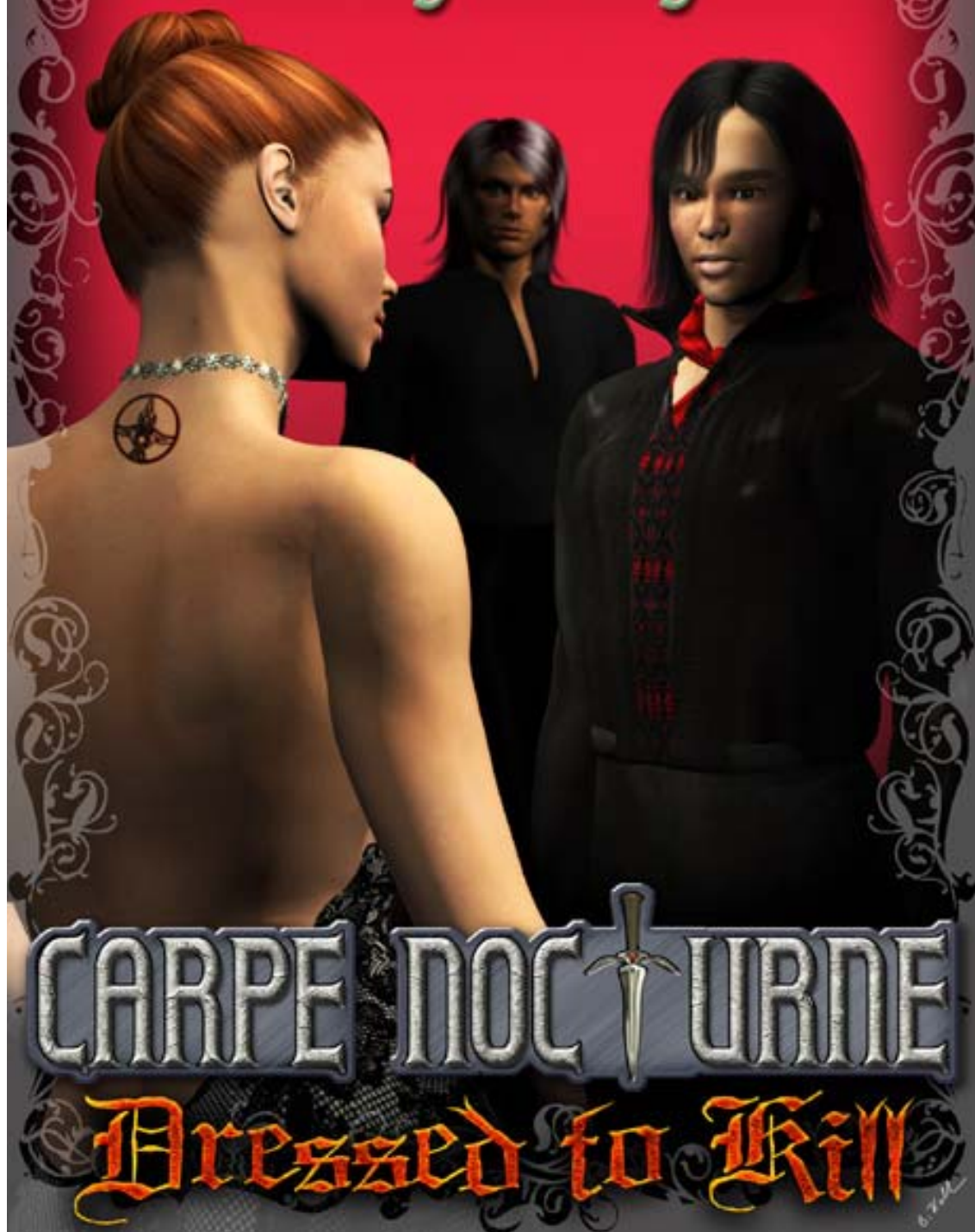


Changeling Press

Tawny Taylor



# **Carpe Nocturne 1: Dressed to Kill**

## **Tawny Taylor**

All rights reserved.

Copyright ©2007 Tawny Taylor

**Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.**

ISBN: 978-1-59596-674-2

Formats Available:

HTML, Adobe PDF,

MobiPocket, Microsoft Reader

Publisher:

Changeling Press LLC

PO Box 1046

Martinsburg, WV 25402-1046

[www.ChangelingPress.com](http://www.ChangelingPress.com)

Editor: Crystal Esau

Cover Artist: Bryan Keller

**This e-book file contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language which some may find offensive and which is not appropriate for a young audience. Changeling Press E-Books are for sale to adults, only, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.**

# **Carpe Nocturne 1: Dressed to Kill**

## **Tawny Taylor**

*One determined entrepreneur.*

*Two seductive vampires.*

*A brutal murderer...*

*...and a bar where every vampire knows your name.*

*Gives new meaning to the expression "Thrilling Nightlife."*

Sylvie Durand must get her failing nightclub, Carpe Nocturne, operating in the black before the utilities are cut off and her credit cards are eaten by an ATM machine. To stir up business, she decides to hold weekly themed costume parties. And it seems to be working -- until she discovers a dead body in her office and learns the vampire "costumes" aren't exactly disguises.

Burke Langton is on the run. Wrongfully accused of murder, he's keeping one step ahead of the Excoluni -- the law enforcement arm of the UMN (United Magical Nations) -- while tracking down the real killer. When the murderer strikes again, this time at Carpe Nocturne, Burke learns Sylvie is his *Origo* -- his mate. He also discovers she could be the murderer's next victim. Now he must find the killer while protecting Sylvie -- and battling the potent desire she stirs within him.

Miko Dvorak is a high-ranking officer of the Excoluni. His mission is to bring Burke to justice. But that's no easy task, for the two share an *Origo*. Miko must choose between the dark hunger driving him to complete the Binding, and his commitment to the law.

## Chapter 1

*Dead* had just taken on a whole new meaning for nightclub owner Sylvie Durand -- a much more literal one.

She wasn't afraid to admit she'd been desperate to increase traffic in her failing bar, *Carpe Nocturne*. But the parade of rescue and police personnel, dressed in matching blue uniforms and wearing identical grim expressions, wasn't exactly what she'd had in mind.

And the night had been going so well too.

All it had taken was one bizarre discovery for the first successful night in her club to come to a strange and shocking end. Terrifying. In fact, if she hadn't been the owner of the bar, she would've been outta there hours ago. She was still shaking all over from finding the dead guy... hanging... in her office... It had been so gruesome. The poor guy looked like he'd been the victim of a vampire attack.

Shudder!

God, it had been so awful. She just knew it would take years and years for the image branded in her mind to fade.

And the smell. Of blood and stuff she didn't want to think about.

Yes, lucky her. *Not*. She had owned *Carpe Nocturne* for two miserable months and was really, really hating it already.

*Anyone want to buy a bar for cheap?*

Only a handful of costume-bedecked patrons remained, hanging around outside the front door after having been questioned and released. They stood wide-eyed, watching the police detectives as they conducted their investigation. Morbid curiosity.

When the police officers decided they were done asking her the same questions over and over, she managed to drag her weary, shaky body toward the exit, intent upon

joining the onlookers still crowded around the front of the building. It was a little chilly outside. And dark. But at least the air wouldn't be tainted with the stench of death. A big, huge plus at the moment.

As she stepped through the doorway, a young woman dressed head-to-toe in Victorian garb gave her a weak smile. She was rubbing at the fake blood on her neck, now dried up and flaking off.

Sylvie attempted to give the woman a smile back. She wasn't exactly in the mood to socialize, although she was glad to be among friendlier company. The police officers who'd questioned her hadn't been rude, but they hadn't been kind either. Their clipped tones and deadpan expressions told her everything she needed to hear, more than she was prepared to deal with.

Yes, this pack of costumed strangers, dressed mostly as vampires -- what a creepy coincidence! -- weren't her first choice for companionship tonight. But they were people. Human beings. Alive. And not eyeballing her with the suspicion that she was a cold-blooded killer.

Or course, given her current mental state, even her worst enemy would be acceptable company. The thought of being alone terrified her. She was scared witless. Completely freaked out. The creepy costumes weren't helping, that was for sure. What had made her think themed costume nights were a great idea anyway?

And why hadn't her best friend shown up yet? Sylvie had called her hours ago, left an urgent this-is-life-or-death message on her answering machine.

"Are you okay?" Victorian woman asked.

"Not sure, to be honest." Sylvie leaned back, letting the cold brick wall support her. Her legs were wobbly. Her knees felt tingly and loose, like any moment they'd give out.

Victorian woman gave her an understanding nod. "I can totally relate. Had to be quite a shock finding that dead body."

*That's putting it mildly.* Sylvie's stomach did a little summersault inside her belly. She swallowed hard against the acid rising up her throat. "Yeah."

"Did you know the person? The one who... you know?"

"No. Have no idea who he is -- was."

"At least that's a good thing. Would've really been awful if it had been a good friend. I've never seen a dead body, outside of the movies. Although I have thought about being a private detective someday. You know, like one of Charlie's Angels," she jabbered excitedly. "I watch old reruns on cable. The original series was so much better than the movie..."

"Nothing too thrilling about any of this, if you want my opinion," she whispered over the woman's ongoing discourse about the shortcomings of a movie she'd never seen. She lacked the energy to continue the conversation. Heck, she lacked the energy to stand erect. Figuring she'd send a subtle message to the yammering red-headed Farrah Fawcett wannabe, she took a step or two to the side. Naturally, Farrah didn't take the hint and closed the distance between them.

A deep chuckle resonated to Sylvie's left as she took a third step.

Why would anyone be laughing right now? What could be so funny about a man who had been murdered in her office? There wasn't a damn thing about this night that was funny. Or exciting. Or cool. It was just plain horrific! The worst thing she'd ever seen.

What was wrong with these people? Didn't they have any hearts? A man had died in there! Died. As in dead. Forever. What if he had a family? Children. Oh, God!

Okay, she was done freaking out and overreacting. At least for now.

She turned her head in the general direction of the chuckle. Found the guilty party standing about five feet away, a guy dressed as a vampire, black cape and all. He was talking to a gaggle of women gathered around him, all dressed in Victorian gowns like Farrah Fawcett. They were tittering like a bunch of birds. Fluffing their feathers. Shaking their tails and fluttering eyelashes.

At the moment it wasn't a scene she had the stomach to watch.

Although, after taking a second look, she couldn't blame the women. That vampire wannabe's gorgeous face would inspire just about any red-blooded girl to do a little tail shaking. Even her.

That was, *if* she had a thing for vamps wearing costumes that played up on devil-made-me-do-it smirks like his.

But she didn't.

Nor did she find the crisp white of his shirt against the deep olive of his skin the least bit sexy. And the tendril of his ebony hair curled over the pulse-numbing swell of his shoulder... that did nothing for her either. Not at all.

Who was she kidding?

When he lifted his eyes, his gaze was incredibly sharp. He reminded her of Hugh Jackman in *Van Helsing*. Dark and mysterious and damned sexy.

She could tell by the way her eyeballs and tongue were drying up that her glance had morphed into a gape-mouthed stare.

What was that all about? She did not gape. She did not stare. *Pull it together, girl!*

His all-too-perfect lips curled into the kind of smile that no doubt inspired women to drop their panties.

Playing the affronted woman of the new millennium, she rolled her eyes and made a failing attempt at turning her attention back to the Charlie's Angel wannabe beside her.

The woman kept talking, rambled on and on about something, but Sylvie couldn't hear her anymore. Now, instead of thinking about the poor dead guy, she was too busy thinking about Van Helsing over there. Him and his "fan club."

Ack! What was wrong with her? A guy had been found murdered in her office. Her bar would be shut down for who knew how long, which meant even more financial troubles were headed her way. As if she didn't have enough of those already! And all she could think about was some egotistical guy wearing cheap velveteen and satin?

Fatigue That's what it was. Exhaustion. And shock. And... and temporary insanity. What was that disease called? Oh yeah. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.



*Is there a psychiatrist in the house?*

She needed to go home. When, oh when would she be free to leave? Not that she was eager to go to her empty house, but this standing around, waiting, was driving her nuts. She needed to get out of there before she really did need a shrink.

She stared at Farrah's face and pretended like she was listening.

"Do you need a ride home?" a deep male voice asked.

Without turning to look, she identified the voice as belonging to Van Helsing. It was a gut feeling. She didn't have to look. Little ripples of awareness zipped up and down her spine.

"Thanks, but no," she said. Maybe he was trying to be nice, and she was just overreacting because of her current unstable mental state, but she doubted it. She glanced his way. The evil Cheshire grin was gone, but something sparkled in his impossibly dark eyes. Something that didn't inspire even the tiniest measure of trust. Still, she felt compelled to add, "Not trying to be rude, or anything. My friend's on her way to pick me up. I'd hate to make her drive all the way here for nothing."

"Just as long as you're not driving. You're a little pale." With a tip of his head, he motioned toward her hands. "You're shaking too."

She laced her fingers together, gripped her hands. "Yeah. Kind of freaked out still."

The medical examiner -- or whatever the guy who collected dead bodies was called -- decided that was the perfect time to wheel the loaded gurney through the propped-open front door. Sylvie knew the body would be closed up in something, but she averted her eyes anyway. Her stomach roiled like the inside of a volcano. Thankful for the support of that cold brick wall, she stared down at Van Helsing's well-shod feet and didn't lift her gaze, even after she heard the slam of truck doors.

She felt sick.

Home. She wanted to go home.

A different set of feet came to a stop next to Van Helsing's. "We're all set here for tonight, we've locked up, but we need to ask you to leave the premises secured for a

few more days. We'll need to get back in there." The speaker -- and owner of a pair of scuffed, black uniform shoes -- was one of the police officers who'd first questioned her. Couldn't remember his name. Didn't really care. As she lifted her eyes, he handed her a card. "In case you need to get in touch with me."

"Okay. Thanks." She fingered the edge of the card and watched him and the rest of the officers get into their cars and drive off. Farrah and the remaining bystanders, with the exception of Van Helsing, left one by one. Van Helsing hung around while Sylvie put in a third call to her criminally non-responsive and soon-to-be-ex best friend.

Still no answer. What the hell? It wasn't that late. A little after one in the morning. Normally Lisa was up at this hour, stuffing her face with popcorn and watching reruns of *Law and Order*. Where was she?

Frustrated and desperate, Sylvie slapped her flip phone shut so hard it flew from her shaking hands and fell with a plastic-shattering smash on the concrete.

No hope Lisa'd get through now.

"Dammit!" Sylvie bent to pick up the phone she knew was broken to bits but Van Helsing reached it first. Her fingertips grazed the back of his hand as he wrapped his fingers around the target of their simultaneous grappling. A funny tingle buzzed up her body. When she straightened up, her cheeks felt like they were glowing as brightly as Carpe Nocturne's neon sign overhead. She staggered backward, bracing herself against the wall.

He handed her the phone. His lowered eyebrows spoke of genuine concern, but the sparkle still lingering in his eyes spoke of other things. Very intriguing other things, she realized as she looked deeper.

"Are you sure you don't need a ride?" he asked.

"Positive. Thanks. I'll just... drive myself home. I'm not a baby." She pushed off from the wall, letting her legs support her fully. Unfortunately, they were a little too wobbly to do all that great a job at it. She stumbled after her second step, and naturally it was Van Helsing's arm that she reached for as she struggled to keep from falling over and breaking her neck.

At least her spine was spared. No need for a neck brace. But she couldn't say the same for her heel. It snapped off when she twisted her ankle. "Oh, this is just great!" Still holding onto Van Helsing's arm, she reached down and snatched up her wrecked shoe. "My favorite pair. What else could go wrong tonight?" She wanted to cry. Really, really bad.

This was a nightmare. Worse than a nightmare. Thanks to tonight's events, she was on the verge of losing everything she'd worked for. Her home. Her bank account. Her security.

Even though the tears were right there, gathering in her lower eyelids, she didn't cry. She blinked a lot. Sniffled. Blinked some more. Slowed her breathing. "Watch, I'll probably have a flat tire, too," she said through a series of hiccupping half-sobs.

"I'll drive you home. I promise I'm not going to hurt you."

She knew that... Kinda. There was, after all, a very sick murderer running around the city. Who knew what the guy looked like? Could look like Hugh Jackman, with long black hair, a stubbled jaw and a charming smile that made women melt...

No way. Van Helsing couldn't be a murderer. He was the good guy. He only shot vampires and werewolves.

*We're talking reality here, not movies.*

Even though she had a feeling this man was not a murderer, she still didn't want to get into a car with him. She was too shaken to trust her instincts right now. "I know you won't hurt me. I, er... I need my car tomorrow morning," she explained, having a light bulb moment. "If I accept a ride, I won't have a way to get my car tomorrow."

"Then I'll follow you home, to make sure you make it back safely."

"No. Really." Realizing she was still holding onto his arm as they walked around the side of the building, she released it. There were only two vehicles in the parking lot. Her Honda sat under the flickering light of a street lamp. A few parking spots away, a black sports car of some kind huddled low to the ground. The lamp's light and the full moon reflected off the glossy paint.

He walked her to her car, opened the door, and politely waited while she got in and started it up.

She pulled the door shut, flipped the power locks and rolled down the window. "I'm fine. Really. Thanks. Uh, goodnight."

He pulled something out of his pants pocket and handed it to her. "In case you need to get in touch with me."

A business card. She glanced down but didn't read it. She was too shaken to comprehend printed words. And too distracted by questions to care. Why would he think she'd need to get in touch with him? She tucked it into the front pocket of her purse and smiled weakly. "Thanks." Not waiting for him to get into his car, she put her vehicle into drive, flipped on her headlights and drove toward the street.

She noticed, as she turned onto the road, he still hadn't flipped on his headlights. Curious. She'd half-expected him to follow her, even though she'd refused his offer.

What was he waiting for?

At the first traffic light she came to, she pulled out his business card and read it. Brett Larrington, P.C.

"Oh. My. God! He isn't a murderer. He's just a lawyer. A freaking ambulance chaser." She dropped her head. Her forehead struck the steering wheel hard enough for a shower of stars to glitter behind her closed eyelids. "A lawyer who probably thinks I'll be on the hunt for a good defense attorney real soon." A horn sounded from somewhere behind her car, reminding her she was parked in the middle of the road, blocking traffic. "No wonder he didn't want to leave me. I'm his next meal ticket."

\* \* \*

"Okay, you can come out now," Burke called to the shadowed figure beside the trash container sitting at the rear of the building. "She's gone."

"I don't like this," Isabella, his one and only friend in the world, said as she tugged at the laces running up the front of her velvet gown's bodice. "I hate not being able to use magic. These gowns are a royal pain. And speaking of pain, are you sure there isn't a better way? Do we have to break in? What if she set the alarm?"

"All I can suggest is next time you pick something less... challenging to get out of. You know we can't risk using magic here. And as far as the alarm goes, she couldn't turn it on because the police are coming back in the morning."

"I hope you're right." She stepped out of the dress, revealing a black corset over a white blouse and a pair of black pants. She folded the dress and stuffed it into a bag sitting on the ground. Then she gathered her long red hair into a ponytail high on top of her head. She handed Burke a spare elastic and he secured his hair low, at his nape. "Well, what if the human police come back? I'm sure you can guess what kind of conclusions they'd jump to."

"Doesn't matter. What're they going to do to me?"

"Us," she corrected, tucking the bag into a dark spot behind a stack of empty boxes.

"Us. It's not like they can catch us."

"You don't know that for a fact," she grumbled, fishing through a second bag.

"They haven't so far."

Lifting her head, she gave him a scowl and pointed a lock pick at him. "You're killing me here."

"Just get the door open. Please."

"I'm working on it. You're distracting me." She slipped the tool into the lock, fiddled with it a few seconds then turned the door knob. "Done."

"This is the only way we can collect the evidence we need. You know what happens when we wait. The damn Excolumi will be here soon. They'll clear the place of any hint of magic and we'll have nothing. And we both know the human police won't know what to do with this. We don't have any time to waste."

"Yeah. I wish we'd figure out who is doing this so we could go back home, quit running. It's wreaking havoc on my social life."

"I'm trying. I'm trying. I'm no Sherlock Holmes."

"I've noticed."

"Shut up." He softened his words with a smile, knowing Isabella wasn't the kind to take his ribbing personally. Hell, she dished enough of it out not to expect to get a little back in return. They'd been friends forever, since they'd cut their fangs on their first humans. Years ago they'd tried being lovers -- only briefly -- then promptly returned to being friends. Wasn't in the cards for them to be more than that, for a number of reasons.

His only regret was having dragged her into this shit in the first place. This was his problem. If he'd left without saying anything that night, she would be at home right now, living her life as she should. Not running from the Excoluni -- the law enforcement organization of the UMN, United Magical Nations.

Thanks to him, Isabella, once a respected member of the UMN, was now a suspected felon and facing the death sentence for aiding and abetting a convicted murderer.

The stench inside the building was almost enough to force him back outside. But he knew his time was short. He'd have to suck it up and get to work.

"I'll wait out here," Isabella said, stepping behind the trash container.

"Perfect. You know the signal. If you see the Excoluni, let me know."

"Will do."

He'd already gotten a good look at the victim, thankfully. He'd resorted to frequenting nightclubs within a ten-mile radius of each murder, hoping that one night he might be in the right place at the right time.

For once fate was on his side. He'd not only seen the guy mere minutes before his murder, he'd found the body immediately following, and knew the method of killing. Having shown up at the scenes of previous murders after the human police had removed the body and the Excoluni had cleared the place of magic, this was a coup, the first time he'd gotten a good look at a body and crime scene while it was still fresh.

Like the other victims, this one had been a human, not associated in any way with the local vampire clans. There had to be some kind of connection between the victims, but damned if he could figure it out. He didn't have a name for this last one

yet, so he had no details about the guy's past life, but the most recent three victims had been a dock workman at a shipping company, a nurse and a delivery driver for UPS. No obvious red flags there. Two men. One woman.

What the hell was the motivation for these killings? They weren't a typical vampire feeding. Vampires didn't have to kill their prey when they fed. And they didn't make a regular habit of taking body parts with them when they were through, either.

If only he hadn't been at the wrong place at the wrong time when that first murder had been discovered he wouldn't be trying to piece this together. He was a nobleman. A landowner. This detective stuff was so far removed from his personal experience. Track down a murderer? Forget it. Negotiate a profitable lease? Now that was something he could do.

It had been all circumstantial evidence, the so-called evidence that had led to his conviction. Just like that, he'd gone from being a vampire who pretty much kept to himself, to a convicted felon, to an escaped convict on the run. Everything he had was gone. His home. His money. His properties. His reputation.

Stolen by fucking circumstance.

Since his night vision was far superior to humans', he needed no light as he carefully searched the room where the murder had taken place. He didn't want to miss anything but at the same time had to take care that he didn't leave any evidence of his visit either. Hadrian Dvorak, the detective in charge of the string of gruesome murders that had been wrongfully tied to his name, would love finding something that would cinch up yet another case against him.

Lucky for Burke, his cotton gloves would hide fingerprints. He'd secured and tucked his hair into the hood of his cape.

He stooped down and searched the peeling, scuffed linoleum tile for clues. Scraps of material. Footprints in the dried blood. Anything that might give him some idea of who was killing the humans. The only thing he was certain of at this point was the murderer was a vampire. And every murder had taken place at a bar.

Dammit, he wished he knew something about detective work. Might actually know when he was looking at a clue.

He saw a little dried mud on the floor. Some smeared blood. A bit of folded paper, partially hidden by a box sitting on a low shelf not far from the trash can.

While the first two wouldn't do him much good because he didn't have access to a lab to analyze them, the scrap of paper looked promising.

He carefully plucked it up. Looked like a folded cocktail napkin. No surprise there. This was, after all, the back office of a bar.

Damn. He'd been too optimistic. Someone had probably simply missed the garbage. He crumpled it up and was about to lob it into the plastic can when he saw the shadow of black writing on one corner. Curiosity got the better of him.

Sure, it was probably nothing. A phone number from some guy hot to get into the bar's owner's pants. He wouldn't be surprised if she didn't get dozens of propositions a night.

Then again, who knew? Maybe it was something? He flattened it out on the desk's top, being careful not to disturb the papers scattered over the surface. A woman's first name and phone number was scrawled in looping feminine handwriting.

Interesting. He was guessing it belonged to either the bar's owner or one of the waitresses, but just for kicks, he folded it up and stuffed it into his pocket. Then he took a look at the papers on the desk. Bills. Most of them late notices. Sure enough, the name matched. Sylvie Durand. Sexy name for a sexy woman. Being careful not to move anything too much, he sifted through the documents.

Evidently Carpe Nocturne was in financial trouble. Hmmm. He wondered if there was a reason for the murder taking place at a nightclub that was in danger of going belly up. Maybe that was a connection? Though it seemed like a long shot that a vampire would turn to murder to shut down a few local bars.

Too bad for Sylvie Durand. Carpe Nocturne seemed like an okay place to him. Kind of... charming. And the owner... well, she had a few charms all her own. If it



weren't for the fact that he was on the run from the law, he'd be tempted to stick around and explore a few of them.

Ruminating about the frustrations of being a criminal on the run, he continued his search, finding nothing else that caught his eye. He headed back toward the exit just as Isabella sounded the signal. She jumped when he whispered, "I'm here."

They carefully worked their way around the north side of the building, knowing Hadrian -- also a vampire -- had night vision as keen as their own. There were two vehicles, he noticed. Not one like usual.

Why the extra men on this case?

He kept quiet about the napkin until they'd made it down the street and into his car, parked about a half block away in a crowded twenty-four hour supermarket's parking lot. He'd moved it there after the bar's owner had left. "I got something this time." When Isabella gave him a surprised glance, he added, "Well, I think. It could be something."

"Oh. Sure."

He started the car and headed north on Main. The apartment he'd rented under the assumed name Brett Larrington was only a few blocks away. "Okay, probably not. But I wasn't going to take a chance. So far, we've searched the scenes of four murders and found nothing. I'm man enough to admit I'm getting a little desperate."

"Desperate? You can say that again," she teased. "In more ways than one."

He frowned. There was no need for that now.

So he hadn't had a lover in a while. That was his choice. It was a voluntary decision -- this last few... decades... of celibacy. He damn well wasn't getting desperate for sex. "What do you mean by bringing that up now? You know why I haven't... why I'm not... forget it." He tried hard to hide the defensiveness from his voice.

She smiled. "Just trying to lighten the mood."

"Didn't work."

"I see that. What'd you get?"

"This." He pulled the napkin out of his pocket and handed it to her then turned into the apartment building's driveway. By the time he'd parked in the lot in front of the building, she'd handed it back to him.

"It's a woman's name. Wrong sex to be the killer."

"We don't know that. Really. Playing devil's advocate here, why couldn't it be a woman? Though I'm not saying this one's the killer 'cause Sylvie Durand is human. The bar's owner, as it turns out."

"It can't be a woman because everyone knows women -- even female vampires -- don't commit murders like this. I watch *CSI* reruns, you know. They prefer methods that keep them out of reach of the victim. Shooting, poisoning, that kind of thing."

"First, I think you're taking this whole detective thing way too seriously. Second, you need to stay away from television. And third, maybe this killer isn't your normal female vampire. Maybe she's into pain and torture."

"Doubtful. Plus there's the little matter of how she'd get those victims strung up like that. All but one of the victims have been big guys. Over two-fifty. I couldn't heft them up by myself and I'm no sissy. We girl vamps don't have the strength you guys do. I doubt those victims would voluntarily hop up on a chair and let her tie them."

"Never know."

"You're so full of it."

He chuckled. Isabella never hesitated to speak her mind. One of the reasons why they would *never* be lovers again. As a friend, however, it was tolerable. Most of the time. "Maybe they're submissives looking for dommes to spank them," he suggested, half-joking. Yes, the whole theory of a female murderer was a little far-fetched. But it was fun pushing it, just to rile Isabella. She deserved it for that jab about his sex life.

"No way. In the office of a bar? An office that doesn't even belong to her?"

"Maybe they'd planned to meet and talk? Maybe the killer is a friend of the bar's owner, Sylvie. There are lots of possibilities here."

"Most likely, that scrap of paper was on the desk and fell onto the floor. Or it even could've been in the victim's pocket."

"Sure. But I think I should check it out anyway. The bar was full and all the bar's employees were busy. If the killer knew the bar's owner, he or she might have known no one would be going back to the office for several hours. So, going back to my original theory, if the killer had arranged for a meeting --"

"You're really reaching here."

"I've been convicted of a murder I didn't commit. I'm going to reach." At her understanding nod, he added, "I remember that victim. He sat alone most of the night. Didn't talk to the owner that I recall. But then again, it's not like I sat there staring at him all night. There was a tall blonde who sat next to him, though. She could be our killer. I didn't get close enough to find out if she's a vampire. She could be..." He swiped the paper from Isabella, "... Mistress Z." He waved the napkin then stuffed it in his pocket.

"That's not the name on that napkin," his friend flatly pointed out. "That's your human, Sylvie."

He cut the engine, fisted the keys and opened the door. "I know. Just changing it a bit for dramatic effect. Trying to lighten the mood."

She rolled her eyes as she looked at him over the car's roof. "I wonder about you sometimes."

"Don't. It'll just get you in trouble." He slammed the door, strode up the sidewalk and pulled open the door for her.

As she passed, she gave him another rolling-eyed glance. "Who says it hasn't already?"

He chuckled to hide the wave of guilt pulsing through him. The door behind them fell closed as they stepped into the apartment building. "Touché, my friend. Actually, there's another explanation for this that we haven't thought about yet."

"What's that?"

"Maybe this napkin didn't come from the victim or fall off the desk. Maybe it fell out of the killer's pocket."

“It’s possible, I suppose. Unlikely but possible.” Isabella stopped at apartment 1A, slid her key into the lock, but hesitated before opening the door. “What’re you going to do next?”

He stuffed his hand into his pants pocket and curled his fingers around the wadded napkin. “Oh, I don’t know. I think I’ll go look up the other Mistress Z on the net. The human one. See if I can find an address. I might be in the mood for a spanking.” He winked.

“Now, that I’d kill to see.” His friend’s laughter followed him all the way up the stairs.

## Chapter 2

Sylvie couldn't sleep. Every time she closed her eyes she saw the same thing. That awful image of the dead man, the empty eye sockets, the horrific expression on his face. And then she saw herself as a child, standing under the freeway overpass, the cardboard sign gripped in her grubby hands, her eyes hollow.

In a desperate attempt to distract herself, she watched infomercials for a while. Kept trying to call Lisa. Gave up after getting her voicemail three times in a row. Would Lisa ever hear about it tomorrow! "She had better be near death's door," Sylvie mumbled as she hit the button, cutting off the call before the voicemail kicked in again.

She tried reading, but her brain was too foggy to absorb written words. She flipped through magazines and stared at the pictures blindly. Her fears kept haunting her. That guy's face.

How long would it take before it would fade, even a bit? Dammit, she didn't want to be alone tonight!

She jumped for the umpteenth time when a tree branch scratched her bedroom window. Tiptoed through the house checking and re-checking the locks. Her puppy, Lulu, who weighed in at exactly five pounds, wasn't much of a guard dog but she brought her along anyway. Weren't toy poodles supposed to be good security dogs?

Then again, if that was the case, hers was defective. The little white fur ball kept whimpering and hiding under the nearest piece of furniture.

"A lot of good you'd be if someone broke in. Maybe you'd ruin their shoes," she half-joked, half-scolded, dragging the shivering canine out from under the couch. "This is not the time for hunting dust bunnies." She was almost regretting not having gone for the Rottweiler. Instead of hiding behind a one hundred fifty pound animal with big

sharp teeth as she crept through her house, she was carting around a shaking, dribbling poodle.

Front door locked? Check. Windows? Check. Kitchen door? Check. French doors to the back yard? Check. Everything on the first floor seemed to be secure. She headed back toward the front of the house, to the staircase. It was then, as she turned the corner, that she saw something dark pass over the leaded glass sidelight next to her front door.

Her heart stopped. Literally.

Someone was out there! That shadow was way too tall to be a stray cat or opossum.

She dashed back to the kitchen, dropped Lulu on the floor next to her food dish and armed herself with the one and only weapon she could find in her current panicked state -- a broom.

Hopefully the element of surprise would be on her side or she was in big trouble.

Then she tiptoed back toward the front door. Her fingers gripped the broom's wooden handle so hard the muscles in her palms cramped. Her heart thudded so hard in her chest she could feel it banging against her breastbone.

She briefly thought about running back to the kitchen and calling 9-1-1. But what if there was no one out there? Or what if her friend Lisa had come over to check on her?

*Please, please let it be Lisa.*

Her arms shaking, she peered through the peephole. No Lisa. She went to the living room window to see if there was a car parked in her driveway.

Nothing.

Still holding the broom, she ran from window to window, checking each one. Her yard had a lot of trees and shrubbery. Too many. Up until tonight she hadn't considered the downside of having a house virtually surrounded by dense greenery.

Tomorrow morning she was calling a landscaping company! It was all going, even the lilacs. Too many places for prowlers to hide.

She went back to the front door, paced back and forth a million times until she was so tired she needed duct tape to keep her eyelids open. Finally, unable to keep going, she dropped on her rump on the bottom stair.

The shadow passed in front of the side light once more, sending her into a state of panic all over again. If only the glass panes weren't beveled. She might know what she was dealing with. She lunged for the front door and peered through the peephole again.

The lawyer?

The lawyer!

As if a switch had been thrown, her racing heart rate slowed. It was only the lawyer, Brett Whatever-his-name. She released a huff of air. God, she was a wreck. Freaking out at every little thing.

But as she twisted the doorknob, the welcome relief morphed into anger. The lawyer? How dare he come skulking around her house at this hour! What was his deal? Need to make a payment on that ridiculous car he had? Speaking of cars, where was it anyway? He had to have driven. Unless he lived close by.

Wouldn't that be her luck?

She didn't wait for him to knock. She opened the door and, making sure to wield the broom in the most threatening manner she could, stomped outside and shouted, "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

He was facing the street. And gauging by the way his very nicely-built body jerked when she yelled, he hadn't expected her to open the door yet. He whipped around and, his gaze dropping to her hands, lifted both of his in the universal position of surrender.

Such a strong man in such a weak position. For some reason that gesture looked wrong on him. She had the feeling he didn't need to use it very often.

"I wanted to make sure you got home safely," he explained. "Didn't see your car..."

Fighting a tingle of awareness as her gaze went on a little tour of the landscape that comprised Brett Whoever, P.C., she tipped her head and glared at him. "It's parked in the garage. Like it should be. So get lost. I don't need a lawyer. And even if I did, I wouldn't call you. How fucking low! Trying to solicit new business by doling out cards at the scene of a murder. Can. You. Say. Ewww?" She punctuated each word with a thrust of the broom.

"I'm not here to try to get a client." He crossed his arms over his chest. And thanks to the fact that he was wearing a short-sleeved shirt, she was privy to the sight of a couple really nice biceps.

Drool. And drool.

Still, he was a scummy lawyer, she reminded herself. Out to get his next buck. What else would he be doing at her house in the middle of the night?

"Heh. Yeah," she scoffed. "Like I'm going to believe that. What's wrong? The ad you put in the newspaper didn't get you enough business this month?"

"Plenty's wrong. But not for me." He took a step toward her. It was a pretty large step. Brought him a whole lot closer to her than she wanted at the moment... or maybe not. Yes, too close.

She took a couple steps backward, but the closed storm door stopped her from going any further. The air got a little thicker, harder to inhale. "Yeah... so what're you trying to say?" She lifted her chin, shifted the broom into her right hand and reached behind her with the left, searching for the door's handle. He closed the distance between them before she had her fingers around it. The scent of man and soap and something else she couldn't name swirled around her like a fog. She inhaled deeply, to see if it was really as pleasant as she'd first thought.

Yeah, it was.

*Scared, you should be scared! Not sniffing him like a bouquet of roses.*

Now, with his threatening -- albeit scrumptious -- bulk blocking her, and her head adrift in thoughts of flowers and biceps, she couldn't step out from in front of the



door to open it. Not sure what to do, she released the door's handle and returned both hands to the broom.

His gaze met hers and held it captive. "Please. I realize it looks a little strange, my being here at this hour. But I think there are a few things you need to know."

His voice was so low and soothing and reassuring the little bit of anger she'd managed to cling to vanished. Poof. Gone. She was suddenly tempted to invite him inside.

*What am I thinking?*

She shoved that idiotic idea aside and yanked her eyes away. For some reason, her brain seemed to get all soupy when she looked him in the eye.

What had she been about to say? *Oh yeah.* "Don't you think a phone call would've been more appropriate? How'd you find out where I live, anyway?"

"That's what I've come to talk to you about." He raised a hand to her face, closed his fingers around her chin and lifted, until she was looking at him again. "You can trust me."

A warm, pleasant feeling, like satin running over her skin, swept through her mind. Equally pleasant tingles danced over her skin, warmed her insides.

Yes, she could trust him. He was strong and mysterious but not scary. He wanted to help her, not harm her.

Very suddenly, she realized she wanted to touch him. No, she wanted to do a whole lot more than that. To taste his kiss. To strip naked, throw herself on the floor and invite him aboard.

The longer she stared into his eyes, the more she wanted to feel his hard body pressed against hers. His mouth over hers, tasting, taking.

Whatever she was about to say faded from her mind.

He slowly lowered his head, tipping it to the side as it came closer, closer.

He was going to kiss her! And she was so very, very glad. She closed her eyes and mentally braced herself.

Nothing.

Confused, her cheeks flaming, she blinked open her eyes. His face was right there. His nose almost touching hers. His lips so close all it would take was a teeny tiny shift forward and they'd be firmly planted on hers, where they should be. Yet for some crazy reason she was frozen in place. Couldn't move a muscle, except for the ones operating her eyelids.

He closed his big hands around her upper arms, backed away from her house several steps, taking her with him, and opened her door.

Dazed, but at least able to move again, she walked inside her house. He followed her, pushed the front door closed behind him and twisted the deadbolt.

"Come. This way." He took her hand and led her to the living room couch. "Sit."

Confused and tired and just plain worn out, she sat. She stared at his face.

It was a bummer to see his expression change. For a second, she'd been sure he'd come to seduce her. There'd been something in his eyes. The simmer of lust burning brightly. Thrilling. Intoxicating, that's what it had been.

But now it was gone and his demeanor was cool. Not cold, but... professional. Suddenly chilled, she pulled the afghan off the back of the sofa and wrapped it around herself.

"I have to ask you about something," he said.

"Oh?"

"Yes, it's about this." He pulled a folded, wrinkled cocktail napkin from his pocket and handed it to her.

Their fingers brushed as she took it from him. She tried to ignore the strange flutter her heart did at the innocent contact and unfolded the paper. Her name and phone number were written on the napkin, in her handwriting. She recognized it right away but wondered how he'd ended up with it. "Yes? I know where this came from. But how'd you get it?"

"I found it in your office."

"That's impossible. My office? When?" She stared at his face, practically memorizing his features. He had high cheekbones. A perfect chin. Cute ears. But it was his eyes that were the most striking.

His eyes...

"Tonight," he answered, vaguely.

She shook her head to clear it. It felt like it was getting clogged with thick, gelatinous ooze. "When tonight?" What was he getting at? And what had he been doing in her office?

She lifted her eyes to his again. Why wasn't he kissing her yet? His lips looked yummy. It was so hard following this conversation. She wondered if he'd be insulted if she asked him to put a bag over his head so she could concentrate. Over his whole body would be even better.

"Earlier," he said.

As he paced back and forth, she was left to wonder about a lot of things. Was he really a lawyer? Or was he an undercover cop of some kind? Did he think she'd murdered that guy?

She needed some space, some air. A brain transplant. Hers had stopped working. She'd never reacted like this to a man before. It was damned disconcerting.

She stood up and pushed past him. Cripes, his chest was hard as concrete. Concrete covered with the softest material she'd ever felt. She had to concentrate really, really hard to get herself to remove her hands from their resting place on his pecs. She did manage, eventually, and was able to put at least five or six feet between them. Her head cleared a bit. Relief.

"First, that doesn't make any sense. And second, want to tell me what's really going on here? Because I'm having a hard time believing you're just a nice guy trying to do a good deed. In one night you've snooped in my office and prowled around my house. It's like... three o'clock in the morning. What kind of person goes poking around someone's house at three in the morning? Are you a cop?"

"No. I'm not."

"Then what gives?"

"I'm no one. A guy who wants to find a killer. That's all. But more than that, I'm a guy who wants to protect you."

"Protect me? From what? What's in this for you? If you're not a cop and you're not a slimeball lawyer looking for your next meal ticket, then what the hell are you?" She saw something flicker in his eyes. One corner of his upper lip curled up, just slightly, giving his mien a hint of dark danger.

Dark danger and wicked promise.

A pulse of warmth shot through her body, nearly knocking her to her knees. She covered her face with her hands and tried to listen, really listen to what he was about to say. She had a feeling if she didn't, she'd be sorry.

"I'm your one and only ally. The only person who really knows what's going on." He paused. "Want me to leave? Right now? Or do you want to hear what I have to tell you?"

What was with all the vague double-talk? God, she hated this. Why not just spit it out? What was this guy hiding? For some reason, even though her patience was wearing as thin as the whisper-fine sheer curtains hanging on the window behind her, she lowered her hands from her face and mumbled, "Okay. I'll listen." If there was something she needed to know, it would be a crime for her to miss out on hearing it just because she was either too turned on to care... or too annoyed with the good-looking jackass' Dark and Mysterious Good Guy game.

He motioned for her to sit down again, and she complied. Not because he wanted her to but because she was so tired she was afraid she might keel over from exhaustion at any moment.

He resumed his pacing and she couldn't help noticing the way his backside filled in his pants.

Why was she so distracted? It felt like her mind wasn't her own. Her body too. It was like someone else held a remote control, pushing buttons that controlled her thoughts, her reactions.

Had to be exhaustion. Or stress. What else could it be? She leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

"Back to this napkin," he said. "You said it was impossible for me to have found this in your office. Why did you say that?" His voice affected her like the soft hum of a vibrator. It buzzed through her body, igniting mini-blazes in her groin.

Her eyes still closed, she fanned her face. "Because I wrote that tonight. I know I did. And I gave it to a young woman who wanted to buy a car."

"You gave her your home phone number?" His accusatory tone grated like fingernails on a chalkboard. Doused a bit of the heat boiling her blood, cooling it to a more tolerable simmer.

She opened her eyes, giving him a dose of squinty mean-eyes. "Yes, I gave her my home phone number. I have voicemail. It made sense. As a matter of fact, right now I'm glad I didn't give her the bar's number. The bar'll be closed for the next several days and my cell phone bill was horrific last month. Not to mention, my cell's kind of dead now."

He nodded slowly, his expression uber-serious now.

She wished that naughty twinkle would come back.

"Where were you when you gave it to her?" he asked.

"Behind the bar, giving Shelley the bartender a hand. She was slammed. When I was serving a guy a Heineken, I overheard this blonde talking to a friend about needing a car. I bought the Honda about six months ago, and I haven't been able to find a buyer for my old car. So I slipped her my number and told her to call me tomorrow."

He stopped directly in front of her. For some reason her gaze decided it needed to pay a visit to the terrain located just south of his belt. *Oh. My.*

"Any possibility you took the napkin back into your office for any reason?" she heard him ask.

"No. I was standing at the bar," she heard herself answer. "I remember handing it to her." She jerked her gaze from the bulge in his pants. Nice bulge it was, but she knew her staring had to have extended beyond a polite two or three seconds.

If it did, he seemed unfazed, outside of a slight red tint to the sides of his neck. "Did you invite the woman into your office for anything?"

"No, I didn't go into my office until later, when I discovered the man... until... you know." She wrapped the afghan more snugly around herself. Damn thing had too many holes in it. When he just stood there, looking all lost in important finding-a-killer thoughts, she added, "What? Tell me."

He rested his hands on the arms of her chair, leaned forward and licked his lips.

Her girly parts rolled out the red carpet.

"Before I tell you what I suspect," he murmured, "humor me with one more question."

"Okayyyy. Then will you tell me what's going on? I'm really... tired." *Not! Tired of being teased, yes.* She shifted in her seat. Her pussy was really getting warm. She could feel the slick wetness coating her panties.

He lowered his head a little more and she closed her eyes, expecting him to kiss her.

"Is there any chance the woman you gave the phone number to might have given it to the guy who was found dead in your office?" he asked.

Still no kiss? Argh! "I don't know," she snapped, revealing her frustration. "I mean, I didn't see them together. But I was busy. There were so many people." What did he expect? She'd stood facing a wall of men and women demanding beer for hours before running back to her office for a pen. Got tired of having to borrow one from the waitresses every few seconds. Nobody paid with cash anymore.

Now, would he kiss her, for God's sake? She blinked her eyes open just in time to catch him grimacing.

"If that's the case," he said, backing away from her, "then we need to consider the worst."

"Which is?"

"Which is... you handed your phone number to a murderer."

All of a sudden, Sylvie didn't feel so well. Her stomach lurched and she made a dash for the bathroom. She made it to the toilet a second before the heaving started full force.

A few minutes later, she emerged from the bathroom, tears still blurring her vision, her stomach empty. She'd brushed her teeth and washed her face but still felt yucky. And shaky and sick. And bone weary. But a little more clear-headed, for some reason.

"Are you okay?" He looked concerned, and she was extremely grateful he'd decided to risk her calling the cops to come and tell her about the napkin.

God, she might've given her phone number to a murderer!

Of course on the bright side, it seemed the murderer had dropped it. That gave her some hope a psycho killer wouldn't be knocking on her front door tonight.

"No, I don't think I'm okay," she answered. "I haven't dealt with stuff like this in a long... I mean, what should I think? I gave her my phone number, yes. But does that mean she wants to kill me? Or does that mean she wants to buy my car? And she lost the paper. So am I safe? Or does she have a photographic memory?"

"Want to take a chance?"

"No, not really."

"Okay. Then I think you should pack. You can stay with me for a few days, unless you want me to get you a hotel room somewhere."

She thought about it for a minute. Hotel room. Alone. Versus a safe and secure home with a guy who looked like he could whoop some serious killer-chick ass?

Did she trust this guy? His story about being a good guy who just wanted to help her was more than a little shady, but she felt deep in her gut that he wasn't out to harm her.

But to play it safe, she could call Lisa and leave a message, letting her know where she'd be staying. She fished in her purse for Brett's card. "I'll be right back. Uh. There is one thing. How do you feel about poodles?"

He looked like a guy who'd just been told he needed to have both testicles removed with some fishing line and a dull butter knife. "Great. I love dogs," he said weakly.



## Chapter 3

Brett's apartment wasn't exactly your typical bachelor pad, though it wasn't nearly as showy as the car he drove. The furnishings boasted simple lines. The colors were muted -- tans, browns. They gave her an instant feeling of calm tranquility. She felt safe.

"This is very nice," Sylvie said as she followed him through the living room.

"Thank you." He led her down a narrow hallway, pointed to the right. "This is the bathroom." Then he stopped at the first door on the left. "And this is the guestroom. I hope you'll be comfortable here." He pushed open the door to reveal a gorgeous room decorated in a slightly darker version of the living room's color scheme. The bed was covered in rich-looking fabrics and piled high with pillows.

Heaven!

She sat, gave it a quick bounce test. Soft. Just the way she liked it. "How could anyone be anything but comfortable in here? It's nicer than a five-star hotel."

He looked pleased. His smile made her feel all soft and girly and warm. "Excellent," he said, his voice like a low purr.

Oh, how she wanted to rub up against that dangerous feline.

Lulu circled a few times then curled up for a nap in her lap. No doubt it was the heat radiating from certain body parts that inspired her dog to settle *there*. Her face warming, her heart hopping around in her rib cage like a toddler on a sugar buzz, Sylvie ran her hand down Lulu's back. "Th-thanks."

He stepped out of the room. "You're welcome. If you need anything else --"

"Wait!" Before he got too far, she set Lulu down, hopped off the bed, ran to the door and caught his wrist. Their eyes met and she swore someone had cranked up the

heat to ninety. "No, I mean thank you. For everything. I haven't been exactly cooperative tonight. I jumped to all kinds of conclusions and suspected the worst --"

"You were frightened."

"Yes," she heard herself whisper as she stared at his mouth. Those really were the most amazing lips she'd ever seen on a man. She wondered what it would take to convince him to kiss her.

Suddenly, she wasn't holding his wrist, he was holding hers. He pulled and she fell against him. She gave a shocked squeak when he looped an arm around her waist and turned, stepping forward until her body was sandwiched between the hallway wall and his amazing body.

What a wonderful place to be! Sweet, hot desire pulsed through her center in rhythmic waves.

He lowered his head, and her insides broke into a cha-cha. "I don't know what it is about you. I can't... dammit, I can't resist." His mouth came down on hers in a crushing kiss. His tongue pushed at the seam of her lips until she parted them. Then it stroked and tasted and took.

Instantly lost in the need his tongue and lips stirred in her, she lifted her arms and looped them around his neck to hold on. An urgent heat shot to her groin and she found herself rocking her hips back and forth in a feeble effort to cool it.

It felt like her blood was on fire. Literally. Her insides were scalding, burning up from the inside out. She kissed him back with all the need and heat she had. She met each thrust of his tongue with one of her own. Still it wasn't enough. It would never be enough.

*Make love to me. Now!*

A stuttering heartbeat later, she staggered forward, dizzy and confused. He broke the kiss? He had released her? Why?

He was staring into her eyes. It was quiet, except for the wild huffing of her breathing and the thump of her racing heartbeat in her ears.

She'd never, ever felt like that from a single kiss.

His eyebrows hanging low over eyes full of confusion, he took another step backward. At the same time he lifted his hands to her shoulders. One index finger traced the neckline of her T-shirt. "What is it?" he asked.

"What's what?" Still out of breath -- had the oxygen been sucked out of the room? -- she glanced down at the finger running down the deep vee of her shirt. If it kept on its current path, it would land in the cleft between her boobs in about five seconds. Four, three, two, one. Bingo! She held her breath and watched him lick his lips.

"Why do I feel this way? Like I'll perish if I don't..."

"Don't what?" she whispered, taking a step forward. She needed to be closer to him, to touch him. To taste him. The impulse was worse than any craving she'd ever battled before.

He gathered her hair into his fists and lifted them to his nose. His expression was wicked hot as he audibly inhaled then released the tresses, letting them fall over one shoulder.

She tried to watch as he walked a tight circle around her. She lost sight of him when he stopped directly behind her.

He gasped.

Little bursts of heat sizzled up her spine when he traced a circle on the nape of her neck. Goosebumps coated her upper body.

"This?"

"What?" Her neck? Was something wrong? She started to turn around, but he halted her with two strong hands on the back of her shoulders.

"I've heard. But I never knew for certain..."

He sounded shocked, like he'd just discovered the secret to eternal life or something. On the back of her neck?

She hated to ruin the mood, but what the heck? "Mind sharing what's so fascinating about my neck? Do I have a mole? Ringworm? What?" She slapped a hand back there and felt around with her fingers, half expecting to feel a bump, a lump, an extra appendage.

He pushed her groping hand aside. "No one I've known has found..."

Getting more curious by the second, she jerked away from him and twisted. Big mistake, moving so quickly. Her head whirled, or rather the world spun around her head. She grabbed his arm to steady herself. "Found what?"

He looked at her like she was either Pamela Anderson or a Greek goddess come to life. "You're an *Origo*."

"You mean an original? I like to think so. But I've never had anyone react with quite so much... amazement before."

"Not original. *Origo*. You are one of the chosen. A human who is mate to not one but two vampires."

"Oh. Oh!" Did she hear him right? Did he say -- gulp! -- vampire? Oh, man. Brett, Van Helsing, whoever he was, believed in vampires? He was cuckoo. "Sorry to tell you this, but vampires don't exist. Outside of movies and costume parties, that is."

"Oh, yes they do." In the time it took for her to blink, Brett's clothes changed. He was back in his sexy black vampire getup. The black cape and white billowy shirt. His hair was untied, falling in silky waves down to his shoulders.

*What the heck?*

"Didn't you know?" Eyeballing her like a starving man would a juicy grilled steak, he licked his lips. "Tonight at your club. There were hundreds of vampires. And other fantastic creatures too."

*What the heck?*

"Ohhhhh! You mean the *costumes*?" She laughed humorlessly. "You thought they were real? Uh, they weren't. It was a *costume* party. A theme. You know? Kinda like Mardi Gras." How silly of him to think there'd been real vampires at her bar.

Ridiculous.

Impossible.

Bizarre.

"Perhaps that was what you planned. But I can tell you with a great deal of certainty that the immortals outnumbered mortals by about ten to one."

"No way. You're joking." She did a quick one-eighty and... ran smack dab into him when she took a step forward. How? "How the heck did you do that? You were over there!" She pointed behind her. "What's going on? Who are you?"

"That's an easy one to answer." His gaze swept up and down her body. "I'm Burke Langton." He smiled, revealing a set of chompers straight out of a vampire film.

There was absolutely no way he could fake those. A friggin' vampire! This guy was a vampire? Vampires were real? "I'm one of your Masters."

Sylvie swore her jaw struck the floor it fell so hard. If it wasn't for Burke... Brett... whoever's lightning quick vampire reflexes, her butt would've been the next thing to hit the floor.

\* \* \*

Burke dragged Sylvie against him and kissed away every protestation that made it past her throat.

He'd known there was something special about her. It had struck him right away, the moment he'd stepped into Carpe Nocturne. Before he'd seen her, smelled her, heard her voice, he'd felt her. Deep inside. Even with the distraction of trying to find the murderer, he hadn't been able to shake the lust stirring in his loins, heating his blood.

And now. Now that he had her here, in his home. So close. He could barely resist the urge to fuck her. It was more powerful than the fiercest hunger he'd ever experienced, worse than the night of his Awakening.

The need to take her burned. He knew he couldn't resist. Wouldn't resist.

She was his. He had only one thing to worry about. He could not feed from her. At this point, to do so would mean certain death.

He swept his arm under her and carried her into his room. Too impatient to bother with the door, he merely kicked it in, regretting his impatience only because of the fear he felt charge through Sylvie like an electric current.

He vowed right then, even if it killed him, he would go slow. For her sake. He would not take her yet. Not as long as she feared him.

When he set her on the bed, she looked up at him with wide, fear-filled eyes. The tang of her terror, mixed with the sweet scent of her arousal, created a bouquet that awakened the hunter within him. Never had he wanted a woman so badly. It was all he could do to cling to the whisper-thin threads of humanity that remained within him.

"What're you going to do?" she stammered.

He stared into her eyes and reached for her mind. The psychic connection he'd discovered earlier was still there, stronger actually. He sent her reassuring thoughts. "I'll do nothing you don't wish me to do."

Her face flushed.

He waved his hand, and her clothing flared in a blue flame and then disappeared completely, leaving his delightful Sylvie lying unharmed but naked.

She instantly crossed her arms over her chest and scooted back.

He sensed her mind was filled with mixed reactions -- fear and wanting, shock and understanding. It would not be difficult to bring her to full acceptance, to have her burning for him as much as he burned for her. Without magic. Although a little bit might come in handy.

She liked this, craved it. A mixed tonic of fright and arousal. He sensed it. He knew it, even if she wasn't fully aware of it yet. He could see even the darkest parts of her mind, where she hid her secrets, the ones she didn't want to know or accept yet.

"Sylvie." He waved his hand again, magically binding her wrists up over her head.

She shrieked, looked up at her bound wrists, pulled and twisted, arched her back as she tested the restraints. As she struggled, her hard nipples jutted into the air. He longed to taste them. "What are you doing?"

"I'm giving you what you want. What you've always wanted."

She stilled, but only long enough to send him a glare. "How could you possibly know what I want? You don't know me at all. We met only a few hours ago."

"I know you better than you know yourself, my darling." He knelt on the bed beside her, gently brushed aside a lock of hair that had fallen over her face. She smelled

so good. Sweet like ripe apples and spicy like curry. His balls were tight. His cock hard. All he could think about was the slick heat between her legs.

"You're freaking me out here. I'm not your darling. What's going on?"

"Like I said, I am your mate. Your Master. One of two, actually. I do not know who the other one is. But if he comes near you, we will both know." He held up his forearm for her to see. There, the sign, a mark identical to the one he had found on her neck, had appeared. Like a tattoo. An intricate circle with a symbol in its center he had never seen before. That symbol would be the mark that would identify Sylvie's other Master.

He was eager to discover who it was. Only when their triad was complete could he feed from her and conclude the Binding.

Only then would he be able to say she was truly his.

"I don't understand. What does a tattoo have to do with anything?"

"You have one too. It's identical to this and marks you as mine."

She tipped her chin up and gave him a fierce glare. "That's silly. I don't have a tattoo. I know that for a fact. I don't like tattoos, not that yours is ugly."

He waved his hand and one of her arms sprung free. Two mirrors appeared in his hands. He handed one to her. "Look." He positioned the mirror he was holding behind her so that she could see the reflection of her neck.

She gasped, dropped the mirror, and pressed her fingertips to her mouth. "How? What's going on? I don't understand."

"If what I've read about an *Origo* is true, it was only a matter of time. We would have found each other eventually. We would have been driven to search until we did." This time he used no magic to fasten her wrist back in the restraint. It was far too pleasurable to do it the natural way -- with his hands. Her skin was warm to the touch. Smooth and sweetly scented.

He leaned over her, dragged in a deep breath to pull in as much of her essence as he could. It was as if he had never smelled in his life, as if he'd lived in a colorless, tasteless, scentless world before and now it was all new to him.

She was so beautiful. So perfect. From the gold that glittered in her wavy locks to the flecks of grey in her pale blue eyes.

His.

"You have been searching, haven't you?" he asked, as he ran a finger down the side of her neck. He could hear her pulse beating there. It beckoned him, but he knew he had to resist. Sweet torture.

She shuddered and closed her eyes. "Searching?" she whispered.

Leaning closer, he whispered in her ear, "You sensed I was out there. Somewhere. Waiting for you. Searching for you." He dipped his tongue into her ear and received a quiver as a reward. Encouraged, he kissed a trail down her neck. "You ached to find me. To find your dark lover. The one who would set loose all your fantasies." He could smell her passion building. Could taste it on the tip of his tongue as it stroked her skin.

"Oh..."

"Legend says there is no greater passion than that between the *Origo* and her Masters. Do you wish to find out the truth?" He knew the answer before she spoke the word.

"Y-yesss."

He reached between her legs and, finding her slit hot and wet and ready for him, pushed two fingers inside. She screamed and thrust her hips forward, forcing them inside. Her silky canal tightened around his fingers.

"Yes, oh yes!" She opened her legs for him. "More. Please, more." Her chest was rising and falling quickly. Lifting her tits high into the air with each inhalation. He had to taste them first, before he moved down to her pussy. She was like the most decadent dessert. Every bit of her more delicious than the last. He hungered to sample every inch of her skin. To explore every part of her. He knew the hunger would not ease until he did.

His fingers gliding in and out of her pussy in a slow but steady rhythm, he took her right nipple into his mouth and suckled. She arched her back, pressing her full



breast into his face. Eager to increase her pleasure, he nipped at the hard tip. Hot juices spilled from her pussy, coating his fingers.

"Please, please," she begged as she met every thrust of his fingers with a tip of her pelvis. "Stop torturing me. Fuck me."

"First, I must taste your juices. You cannot deny me."

"Oh God."

He moved lower, pushed her knees back until she was open to him. Salivating at the thought of what wonders he would experience, he parted her swollen labia and lapped away every bit of her juices. More. He wanted more. He thrust his tongue into her vagina and sucked, drinking in her flavor. Her essence. But the more he tasted and smelled, the more he wanted.

"No! No, please. No more. Fuck me."

He could feel the hunger building inside her. Could smell the climax that was just beyond her reach.

It was time. "Yes, my sweet. I will take you now." With a wave of his hand, his clothes were gone. He moistened the head of his cock in the juices still pulsing from her slit then in a single thrust drove himself deep inside.

A roar of raw lust rose up his throat and he was unable to hold it back. The sound of her cries of pleasure drove him mad, to the point where he was fucking her hard and furious. He lost complete control and couldn't hold back for another moment.

He reached between her thighs, found her clit and stroked it with his thumb, knowing it would bring her to climax. But only after his cock was bathed in her hot juices and her pussy was spasming around it in its sweet rhythm of release did he take his own. His cum pulsed from his balls, blazed down the full length of his rigid cock. He groaned in agony and gratitude both as he sealed his claim to his sweet bride. His seed spilled into her cunt.

Her eyelids fluttered closed just as he felt the Change pulling at his bones and tendons, turning him into the beast he really was. Her fingers wrapped around the chains of her restraints, she whispered, "Yes, my Master. Yes." She lifted her legs,

hooked her ankles around his back, holding him deep inside until he was spent and his cock had slackened, and the Change had reversed.

In awe of her beauty, of the depth of her acceptance, he freed her wrists of their bindings and pulled her to him as he lay down.

He had discovered that which he hadn't thought existed. He had discovered his true love. His mate. His bride.

Now, all he needed was to find her other Master before his will failed him and he took that first bite.

## Chapter 4

Sylvie woke up sometime later, sore, groggy but deliriously happy.

That was it. She was ruined forever when it came to sex. She had never -- *never!* -- had sex like that before, not that the studly man sleeping beside her had done anything too crazy. Sure, she'd never been tied up before and that was something she'd wanted to try. But last night... it had been so intense. So much more than a little bit of kink and a couple of leather wrist cuffs.

It was as if he'd made love to her mind. To her very soul.

Oh, God! What a night!

And if she'd had any doubts that Burke was telling the truth about vampires, they were long gone now. With the mere wave of a hand, he'd fried her clothes off her body, chained her up... not to mention the magic he'd performed on her body. Oh, no. There could be no question. Even though she'd spent four years in college studying natural sciences, and her entire life denying the existence of anything that couldn't be seen, heard, or touched -- from God to the Loch Ness monster -- she knew for certain that vampires were very, very real.

And very, very sexy.

The world had just tipped on its side. Everything she'd ever believed to be true was now subject to doubt. Had her mother, a self-professed psychic, been right all this time?

It was really too bad she couldn't ask her.

Shoving aside a wave of regret, she took a peek at the clock. It was noon and she was staaaaarving. She scooted to the edge of the bed, hopped to the floor and shivered. It was cold. Like, refrigerator cold. No way could she run around naked in here.

Resigned to the fact that she'd have to make do until her hunky vampire woke up and magically whipped up some new clothes, she dashed to the closet.

As she sifted through clothing that was at least five sizes too big for her, she wondered if he could make her some designer duds. Maybe some DKNY. Their clothes were so classy. And so expensive.

With her limited clothes budget, the closest she'd ever gotten to owning anything by her favorite designer was a pair of sunglasses she'd picked up on eBay for forty bucks. Even that had been a bit of a stretch. Normally, when it came to eyewear, she went for ten-dollar specials at Fashion Bug.

She settled for a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt. The pants barely stayed up, even with the waistband's string pulled as tight as she could get it. The shirt hung to her knees but at least she was warm. Evidently, vampires liked their homes to be the temperature of a restaurant's meat locker.

She didn't want to think too long and hard about that bit of irony.

After locating Lulu -- closed up in the spare room -- and taking her out for her morning duty, she brought her inside and set her on the floor. Lulu gave her the doggy cold shoulder big time, no doubt because last night had been the first night ever that she'd slept alone.

En route to the spare bedroom to retrieve Lulu's bowl and food, she checked the thermostat. Fifty degrees? It was set at fifty degrees! She'd hate to see Burke's electric bill come summertime.

Her curious side sated, she gathered up Lulu's cans of food and headed for the kitchen to satisfy both their hunger. However, Sylvie realized rather quickly that Lulu might be okay, but if she was going to eat, she was going to have to order something in. There wasn't a thing in the fridge. In fact, it wasn't even turned on.

The cupboards were bare too.

Duh! Vampires didn't eat food.

"Well, poop." Her stomach grumbled, letting her know it did not appreciate the long wait between meals. "I'm working on it," she said aloud as she headed back to the

bedroom to get her purse. There had to be a restaurant around there that delivered. After retrieving the only credit card left to her name that wasn't maxed out, she headed back to the living room to try to locate a phone and phonebook. She was leafing through the restaurant section when Burke whispered in her ear, "What're you doing?"

She jumped like a cat spooked by a German shepherd. "Oh God! Will I ever get used to that?"

What had made her say that? Who said she'd be given the chance to get used to anything? No one had made any reference to a long-term thing. Talk about jumping the gun! Thoroughly embarrassed, she poked his glorious chest and backpedaled. "I mean, you're so sneaky."

"Mmmm..." He gathered her hair in a fist, draped it over one shoulder and ran a fingertip down the back of her neck. "I'm not trying to be sneaky."

"Maybe not. But you move soooo... fastttt..." Man, it was hard holding a conversation with a vampire kissing your neck! "You're over there one moment and right here the next. It startles me."

"I'll try to keep that in mind," he said between kisses.

"Good." She let her head fall back when he slid his hands up under the T-shirt. "Ohhhh."

"Come back to bed." Hands kneading her breasts, fingers tormenting her nipples, he hooked his forearms under her armpits and stood, lifting her with him. And before she exhaled, before she even realized he'd picked her up, they were in the bedroom, him lowering her onto the bed.

Her girly parts waged battle with her stomach, demanding satisfaction at the expense of food. When he bent down and kissed her like he had last night, the battle came to an abrupt end.

Food? Who needed food?

She was content to keep her mouth busy with more pleasurable purposes for the moment. It was being plundered by a certain man's pushy, invading tongue... and

damn happy about it too. Some other parts of her anatomy were also feeling the joy. She sighed into their joined mouths.

He broke the kiss and with a bizarre hand motion made the clothes she was wearing vanish. Naked again, but not cold. Oh no, not in the least. Not with an extremely gorgeous vampire dragging his tongue over one nipple, then the other, his fingers teasing and tormenting. As a matter of fact, in short order she was feeling more than a little overheated.

Oh, what this man did to her body!

"You don't know what you do to me," he murmured between nips.

He had no idea what he did to her either.

"I want you. I want you now. I'll want you again as soon as it's over. It's agony."

He slid one hand down between her legs and thumbed her clit.

Oh... now that was agony!

More. She wanted more. She wanted his cock. Now. She couldn't speak. She was too lost in the sensations he was stirring in her body. The intoxicating scent of man. The sound of his voice as he whispered wicked promises in her ear. The taste of his kiss lingering on her tongue. The urgent need building deep inside her body.

She bent her knees and opened her legs wider in a silent invitation to take her. But he didn't. He remained kneeling at her side, on the bed, smoothing one flattened palm up and down her torso while he tormented her clit with his other hand.

"I know what it is you secretly hunger for. What you haven't even admitted to yourself." He sat back on his heels, looked down upon her with eyes partially hidden by heavy eyelids.

She believed what he said. He'd proven so much already. Last night had been so... incredible. So intense. Beyond words. "Yes?"

"I will show you." He made that bizarre gesture again, and poof, the bed was gone and she was somewhere else, or so it seemed. In an entirely different room with some very unusual furniture.

The huge canopied bed was gone. The dresser. The fine artwork. The soft tan walls. They were now in a room that was the same size, with the same dimensions, but the walls were painted the dark blue of a night sky. The furnishings were not the kind a girl would expect to see in a bedroom. But they were the kind Sylvie had seen on the Internet.

She was in a real live bondage dungeon.

He held her hand and helped her up onto a wooden table-like thing. He traced a circle around her breast with a fingertip. "It takes time for a submissive to learn to trust and respect her Master so I don't expect you to trust me after only one night. But try to remember that everything I do is for your enjoyment. I take no pleasure until you have been satisfied."

Giddy anticipation made her nerves all jumpy. She nodded, looked into his eyes, searching them for reassurance. She really needed it at the moment. So many things had happened in the past twenty-four hours or so.

First, she'd found a dead body in her bar, then she'd learned the murderer might have her phone number -- and possibly her home address -- and then she'd learned there were real vampires in the world.

And now this? She was actually lying on her belly, on a table, letting a real live vampire, who happened to have abs male models would turn green with envy over, tie up her arms? And it was making her really, really hot.

Could the world get any stranger?

Once he had her arms secured up above her head and out in a wide "V", he went to where the closet had been in the other room and pushed aside the rolling track door.

It was a virtual bondage paraphernalia treasure-trove. She watched him pull out a metal bar with leather straps attached to either end, a dildo, a little whippy looking thing.

Uh. What was he going to do with that? She was a whole lot more nervous when he stepped up beside her holding that whip in his fist.

"As your Master, it is my responsibility to protect you."

Despite the rising heat pulsing through her body, she found herself mentally backpedaling. Had she asked him to be her Master? Wasn't there some rule about that? Shouldn't he have given her some kind of talk first? Told her what the rules were?

"I will not do anything to harm you." He stepped out of the line of her sight, which was limited by her position.

The muscles of her back tensed when something touched her, right in the center of her spine. The light, tickling touch went up, stopped between her shoulder blades and then went down. It stopped at the base of her spine, just above her rear end.

"You are so beautiful. So perfect."

Was he looking at her ass as he said that? Couldn't be.

"Look at that ass. Dammit, it's perfect. Round and soft."

Okay, he was blind.

"Lift your ass for me," he said in a low voice that sounded like an animal's growl. "Kneel and get it up in the air."

"Uh..." Was this what she wanted? To be teased and tormented in a dark room with a sexy vampire who made her squirm just by looking at her?

She'd been on those bondage sites, stumbled upon them while surfing. But she'd stared at those pictures because they were so shocking. Not because she'd wanted to do that stuff.

Right?

If not, if she thought that stuff was so strange, why was every nerve in her body tingly? Why did the sharp edge he'd given his voice send little blades of pleasure through her? And why was she shaking all over, anxious to see what it would feel like to have him smack her ass with that whip thingy?

How would he know what she wanted? Especially if she hadn't even admitted it to herself?

"Up on your knees," he barked.

She shuddered as heat pooled between her legs. My God, this really was turning her on! In a big way!



To hell with the questions. She had the feeling the answers would come. In time. At the moment, she just wanted to let it all go, all the doubts and questions. She wanted to lose herself in the experience. To try something that suddenly she was sure she'd be sorry to miss.

It was foreign to her, speaking the word "Master." It sounded funny to her own ears. Not nearly as sexy as it did coming from those perfect *bondage babes* on those websites she'd trolled. But she forced herself to say it anyway as she struggled to reposition herself. "Yes, Master." It was difficult to move because her arms were tied up and out, fastened by three-foot chains to two rings bolted to the wall. But by gripping the chains in her hands and pulling, she was able to get her upper body up off the table and work her way onto her knees.

She felt so vulnerable in that position -- her hands tied, her fanny up in the air. Vulnerable but also sexy.

"Yes," he murmured.

There was a touch to her bottom. A little tickle that made her muscles clench and pussy heat. She huffed out a little whimper.

"This is what you've wanted, what you've dreamed of. For a long time, since you were a child. Do you remember? Remember how you would lay in bed at night, daydreaming about a strong man who would steal you away to a big, dark castle?"

How did he know about that?

He kissed the small of her back. Out of reflex, her spine tightened, arched to thrust her bottom up higher into the air. She held her breath. He was going to strike her. But when? And how hard? The anticipation was making her jittery. Her heart was drumming a speedy beat in her chest.

"I know because I've seen your secrets."

She believed him. There was no other way he could have known about her daydreams. She'd never told anyone. Never written them in a journal.

"Because I know your secrets, I must do this."

There was a soft sound, a whistling whoosh. And then the smack of leather against skin.

He'd struck her on the right side of her ass. A sharp, stinging pain whizzed up her spine. She yelped and curled her spine, tucking her back end down.

"Oh no. I will not have that. Ass up."

Her arms trembling, adrenaline pumping through her body, she tipped her hips, pushing her bottom back up into the air. The pain was dulling to a tingly burn already, yet she couldn't help tensing every muscle in her body in preparation for the next strike.

It came a few heartbeats later. This time on her left side. Searing pain razored up her spine and exploded in her head. Her ass burned hotter, like an iron. She cried out, "Oh God!"

"Do you feel it yet? The buzz of endorphins flooding your brain? It's better than any drug mankind will ever create."

She did feel something, a heady rush like nothing she'd ever experienced before. Her nerves were on edge. Her senses so sharp every scent, sound, touch felt ten times more intense than normal. She felt like she was strong enough to toss around a Mazda Miata like it was a toy. She laughed. "Yes, oh yes! I do feel it." Her pussy was burning with the need to be filled. He ran his palms over her stinging backside, teased her anus with a prodding fingertip. She wrapped her hands around the chains securing her wrists to the wall and tossed her head back. "Oh yes. Fuck me."

"No, no. It's much too soon. The last time I went too fast. I will go slow. For you." He stroked her slit with what she guessed was the head of a dildo.

Inside! Would he please bury that dildo in her pussy? She tried to rock back on her knees to force the toy inside but the chains secured to the wrist cuffs stopped her. She groaned in frustration.

"It's the anticipation that makes it such a powerful experience, don't you agree?" he whispered. "Your heart is racing so fast it sounds like a purr. Your breath rushing in

and out of your lungs. Will I strike you again? Or will I thrust this dong deep into your pussy?" He pressed harder until just a tiny bit of it slipped into her vagina.

She tensed, silently begging for it to go the rest of the way in.

"No, you're not ready yet." He pulled it out.

Teasing bastard!

She whimpered again and tried to look back, to give him a healthy dose of mean eyes but the stupid chains restricted her movement too much. It was impossible for her to twist her upper body to look at him. That fact, coupled with the rumble of his voice as he spoke only made her gnawing need that much more urgent. "Burke... oh, God."

She'd never been tormented and teased like this. Her past lovers had all been about the orgasm. A little bit of foreplay to warm her up, followed by ten minutes of fucking, and then it was over. If she came, it was only because she'd taken the matter into her own hands -- so to speak. She had no qualms about reaching down and stroking her clit while they hammered away. Sure beat lying there like a blow up doll, stiff and lifeless, and ending the night completely unfulfilled.

This man. This vampire. What he was doing. It was... amazing.

Maybe it was the vampire in him? The dark predator. In the wild, predators sometimes liked to tease, to play with their prey. So it made sense a vampire -- the ultimate predator -- would do the same.

"You like to touch yourself. I want to watch."

The wrist straps fell away from her wrists and she fell forward, nearly toppling from the table. A set of powerful hands closed around her waist. She turned to give him a smile of gratitude for keeping her from falling and cracking her skull open on the hard tiled floor.

She froze when her gaze met his. She was sitting on the wooden table, her legs dangling over the edge. He was so incredibly gorgeous. His face so sexy and masculine. His eyes were such a dark brown they almost looked black.

One corner of his mouth lifted into that naughty smile of his. The one she'd noticed last night. "I have such plans for you tonight, my sweet. This way." He picked

her up by the waist and held her until she somehow managed to get her feet under herself. He motioned toward a wooden chair set off in the corner. A bizarre metal contraption of some kind stood in front of it. There was a long metal rod protruding from the front of the machine, the end of it a half foot or so from the chair's seat.

She had a feeling she knew what this was. She'd seen one on the Internet.

Would a fucking machine really do it for her? Or would she be left wanting for the real thing? She knew she was about to find out.

"Sit. Feet up on the edge of the seat. I want your pussy wide open."

She was quivering so much from the anticipation she could barely get herself situated on the chair. The smoldering look he gave her as he slid the thick dong over the metal rod and positioned it at her pussy, oh God. She was going to melt.

"Now touch yourself while the machine fucks you. I want to see how hot it makes you. I want to smell your cream. To see it running between your ass cheeks and glistening on the dong."

It was doing that already!

She slid a hand down to her pussy. The other she used to steady herself on the chair. And while the thick dong fucked her oh so tortuously slow, she rubbed her clit.

It was pure heaven.

Thick dong filling her pussy. Waves of pleasure pulsing through her body. It wasn't so much the mechanical motion of the machine as it was Burke's dark eyes watching. There was this feral look in them. Wild and dangerous. His expression was what drove her crazy.

Now at her side, he growled and lowered his head to feast on a nipple. As if she wasn't already in heaven!

"Yes! Yes!" Orgasm was just a few strokes away. She could feel the telltale heat spreading through her. The tension pulling at every muscle, right down to the soles of her feet. Coming. She was coming!

"No!" The machine cut off and the dildo halted mid-air, just shy of plunging into her pussy again.

No!

There was a twitch but no spasm. No orgasm.

Now she wanted to growl. Teasing bastard! She gritted her teeth, literally, and concentrated really, really hard on not screaming at him. Ooh, it was hard!

So was his dick, she noticed when he did his little hocus pocus thing and his clothes vanished. The growl lodged itself in her throat, kind of morphed into a purr as it worked its way up her throat and out through her lips.

He pushed her shoulders back, until her spine was pressed into the back slats of the chair, then he kissed her to the point of delirious begging. After kneeling on a mat that appeared out of nowhere, he drove his cock into her.

Yes! At last! Oh yes. She squeaked into his mouth, wrapped her arms around his neck and clung to him. And just so that he wouldn't get away, she wrapped her legs around his waist.

That deepened his thrusts, which was just fine by her!

Fast and hard, exactly the way she liked it. Exactly the way she needed it. With every thrust, his groin rubbed against her clit, creating just the right amount of friction to catapult her back to orgasm-land.

A wave of heat spread out over her body and she tensed in anticipation of the first spasm.

*Please, don't stop now. No more teasing.*

"Come now!" he shouted.

He didn't have to say that twice. She dug her fingernails into his shoulders and pulled back, tightening every muscle in her body. Finally, sweet release. It pulsed through her body in quick spasms that made her jerk and scream. As his shout filled her ears, she felt his shoulders move under her hands. They changed somehow, but with her eyes closed, and the bliss of orgasm still rippling through her body like waves in a pool, she didn't care. All she cared about was holding on to the feeling for another second. And another. And another.

It ended. Eventually. She felt weak and tired, but also very, very satisfied. When she opened her eyes, they were back in his bedroom, sitting on a chair in the corner.

That magic stuff was really something. Very cool. Very sexy.

He was practically sprawled over top of her. Heavy and warm, his skin slick with sweat. She closed her eyes and sat there, enjoying the closeness, and the giddy, happy feeling that came from having the most incredible sex in her life.

As if he hadn't spoiled her before, now there was no doubt. No man would ever measure up to Burke the vampire lover. No way. No how.

Which left her wondering -- how long could she expect to keep him around? Were vampires the love-them-and-leave-them type? God, she hoped not.

Burke stood, took her hand in his and pulled. "Come, my sweet. We must sleep now. At sunset, I must leave. I must find the murderer before he kills again."

Sylvie lay beside him, tired but restless, and no longer hungry. Most surprising, she'd been so preoccupied by Burke's very distracting lovemaking abilities, she'd all but forgotten about the murderer. What would happen tonight? Would someone else die? Maybe even someone she knew?

## Chapter 5

This had to work. He'd followed the spell to the letter. Found the right human. Killed him exactly as it was written in the *Book of Shadows*, took the ingredients in the right order.

"It's time." He stroked his love's hair.

She lay on the stone altar in the room's center, her eyes closed, her skin cold, her body lifeless. "This time it will work. I will have you back. I can't live another night without you." He lifted her hand and kissed its back then held it to his cheek.

How he missed the sound of her voice. The feel of her gentle touch. The taste of her kiss.

Two cycles of the moon. She'd been stolen from him two cycles ago. It felt like it had been an eternity. He was empty without her. Hollow and cold and... dead. "I did everything right this time. I will not fail. I cannot fail."

He gently placed her hand on her chest and turned to the large circle drawn on the tile floor in ash. Last time he'd made a mistake. He'd rushed the killing and that had been why the spell had failed. But not this time. This time he'd done everything exactly as it was supposed to be.

He read the *Book of Shadows* one last time, to make sure he was following the spell to the letter. Yes, perfect. His love would be returned to him in just a few moments! His suffering would be over. At last.

He placed the bowl of human blood in the circle's center then drew the star within the circle with the ash. He set the other items on each point of the star -- heart, tongue, finger and two eyes.

He closed his eyes and began the incantation. Instantly, the magic crackled in the air, sizzling like bolts of static. He spoke the words of the spell in the ancient tongue,

*"Socusi donomini. Letre dos golomine."* Almost done. He turned to face his love and extended his arms. The magic charged through his body, fiery hot like bolts of lightning. It swept up his legs, whirled around inside his chest and then blazed down his arms. He quaked with the power of it. The power of all the demons in Hades. Laying his hands on his love, he spoke the final words, *"Yumada renise dolin dagado!"*

Wham! The magic blasted through his hands and leapt into his love. She jerked and thrashed as the dark powers charged through her body, reanimating her dead form. The gaping wound in her chest fused before his eyes. She shifted from beast to the beautiful woman he'd known and loved.

Silence.

He sagged against the altar, rested his head on her chest.

A shaky hand stroked his hair.

He had succeeded, once again.

*Please, please let her stay alive this time.*

As he turned his head, she blinked open her eyes and smiled. "Master."

He stroked her cheek. Soft as velvet but still cold. He traced her full lower lip. His hand shook as hope and joy swept through him. "Yes, I'm here, my sweet. I did it. I brought you back to me. We will be together forever. I won't let anything happen to you again."

She took his hand in hers and cradled it to her cheek. Her skin was warming. He could feel it. She blinked and a single tear ran down her cheek. "Thank you, Master."

"Feed. You must feed." He turned his hand to offer his wrist. "Feed now and live."

"Yes, my Master."

The pain of her bite was sweet agony. He closed his eyes and let the bliss sweep through his body. Lust, profound and urgent, gathered in his loins, sparked by the pleasure of her feeding.

He needed to fuck her. Needed it more than he needed his next swallow of blood. But not yet. It was too soon to know for certain if she would live or if he'd failed



again. Very soon he would know. Within minutes. Only when he knew for certain that she would live could he satisfy his need for her.

These next few minutes would be pure agony.

Her hunger satisfied, she released his wrist and slowly sat up. "Will it last this time? Or will it be like before?"

"I did everything exactly as the book said. How do you feel?"

"Weak. Tired. But getting stronger." She raised a hand to her forehead. "Kiss me. Even if I must go back... even if it doesn't last, I want to die with the taste of your kiss on my lips --"

"No!" he shouted, shaking her shoulders. "You will not die again. You must fight!" He pulled her roughly to him, crushed his mouth to hers and kissed her. His tongue stroked, twisted, tasted and took, as his hands stroked and pinched and pleased. She moaned and the sound echoed in his head, reverberated in his chest.

He had his love back!

And then she jerked. Her head fell back and her form shifted from beauty to beast. She screamed as the torture began once again, the agony of death.

How could he have failed? "No!" he shouted. "No, no, no!"

"Master," she whispered, just before life left her again. "Do not try another time. I beg you."

"I'm sorry, my love. So sorry for your pain. But I will not stop. I cannot stop. Do not ask that of me." He swept her lifeless body into his arms and held her. The pain of loss tore through his being. "I cannot stop. Next time I will succeed. I cannot live without you. My love."

He gently laid her on the altar and cursing the devil for the pain of his loss, turned to the *Book of Shadows*. "What mistake did I make?" he yelled as rage burned in his gut. "What did I do wrong this time, dammit?"

The answer had to be in the book. But where? What had he missed?

\* \* \*

"Don't you ever, ever do that to me again!" Lisa scolded, dishing out a one-two smack to Sylvie's shoulders. "You had me scared. To. Death!"

"Me? What about you?" Sylvie gave her friend a warning glare. That girl had better keep her hands to herself! If she didn't, gorgeous, slinky black dress or not, Sylvie was going to have to take her down. "I called how many times? Left how many messages? Why didn't you answer? Did you even listen to them?"

Lisa's face turned the shade of a tomato.

Sylvie turned sideways, wedged herself between two guys sitting at the bar, hunched over martinis, and waved at the bartender. "Ah! So you were doing something I wouldn't approve of. And so you decided to avoid the lecture you knew was coming by avoiding me altogether. Well, that's just fine! I could be dead right now, no thanks to you and your sex life."

The guy facing her gave Sylvie a curious glance, then turned to do the same with Lisa.

"Say it louder, why don't you?" Lisa grumbled.

"I just might. What kind of best friend leaves their friend sitting alone at the scene of a crime? Huh? Just so she can have sex?" She shouted that last word, just because Lisa deserved it. A few more males in the crowded upscale club took notice and they were all sizing Lisa up. Sylvie was satisfied to see her friend was really squirming now. Served her right. "Don't you at least screen the calls? Check your Caller ID, so that if it is something important, you know?"

"Yessss. Normally, but --"

Sylvie ordered two cosmopolitans, paid and then turned to her friend and smiled. Time to lighten things up.

Lisa gave her a weak smile back. "Done hating me now?"

"Yes. You know me. I can't hate anyone for too long." She turned when the bartender set the drinks on the bar, picked them both up and handed one to Lisa. "Here. On me."

"Thank you." Lisa took a sip. "So, where were you last night? I tried calling this morning that number you left. A lot of times. No one answered. What happened?" Lisa headed for the only open table in the place. Dropped her purse on the tabletop and set down her drink. "Seriously, I was worried."

"I know you were." Sylvie sat across from her friend while simultaneously scanning the crowd for Burke. She knew he wouldn't wander far. He was too worried about her safety to do that.

Unless something bad had happened. To him. To someone.

Where had he gone?

"I'm sure you'll be reading about it in the newspaper by tomorrow," Sylvie said. "There was another murder."

Lisa's eyes widened. "Oh no..."

"Yep. At Carpe Nocturne. And get this. The guy was killed in my office and Burke thinks the killer is this woman I talked to about my car."

Lisa cupped her hands over her mouth and inhaled an audible gasp. "No. Way! What're you going to do? Wait." She dropped her hands. Her eyebrows dropped a smidge too. "Uh. Who's Burke? A cop? I thought you said you were staying with a guy named Brett."

"Well... not exactly."

"What does that mean, 'not exactly'?"

Sylvie considered telling her friend the truth, but she quickly decided that would be a foolish thing to do. Like herself, Lisa only believed in what she could see, hear, touch. She'd never in a million years believe there were vampires living outside of the imaginations of film writers and romance authors. At least not without more substantial proof.

"His real name is Burke, not Brett. And he's a... private detective."

"Ohhhh." Lisa daintily sipped from the narrow cocktail straw. Licked her bright pink lips. Her eyes flickered, focused on something behind Sylvie.

She knew that look. Lisa had spotted some man meat. "What's he look like?" Sylvie teased.

Lisa smiled dreamily. "Tall. With long brown hair. And a body to die for." She tipped her head slightly. "I think he's staring at you."

"At the back of my head?" Sylvie raised her hand to check and see if her upswept hair had come undone. "Is there something sticking up?"

"No. You look fabulous. Didn't get a chance to say anything earlier. That is a hot dress! Where'd you get it?"

"Uh..." She couldn't tell Lisa the truth -- that Burke had magically conjured it up out of thin air. But where else could she say she'd gotten something that was clearly way out of her budget? Black and slinky, with an open back that plunged nearly down to her ass crack, it was nothing like anything she owned. "Bought it on eBay," she lied. "Although, I didn't know how low-cut the back was going to be."

Lisa momentarily looked at her. "It is low. But it looks amazing on you. Like it was custom sewn."

"Thanks."

Lisa's eyes brightened. She fiddled with her straw. "Oh my God, he's coming over here."

"Could it be because you gave him that fuck-me smile?" Sylvie teased, looking around again for Burke. Still nowhere to be seen. She was starting to get worried.

"Hello, ladies." The guy -- who Sylvie had to admit was extremely good looking -- rested an arm on the back of Sylvie's chair. "Can I buy you a drink?" he asked the back of Sylvie's neck.

Why was he speaking to her back?

She turned, to see if his hand was doing anything funny, or if he was perhaps checking the time.

No watch. Huh.

Feeling a little weird, she self-consciously lifted her hand to her nape. It was only when she felt the slightly raised ridge that she realized what he was staring at.

Instantly her gaze dropped to his arm. Covered, dammit.

She tried to remember what Burke had said about that crazy tattoo stuff, about the mark on his arm, and what it had meant. And whether other vampires could see it or not. But damn if she could remember much of anything, outside of how his kiss had tasted.

Speaking of kisses, the guy standing next to her sure looked like he wanted a kiss. She licked her lips, getting them pucker ready.

Since when did she think about swapping spit with total strangers, mere moments after setting eyes upon them?

Insanity, that's what it was.

"Thanks," Lisa said, her face aglow. "I'll take another cosmopolitan. This one's about gone."

The man nodded then turned to Sylvie and gave her a look that made her panties instantly wet. "And you?"

"Nuh -- no, thanks. I'm good." She lifted her still full glass with a shaky hand, maneuvered the straw to her mouth somehow and sucked hard until her dry mouth was full of liquid. It all went down in a big gulp. Hit her gut like a block of ice. Cold and heavy.

He watched her, his eyes sparkling with... something. She wasn't really sure what they were trying to say to her. "Are you sure?" He nodded to her glass. "It's empty."

"Oh. Yeah. So it is." Her face was flaming red, she just knew it. "But, no. No thanks. I'm the designated driver."

Someone kicked her leg and she jumped.

She looked at Lisa, who was giving her *that* look -- the one that told her she was making a really stupid mistake.

"Okay," he said, sounding a little put out. He gave her a half-smile and stepped back.

The room's oxygen supply finally seemed to normalize.

"I'll be back in a minute," he said.

"Okay. We'll be right here waiting," Lisa sing-songed, giving him a little wave. The second he was out of sight, Lisa leaned forward and said, "Are you friggin' crazy? What's wrong with you? That guy was gorgeous, and he was so into you. What would it hurt to have one more drink? You can out-drink half the Navy."

"Yeah, well," Sylvie said, shifting in her seat. God, it was hot in here. Why wasn't the manager turning on the air conditioning? Was he an idiot? Or was he trying to get people to drink more by making them sweat? "I need to keep on my toes tonight."

"You insulted him."

"He'll get over it, I can tell. Heck, he's probably at the bar hitting on some other babe in a backless dress."

"No, he's not." Lisa pointed behind her. "He's on his way back. With my drink."

"Oh, great." When he was out of her line of sight, she could think clearly again. And she was worried about Burke. Where the heck had he gone? Didn't he see this guy practically drooling over her? Didn't that bother him? She was, after all, his... what had he called it? Original?

"So quick!" Lisa said, batting her eyelashes as the guy handed her the fresh drink.

"Got lucky. There wasn't a line at the bar." He looked at the chair next to Sylvie. "Mind if I sit?"

Sylvie really wanted to say "no," she really did. She wanted to get up and go hunt down Burke, find out where he'd gone. Make sure nothing was wrong. But for some reason, she just plain couldn't move. She couldn't deny this man. She couldn't do anything but mutter, "Sure."

Her body warmed. Sensual awareness pricked her spine, like little needles. It was both an uncomfortable and extremely pleasant sensation.

"The name's Miko," he said, offering a hand to her. "Miko Dvorak."

"Sylvie." She tried to give his hand a quick, non-committal shake. It didn't turn out that way. Her eyes met his and then there was this crazy connection, just like

there'd been with Burke. He twisted his hand around, so their fingers were twined and his thumb was stroking the side of her hand. And oh... her girly parts were jumping up and down with glee and planning a party.

Burke! She jerked her hand away, broke the connection between their eyes and stood up. "I... need to go to the ladies room. Be right back."

Her celebrating parts put up a scream of dissention, but she carried them away on wobbly legs to the bathroom, scanning every corner of the bar's interior for Burke as she walked.

She found him, half hidden by the disc jockey's booth, which was empty.

He cringed when she walked up to him.

"Are you hiding?" she asked as quietly as the bar's noisy interior would allow, spinning around to see if she'd led anyone to him. No one seemed to have followed.

"Yes. Kind of. They're here."

"Who?"

"The Excoluni. They're here, looking for me, which means I can't keep a close eye on you if you're more than a couple feet away. The place is packed. This is too dangerous. We should leave."

"But what about catching the killer?"

"How can I do anything hiding back here?" The frustration in his voice made her want to forget about the danger and help him any way she could. "I don't want to go," he continued, "just in case there is another murder. This is the only bar in the area that the murderer hasn't hit yet."

"Then we'd be foolish to leave."

"No, we'd be foolish to stay if you're the next chosen victim."

"We still don't know that. For all we know, that slip of paper has nothing to do with the killer. Besides, if I was the intended victim, why would the killer come here? I've never stepped foot in this place. And why wouldn't she have tried killing me last night?" When Burke had no answers to her questions, she felt her smile turn smug.

"You see? I'd say the odds are in my favor. The paper with my name and phone number had nothing to do with the murder."

He stared thoughtfully at the booth's control panel for a moment. "You have a point. But I don't like taking these kinds of risks with other people's lives. I've done enough of that already." He sighed. "Has anyone been watching you tonight? Anyone but me? Do you feel like you're being followed?"

"No..." Even she could hear the wavering in her voice. Darn! He had almost lightened up.

His expression turned fiery. Before she realized what had happened, he was out of the booth and standing next to her. He lunged forward and caught her shoulders in his hands. "What aren't you telling me?"

"Uh. Okay. There's this guy..." *This mysterious, sexy guy who was making me hot with a mere whisper.*

Man, if Burke could read her mind, the shock he'd get!

"What guy? What'd he do?"

Her cheeks burned. "Nothing. Really."

His eyebrows dropped. He wasn't buying it.

"He offered to buy me a drink. That's all. I swear. Nothing creepy or out of the ordinary. We are in a bar, you know. And by all appearances, I'm unattached..." Feeling uber-guilty, like she was cheating on Burke or something, she let her words trail off. There was nothing to feel guilty about. They hadn't made any commitments to each other. An offer to buy a drink was nothing to be shocked or alarmed over. Although her reaction to the guy was. Perhaps. Okay, most definitely. "I didn't accept the drink," she added weakly.

He stared into her eyes. "You're still keeping something from me."

Maybe he could read her mind. Or maybe she was just a really bad liar. She pulled her gaze from his and took it to safer territory -- the wall behind him. "No. Not really. Like I said, he just came up and offered to buy me a drink." For some reason, she left out the part about him staring at her neck, and her suspicion that he might be the



other vampire in her supposed triad. She had a feeling her instincts were wrong about all that stuff and she didn't want to rile Burke up even more at the moment, make any of this out to be more than it was. Now was not the time. Besides, he was looking like he'd pop a few blood vessels at any moment, thanks to the stress he was already shouldering.

He had a killer to catch. That had to be his focus. There was no reason to distract him with secondary non-important stuff at the moment, like her raging libido.

He pulled on her upper arm and started toward the back of the building. "That's it. We're leaving."

"No. Wait!" She yanked as hard as she could, determined to get free of him. If there was one thing that annoyed the crap out of her it was being manhandled. "First, I'll decide when I'm ready to leave. And second, you're overreacting." When he refused to release her, she lowered her voice until it was a deep, threatening growl. "Get your hands off me and I'll explain."

Mid-stomp, he whirled around and gave her a glare that made her heart stop for a full second. "Are you trying to get yourself killed?" he hissed.

"Puhleez. You're being melodramatic. No one is trying to kill me."

"What's going on?" Lisa asked from somewhere behind her.

"Go away," Burke barked.

"Don't talk to my friend like that." This guy was way out of line. Sylvie stomped on his foot with all her might. "Back off!"

Caught by surprise, he loosened his boa constrictor-like grip on her arm long enough for her to get free. She caught Lisa's hand and made a beeline for the empty dance floor, knowing he didn't dare follow her with the Ex-co-whatever searching for him.

She stopped in the dead center to catch her breath.

A song by Coldplay started thrumming from the bar's speakers and hordes of people crowded around them.

Great, so much for her plan to stand where she'd be in plain sight.

"Who was that?" Lisa asked, sounding both mystified and impressed, like she'd just met Vin Diesel or something. She handed Sylvie her purse.

Hugging her purse to her chest, Sylvie wriggled and shuffled her way between gyrating bodies, figuring she'd head back to their table. "It's no one. This guy I met last night. He's turning out to be a real pain in the butt."

"Wait a minute."

Sylvie stopped at the edge of the dance floor and turned. "What?"

Lisa studied her for a moment. A knowing smile spread over her face. "That's the private detective you were talking about. You slept with him?"

Her cheeks started burning all over again. This place was hotter than blazes. "Yeah. Well, that was a mistake. Granted a fun mistake... but a mistake."

"My God, he was hot! What a body." She gave Sylvie a pat on the shoulder. "I officially forgive you for not being home last night to take my call."

"Gee thanks." Sylvie sighed and looked at the DJ booth, which now appeared to be inhabited by someone else.

"So, why're you running from him?"

"Because he's a controlling ass. He got all grabby and bossy. I hate that!" *At least, outside of the dungeon.*

"I hear that. No biggie. You win some. You lose some." Lisa poked her in the rib. When Sylvie turned to look at her, she pointed toward the opposite side of the room. "You've always got hottie number two. Look, here he comes. Damn, girl. I want to know what you're doing to get all these gorgeous guys to chase you around. Share the wealth, would ya? Toss me a scrap. Anything."

"I'll let you know what I'm doing as soon as I figure it out myself."

"And look at that. He took off his jacket. Wow, does that man know how to fill a shirt properly. Mmmm mmm!"

"I'm beginning to think you ladies are running from me," Miko said by way of a greeting. "Dance with me." It wasn't a question. It was a demand. Not waiting for her to respond one way or the other, he looped an arm around her back and pulled until

her entire front was smooshed up against his. He took her right hand in his and started a slow, seductive sway.

“I’ll just be standing over here,” Lisa said, backing off the dance floor.

## Chapter 6

Sylvie tipped her head to get a close-up look at Miko's face. Bad move. Bad, bad move. The air left her lungs somehow when she wasn't paying attention. Either that or someone had turned on a gigantic vacuum and sucked it all out of the room. After dragging in a few desperate gulps, she managed to mutter, "Don't you think this music is a little fast to be dancing like this?"

"No." He pressed on the small of her back, making her front even more smooshed. Her nipples had taken notice of the contact and were poking at him through the thin fabric of her dress. His hand wandered north, over the gathering of fabric to her exposed back. Goosebumps immediately coated her upper body, despite the fact that the room was beginning to be as hot and muggy as a sauna.

He bent his head and whispered, "I know what you are."

*What* she was? That statement was a mite confusing. "Oh?" she asked, following his lead as he swayed to a much slower beat than was pounding through the air and shaking the walls.

He nipped her earlobe. "You're an *Origo*." Releasing her back, he bent his elbow and lifted, showing a mark on the inside of his forearm. It was identical to Burke's. "My *Origo*." Clearly not in any hurry to have her leave, he returned his arm to its previous position, snuggled her against him and in a snazzy move a la Gene Kelly twirled her around.

Dizzy from the motion, dizzy from the heat blazing through her body, dizzy from whatever, Sylvie clung to him and tried to keep her feet under her and her brain from melting into grey goo. She felt like she was losing both battles.

Her feet felt like they were hovering above the ground more often than planted firmly on it. And her brain? Well, that was short circuiting like crazy, or so she

assumed. Because it was telling her to do some downright shocking things with this man.

Like throw him to the ground and have her way with him. Or rather, throw herself to the ground and beg him to have his way with her.

What had gotten into her? Was this *Origo* thing some kind of magical connection? Because while she would admit she'd never been a prude, she'd also never reacted to a man the way she had to Burke and Miko. Her body temperature spiked with just a look from either of them. Burke with his long, dark hair, lopsided grin and smoldering gaze. And Miko with his slightly lighter hair and stunning good looks. He looked like he'd just walked off the red carpet -- or the pages of a men's fitness magazine.

"Do you know what you do to me?" he murmured, his mouth grazing the side of her neck. He released her hand and lifted his to the back of her head, pulled the clip from her hair and tangled his fingers in it as it fell heavy over her shoulders. "I can hear your pulse. Right here." He swirled his tongue over a sensitive spot on her neck and she jerked against him, instantly rigid. "I can smell your desire." He audibly inhaled. "Sweet. Intoxicating. You're wet, ready for me. Makes me want to take you right here."

She meant to give him some kind of sarcastic comeback, but the best she came up with was, "Eerk!"

Taking her right then and there didn't sound like such a bad plan, come to think of it.

Yep. Brain was gone. She put out a silent SOS vibe to Lisa, hoping her friend might by some miracle answer it. Granted, she couldn't get Lisa to answer a simple phone call the last time she'd needed her.

But if someone didn't come and shake things up within the next thirty seconds, she knew with absolute certainty she was going to do something stupid. Like beg him to take her home with him.

Unfortunately, no one came, and she was left to stand there, stumbling over her own feet and whimpering while Miko nibbled and licked her neck like she was a

lollipop. With each flicker of his tongue, little pulses of heat rippled through her body. They spread out from her center, these happy little ripples, yet for some reason, more heat seemed to keep building deep inside.

She realized quite suddenly there was a reason for that. She was grinding against his leg.

So not cool!

"Hey, Dvorak! There you are. Quit with the chicks..." some unidentified male voice said to the left of her.

She turned to look, found she was standing beside yet another huge, muscular, extremely good looking guy.

"Sorry, Miss. But my friend's gotta cut this dance short."

"Not now," Miko said in a low voice that reminded Sylvie of Burke's growl. It was very predatory, almost inhuman, which made sense, since vampires weren't exactly humans.

His friend blinked. "Yes, now. Right now. What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing's wrong with me. Just go away." He gave his friend a shove.

The man squared his shoulders and lifted his chin, giving Miko a piercing stare. "As your superior, I command you to come with me this instant."

Sylvie swore she heard Miko say, "Fuck off," but if he did, he said it low enough for only her to hear.

He loosened his hold on her, but didn't release her completely until after he said, "I need to find you again. Tell me how to find you."

Despite the fact that her tongue felt swollen to at least twice its normal size, she managed to utter two words, "Carpe Nocturne."

He leaned down, barely brushed his mouth over hers and turned to leave.

He was no more than a couple feet away when she heard someone say, "Look who we have here. It's Langton. What're you doing? Hunting your next victim?" She spun around so fast, she nearly fell over.

Miko's supposed boss was glaring at Burke. And Burke was giving him an equally evil look right back.

Despite the festive atmosphere all around them, the eardrum-splitting music and gyrating bodies, Sylvie could literally see the tension in the air between the two men. It was like a dark shadow, rippling like heated air above the asphalt in July.

"Are you going to come quietly or are we going to have to take you by force?" Miko asked, stepping forward.

They wanted to take Burke? Did they really say that? Why? What was this all about?

She wanted to do something but didn't know what. And then someone, or something, caught her by the neck and yanked hard, forcing her to stumble backward. An arm circled her neck, and something sharp pierced her skin, just below her ear. A little tilt to her eyes, and she verified it was a knife blade. A really sharp looking knife blade.

"Let Langton go or this woman dies," a female voice said behind her. It was a woman holding her? Had to be the strongest woman this side of hell.

Who the heck was she? What was she trying to do? And what the hell made her think those two vampires gave two fangs whether she ran that knife blade through Sylvie's throat or not?

The one guy gave her a cool look and shrugged his shoulders. "She's nothing to me."

"But she is to me," Miko said solemnly.

A few sets of eyes fell on him at that bit of news, one of them belonging to Burke.

"I couldn't tell you before because..." He sighed before continuing to explain to his boss. "She's my *Origo*. My mate."

The gasp she heard didn't come from the boss. It came from Burke. As she watched, he grabbed Miko's wrist with his left hand and twisted, forcing the man to reveal the underside of his forearm.

"Well, that explains a lot," Burke said, studying the black symbol that matched his own, which she knew was on the arm he held behind his back. "A whole hell of a lot." For the first time in eons, his gaze met Sylvie's. Something flashed in his eyes.

"Let him go," the woman repeated.

"Fuck, I can't!" Miko's boss snapped. "He's a convicted felon."

"You have to!" Miko snapped back. "You know what will happen if she's killed, Hadrian. You know what'll happen to me."

"Have you taken the bond?" The man called Hadrian studied Miko for a minute. "No, you couldn't have. They won't kill her, anyway."

"Who says I won't?" the woman holding Sylvie said in an icy voice.

Sure convinced Sylvie. She stiffened.

"They're murderers. Why wouldn't they kill her?" Miko challenged.

"Because she's their friend."

"She's not my friend," her captor said. "I've never met this bitch before. I'm a cold-blooded murderer, right? It would take so little effort." The woman pressed the blade into Sylvie's skin. It pinched and she flinched when a rivulet of warm wetness dribbled down her neck. "Oh, dear. Looks like she's bleeding."

Precisely three seconds later, all hell broke loose. It went something like this -- Hadrian jumped at Burke. Miko jumped at Hadrian and Burke just started swinging at both of them. Three vampires fighting. It was a bizarre if not confusing sight. They moved so fast, it was like she was watching a movie playing back at the wrong speed. Or like a cartoon fight, where there was this cloud of smoke and arms or heads popping out every once in a while.

As quickly as it started, it was over. Burke staggered out from the cloud, followed by Miko. Hadrian was lying on the floor. She found herself hoping he wasn't dead, or Burke's problems -- which already seemed to be pretty huge -- had just gotten a whole lot worse. Whoever Hadrian was, it appeared he was some kind of VIP. Someone with ties to the police. Nothing good could come from killing a guy like that.



The woman's grip on Sylvie's neck loosened a smidge but not enough for her to break free.

Hadrian stirred, pushed himself up on one arm and rubbed his head. "Fuck!"

Miko shoved Burke. "Get out of here. Now."

Before Sylvie knew how it had happened, Burke had her in his arms and was running for the door. Everything flew by her in a blur, like she was driving down a bumpy road at eighty. He stopped outside at his car, opened the back door, hurried her in, then slammed it.

In the back seat, she twisted around and caught Hadrian and Miko running from the bar's front door. Hadrian stomped his foot as Burke gunned the engine and the car rocketed down the street.

Well, that wasn't exactly the way she'd expected the evening to go. She'd been seduced. Held hostage. And then rushed from the building, with a couple of pissed off men on their tails.

She wondered what would happen next. She lifted her hand to her neck, found a little sticky wetness at the base, where her neck met her collarbone. She checked her fingers. Sure enough, it was blood. That... woman had cut her!

What the heck was going on? "Burke?" she said.

"Not now."

What, not now? Was she a child whining for a cookie?

"Excuse me?" she said.

"Don't you ever lay your hands on her again," Burke said in a low growl, evidently directing his anger at the woman sitting next to him in the front passenger seat.

"I'm sorry," the woman said. "I was trying to help --"

"Not her! I can't see someone hurting her without... without wanting to do something drastic."

"Ohhhh. Oh!" The bitch who'd cut her twisted in the passenger seat and gave her a smile around the seat's back. "I'm Isabella. Sorry about your neck." She reached

back with her right hand. "I... uh... didn't realize you and Burke... I mean... Nice to meet you."

Who was Isabella? Obviously she knew Burke. But how well? And why was Sylvie burning up with jealousy, even though he was so obviously steamed at her for the stunt she'd pulled at the bar?

She took Isabella's hand in hers and gave it a polite but unenthusiastic shake before releasing it. "Sylvie Durand," was all she could manage to utter. She raised her hand to her neck again, to see if she was still bleeding. Felt like it had stopped.

"It's a shallow wound. It's clotted already. Sorry. I had to do something, or Burke here would've been on his way to face the executioner if I had just stood there..."

Sylvie listened, half-comprehending what Isabella was saying. She was partly distracted by her efforts to remember where she'd seen the woman before -- she looked vaguely familiar -- and partly preoccupied by her attempts to figure out where Burke was taking them.

He wasn't driving back to his home, or back to hers.

"Where's he taking us? Burke?"

Isabella turned forward for a second then looked back again. "The Excoluni saw our license plates. They'll be at our apartments before sunrise. We're going to need new identities. Again."

"What's an Excoluni?" Sylvie asked.

"Dammit!" Burke said, smacking the steering wheel. "Dammit, dammit, dammit! I need to stop at an ATM, get as much cash as I can. Before my bank account's seized. I won't be able to get it all. There's a daily limit. And there's no way I'll risk going back to my apartment to get the stash I hid there."

"Bank account seized? For what?" Sylvie felt as lost as a movie-goer who'd walked into the middle of a mystery film. But tons more frustrated and scared. "Someone want to tell me what's going on before I freak out?"

"I'd start from the beginning, but I figure that's for Burke here to tell you. Maybe later," Isabella said. "For now, I can tell you we're being hunted by the Excoluni, the police force of the UMN, for murder."

"Y-you? And Burke? Murder?" Sylvie heard herself stammer.

"I didn't kill anyone," Burke said. "Yet."

"Neither have I," Isabella explained. "But we're being blamed for the murders of several people, one of whom died last night. At your bar. We're trying to catch the real killer."

It was then that Sylvie realized why Isabella looked so familiar. She was Farrah! "You were at Carpe Nocturne last night, talking about *Charlie's Angels*."

"Yes. That was me. I thought you realized that already."

"Well, gosh. You look so different." Sylvie took a good long look at Isabella's face and hair. Isabella had looked pretty in an innocent sort of way last night, wearing her midnight blue Victorian gown, her long deep-red tresses cascading down her back. Tonight, she looked tough and dangerous, like a spy chick. Her hair was pulled tightly into a ponytail at the back of her head. She was wearing all black. Snug pants, form-fitting knit top. Sylvie half-expected her to whip out some spy gear.

"Call our contact," Burke said as he maneuvered the car into a bank's parking lot. "I'll be right back."

Half-listening to Isabella place a call on her cell phone, Sylvie watched him as he walked to the front of the building, to the glassed-in enclosure holding the ATM. He was walking stiffly, like he was either in pain or so ticked off there wasn't a muscle in his body that could relax. She hoped it wasn't the first and suspected it was the second.

He was heading back to the car by the time Isabella had ended her call. "I got all I could. It isn't much. We'd better get what we can from your account too."

"Okay." Isabella handed him the cell phone. "He's working on our new papers. We can go pick them up in a couple of hours."

"Good thing it's early."

When Isabella got out, Sylvie climbed out of the cramped back seat and took her spot in the front. She focused her attention on Burke.

He sighed and dragged his fingers through his hair, pulling out the elastic holding it at his nape. "I'm sorry I'm being such a bastard right now. I just didn't need this. Any of this. It took so long to get to where I was. And now..." He shook his head, leaving the sentence hanging there, unfinished. He raised his fist and she thought he'd put it through the window. He didn't.

She wanted to do so many things -- comfort him, console him, help him. But mostly she wanted to bombard him with a million questions. Obviously, he wasn't just a nice guy trying to protect her. He was a guy who had problems. Lots of them. He was a guy on the run from the police... or so she assumed. She had no idea what or who the UMN was.

Instead of doing anything useful, or helpful, she merely nodded and lifted the corners of her mouth into something she hoped resembled a smile. Their eyes met. That crazy connection zapped and buzzed in the air between them. She reached a hand out to touch him, but he jerked away before she'd done more than pat him.

"No. Don't," he said softly, grimacing as if she'd just scorched him with a branding iron.

"Wow. Sorry." She heard the hurt in her own voice, but she hadn't been able to stop it from coming out. Despite all the confusion, the questions, the men chasing them, she felt a strange and unexplainable draw to this man. And any distance, whether it was physical or emotional, hurt. Bad. Physically. It took the form of this burning deep in her gut. The pain made it hard to breathe. To think. To do much of anything.

It was so weird and horrible and fascinating.

"We're both feeling it, the pain of the *lugum*, the Binding. It's because we've found the third member. The *lugum* is calling to us. It will get worse."

The third member. Miko. Could she be with two men? Be their lover? Would she desire them both? Serve them?

Love them?

Was that possible?

Isabella returned to the car, and without complaint took the backseat, leaving Sylvie beside Burke. "I got all I could too, but between us, I doubt we'll have enough to pay for the new identities."

"Dammit. We'll have to go back to my place after all." He pulled a U-turn in the middle of the two-lane road, heading the car back the way they'd come.

"No. It's too risky."

"What choice do I have? No money, no IDs. No IDs, no hotel or apartment or jobs or food for Sylvie."

"Don't worry about me. Sounds like you've got enough to worry about yourselves," Sylvie said, trying to be helpful.

Burke shook his head. "You're in my care. I will provide for your necessities. Besides, we cannot risk you using your credit cards, either. They may be able to track our movements and find us."

"Okay." Feeling torn, she clutched her purse to her chest. Thanks to all the commotion, she still hadn't gotten to the bank to make the deposit on last night's bar sales. Even though the night had been cut short, and a fair amount of the bar's sales had been paid by credit card, she was still holding onto almost five thousand dollars. It was enough money to pay off all the vendors she owed money to, including the utility companies, and catch up the payroll.

But this was life or death.

She sucked in a deep breath, flipped open her purse and pulled out the envelope, already filled out and sealed. She swallowed a huge lump that had lodged itself in her throat. "You can have this."

Driving, Burke glanced at the envelope she was offering him and shook his head. "No. I can't take your money."

"Please. I've thought about this. I want to help."

"No." He gently pushed her hand back toward her own lap. "Last night, when I searched your office, I saw more than that napkin."

She had no doubt what he meant by that. He'd seen the piles of bills on her desks. The ones with red lettering all over them, threatening all kinds of horrific penalties if payment wasn't made immediately.

They were important. The meat guy needed to get paid. So did the wine vendor, the electric company, the waitresses and cooks. But dammit, what good would the money in her purse do any of them if those two Exco-whatevers found them? Would she be named an accomplice? Was she now wanted for aiding and abetting felons?

Oy! She didn't want to know the answer to that question at the moment. "I insist."

"No. You need that money. We're going back. For mine."

Isabella placed her hand on Sylvie's shoulder. It was a soft touch, a silent show of support and gratitude.

After studying the stubborn set of one adorable man's jaw, Sylvie returned the envelope to her purse. He'd won the argument but she'd win the war. She'd just have to approach things with a different strategy.

All men had their weak points. She'd find Burke's.

And she'd find a way to help him clear his name.

## Tawny Taylor

Nothing exciting happens in Tawny Taylor's life, unless you count giving the cat a flea dip -- a cat can make some fascinating sounds when immersed chin-deep in insecticide -- or chasing after a houseful of upchucking kids during flu season. She doesn't travel the world or employ a staff of personal servants. She's not even built like a runway model. She's just your run-of-the-mill, pleasantly plump Detroit suburban mom and wife.

That's why she writes, for the sheer joy of it. She doesn't need to escape, mind you. Despite being run-of-the-mill, her life is wonderful. She just likes to add some... zip. Her heroines might resemble herself, or her next door neighbor (sorry Sue), but they are sure to be memorable (she hopes!). And her heroes -- inspired by movie stars, her favorite television actors or her husband -- are fully capable of delivering one hot happily-ever-after after another. Combined, the characters and plots she weaves bring countless hours of enjoyment to Tawny... and she hopes to readers too!

In the end, that's all that matters to Tawny, bringing a little bit of zip to someone else's life. You can email Tawny at [tawnytaylor@sbcglobal.net](mailto:tawnytaylor@sbcglobal.net) or visit her website at <http://www.tawnytaylor.com>.