

## Chapter One

*"You're a blood sucking vampire, Gloriana St. Clair. When are you going to start acting like one?"*

I snarled and showed some fang. "Careful, fur face. You really don't want to make me mad." Yeah, I'm a vampire. Forget stereotypes. I'm blonde, blue-eyed and twenty-something with a, uh, voluptuous figure. Vamps are everywhere and you won't have a clue. We're pretty good at blending with mortals and if we're caught in a compromising situation, like say with our fangs in your neck..? Well, there's always the whammy. We can make fang marks disappear along with your memory. Hmmm. Makes you wonder, doesn't it?

*"Come on, Glory. I'm hurting here."* Valdez talks in my head. A lot.

"You're my dog-slash-bodyguard, Valdez. You're supposed to be taking care of me."

*"I will. I am. Now turn around."*

"I'm not going back to the store. Forget it. I got the essentials—cream rinse and flea shampoo." I gasped when my stomach cramped again. "Those damned Cheetos almost killed me."

*"I'm not asking you to eat any. You expect me to give them up just because you can't handle them?"*

"I had a near death experience." Who knew a Big Grab of Cheetos could be so *lethal*? If you know anything about vampires, you know we can dish it out, but we can't or won't take it. I'm an old vampire. Like, I hung out with Billy Shakespeare old. I knew better, but just once I'd wanted a little crunch in my diet. I gave up biting mortals, mostly, ages ago. But chugging the bottled fake stuff just hadn't been cutting it for me for a long, long time.

I wheeled my aging Suburban into the parking lot behind my apartment building where I have my shop, Vintage Vamp's Emporium (cute, huh?) on the ground floor. The security lights were out again. Not a good sign. Valdez had taken an arrow in the hip back here. An arrow intended for me. I slowed down to a crawl, fought another pain, this one in my head for a change, then pulled into my parking spot.

Crunch, thump and the car lurched to a stop. Oops.

*"Now you've done it. Stay here and lock yourself in."* Valdez opened the passenger door (don't ask) and hopped

out, obviously on high alert. Was this a trap? Everyone I know realizes that's *my* parking spot. Was some stake-happy vamp hunter waiting to get me when I checked out whatever I'd hit?

*"I'm not picking up on a threat. But we're in deep shit anyway."* Valdez stopped next to my door. *"Back up a foot, then come see."*

As soon as I turned off the engine, another sharp pain hit me right between my eyes. What the hell? I never have headaches unless I'm trying to block one of my mind-reading friends. And the Cheetos didn't mess with my head. Instead I'm stuck with what I'll call the Cheeto bulge. I'm well-rounded anyway, but since I did the dirty with the snacks, I've developed a new curve in my tummy area. I unlocked the doors and got out.

Thanks to my superior vamp night vision I could see that the Suburban looked undamaged, but the crushed metal between the car and the fence had once been, gulp, a motorcycle. And not one of those cheap bikes, but, double gulp, a classic Harley. And I know about these things. Had a boyfriend once who'd been into those. Mortal. And very last century. One thing I try to do is stay current. I may be ancient, but I don't ever intend to look or act that way.

"What the hell have you done, Gloriana?"

I turned around, fully prepared to do some kind of vamp whammy until I could figure out how to make this right without the involvement of law enforcement or insurance adjusters. One look at furious Harley owner and I knew the whammy wasn't going to cut it.

Richard Mainwaring is a vamp too. A friend, sort of, but also a scary dude. Anyway, he was staring at the mangled mess like, if he'd been any less pure macho male, he would have shed a few tears. I wanted to cry too. Maybe I could entice him upstairs for a bottle of Fangtastic (my blood substitute of choice lately) and an all-out sob-fest.

"I didn't see it. And this is my parking spot." Yep, I was defensive.

"There's no assigned parking here." He tenderly set the fallen motorcycle back on its wheels, the effort doing nice things to his biceps. The Harley wobbled for a moment and I held my breath until it seemed steady.

"But it's for residents only. You don't live here, do you?" He'd been an item with my roommate, Florence daVinci, until recently, but the last word on that subject was that Flo had dumped him. Had they made up and he was moving into Flo's bedroom?

"No. And I'm not with Florence." He had a grim look. And don't you hate the fact that he'd read my mind? It's a bad vamp habit that I refuse to acquire, at least not on a

regular basis. And I'd had run-ins with Richard before. His thoughts are never up for grabs.

"Then you have no business parking here. Visitor parking is in front of the building."

He knelt down to examine what had been the rear wheel of the Harley. Hmm. He did fill out a pair of jeans nicely. Not that I should be noticing that right now. More to the point, he had a set of shoulders on him, clearly showcased in a sleeveless leather vest, shoulders that would have done a linebacker proud. I have vamp strength, but this guy could have thrown me across the parking lot without breaking a sweat.

He turned and gave me a measuring look. Oops. I think I came up short. I unzipped my jacket, a cozy velour hoodie that matched my turquoise sweat pants and sleeveless tank. He could out-muscle me, but I've got a few weapons of my own. Maybe if I flashed a little cleavage... Mainwaring's a former priest turned vamp, but I know for a fact that he's very into women.

"Gloriana, how could you do this? Didn't you see the space was already occupied?" Mainwaring has a slight British accent, white blond hair and the kind of eyes that make you think of clear skies. That is, if you can remember that far back. Me, I haven't seen daylight personally since 1604. Sigh.

"It's dark back here." I looked down at my dog, pressed against my right leg. "And Valdez and I were having a discussion..."

"Don't lay this off on me, Blondie." Valdez chuffed and stepped away. "You were driving this heap, not me."

I'm not the only one who can hear Valdez and Mainwaring gave the dog a look, like—who's the master here? Good question. Instead of growling at Mainwaring like a good guard dog, Valdez sat down and scratched his left ear. We really needed that flea shampoo.

"Look. The Harley is, I mean was, black without a lot of chrome or anything. Plus the security lights are out. Maybe we should hustle our butts inside to discuss this. Hunters could be stalking us as we speak." I did feel...something out here.

Mainwaring stood and scanned the area with a narrow-eyed look that meant business if anyone dared make a move on us. Finally he shook his head. "We're safe enough. But perhaps you'd like to go inside, closer to your checkbook."

"Ha. Ha." I put my hand on his bulging bicep, fluttered my eyelashes and leaned in to give him a cleavage close-up. Mainwaring just glared. Ever try charming an uptight man with a wounded Harley? But charm was all I had at the moment. Unlike a lot of vamps, I'm not rich. I work for a living. This century I started my own business, and

it got off to a great start, but there's overhead, stock to buy, my own living expenses... Well, you get the picture. Obviously, I don't have enough in my checking account to pay for Richie Rich's Harley. Hey, I bought generic cream rinse. What does that tell you?

"Now, Richard." I smiled what I hoped was sweetly. Not easy to do when your head feels like it's about to split open. "I'm really, really sorry, but be reasonable. You know I didn't mean to hit the motorcycle. And I'm sure you can afford—"

He turned and squatted down next to the downed bike. I knew enough to shut up. For a long moment, he just stared at it, then he picked up a piece of metal that had fallen to the ground. He finally stood and walked closer to me, too close. I held my ground, even though I could practically feel the hostility coming off of Mr. Motorcycle.

"You need to be held accountable, Gloriana. Whether or not I can afford to replace a 1946 Knucklehead is not the issue."

"Excuse me?" I knew better than to grin, but it was a struggle. "Did you just call your bike a knucklehead?"

"That's the model. A 1946 Harley Davidson Knucklehead. Rare. Valuable." He was really in my space. "Maybe even irreplaceable."

Oh, jeez. Heaven forbid I should have mangled a vintage cycle. And I *did* feel bad, especially with Richard looming over me. I eased around him to check out the damage.

"Look. I think it can be fixed. It's mainly the back end that's crunched. Why don't you get an estimate or two and then we'll talk?" And maybe I should win the lottery in the meantime.

"It isn't the money, it's the principle." Richard was right behind me, peering over my shoulder. He smelled like all vamps do, it's a yummy scent that mere mortals can't even pick up. But Richard also had a nice sandalwood kind of thing going on and a male musk that was having an unfortunate effect on my sex-starved libido.

I swore off men after my on-again off-again maker and mate, Jeremy Blade aka Angus Jeremiah Campbell the third, and I faced death at stake-point together on Halloween. I'd expected a little post-action celebration, one on one. Instead, Jerry played hero to his best friend's widow, who's thin and beautiful, and, well, thin. You get the idea. Okay, so I'd only been celibate a little over two weeks, but vamps are sensual creatures. Sometimes that's a blessing, sometimes a curse.

So I was noticing Mainwaring's male attributes. For a former priest, he was surprisingly built. Though I'd heard



he'd been a Crusader back in the day.

"Crusader then galley slave." His open vest brushed my back. "And I gave up celibacy a long time ago."

His breath stirred my hair, which should have been washed two days ago. I inhaled and licked my lips. I'm *really* not good at celibacy.

I turned to face him. Diversion time. "Yeah? Bet that's an interesting story. How'd you escape? I've heard most galley slaves die at their oar."

"Long story. And don't change the subject." He stared at the bike for a moment, shook his head, then reached down to pick up his saddle bags.

Gee. He may have given up celibacy, but he wasn't exactly falling under my spell, either. Well, what did I expect? His last girlfriend had been my roommate, Florence daVinci, ancient vampire and certified sex goddess. Of course Flo isn't her real name, she's paying homage to her favorite Italian city and one of her former lovers. Flo is a love 'em and leave 'em kind of gal. How could I compete with a woman who'd talked Leonardo into painting her into the Last Supper at you know who's right hand?

"I've got an appointment. We'll discuss the Harley later." With a glance at Valdez, Richard strode off into the night.

"Well, you weren't much help." I fussed at Valdez

while I grabbed the grocery sacks out of the car. Most of the stuff was for the dog anyway. I order the Fangtastic on-line. It's not exactly a beverage you find at your local mini-mart.

*"The guy was pissed. You can't blame him."* Valdez looked mournfully at the motorcycle. Even in dog form, he is such a guy. *"You're lucky he didn't try to knock you on your ass. If he'd raised his hand, then I'd have made my move."*

"Your move. Yeah, right." I was being bitchy. Valdez did have some pretty scary moves which he's saved me with more than once. But Mainwaring dripped power like my old car did oil. I locked the car and headed for the back entrance to the building, stopping when my head screamed again.

*"Gloriana. Come to me."* A husky whisper made me drop my groceries and grab my head. Who or what was this?

Valdez growled and looked around. *"Something's going on. Your head is killing you. Because someone or something is trying to send you a message."*

"Not Blade."

*"Nope. This guy's one bad actor, trying to get you to go somewhere. I'd like a piece of him."* Valdez growled again and paced in a circle around me.

I held onto my head, queasy with pain. You get that

my dog was reading my mind too. I'm used to it. I'm also used to letting him take care of me. Like now.

"What's wrong with a cell phone?" This didn't make sense. Blade sent me mental messages all the time and it didn't hurt.

"*Gloriana, come here.*" Same damned compelling voice. I fought the urge to follow it.

"*I tell you. It ain't Blade.*" Valdez growled, deep and dangerous enough to give me goose bumps. "*Cut it out, whoever you are. Gloriana's goin' nowhere and you don't want to mess with me.*" Valdez backed up until his tail brushed my legs. "*Suck it up, Blondie. Punch in the code. I figure you'll be okay once we get inside.*"

I managed to grab my bags and deal with the code. Believe me, vamps only live where there's great security. We both scooted inside. As soon as the steel door slammed shut, I did feel better.

"*You okay now?*" Valdez nudged me.

"Yeah. That was weird though." I trudged up the stairs. You get that Valdez isn't really a dog, don't you?

"*Careful, you're smashing my Twinkies.*" Valdez is into junk food and the occasional rib-eye. I get him what he wants since I know he'd lay down his life for me. Previous Valdezes have. And isn't that hellacious?

Not my idea, of course. But when Blade and I parted

company the first time, centuries ago, he'd insisted I needed a bodyguard. Jerry *made* me, so I give him a certain amount of respect. Respect, not obedience. I do have my pride. But I caved. Of course I sure wasn't going to be saddled with a male guard, even a cute one. That would've cramped my style, big time. And, trust me, Jerry wasn't going to send in a hunk of the month to be with me twenty-four/seven. Remember my celibacy issues?

So we'd settled on guard dogs, always named Valdez for some reason. Recent ones have been shape-shifters, though Jerry forbids the guards to be anything but dogs around me. Think Jerry's jealous? Works for me. Anyway, he's got some kind of hold over the guys, this Valdez for sure. I don't know what kind of debt the V-man owes, but it's made for some really fierce and loyal protection.

"I'm okay. You think Mainwaring was doing that to me? Giving me a headache?"

*"He's one tough dude and neither one of us needs to be making him mad. But you had that headache before we hit the Harley. Remember?"*

"Good point." I threw up a block so Valdez couldn't read my mind. I remembered a night when Mainwaring showed me his scary side right here on the stairs to my apartment. The worst part? He'd wiped Valdez's memory. Poor pup didn't realize he'd been whammied into sitting meekly at the

bottom of the stairs while I'd fought off the Mainwaring mojo all by my lonesome. "So it wasn't Mainwaring."

"Mainwaring? You've seen Ricardo?" Florence met us at the door and took one of the bags from me. "Not that I care. I'm through with him."

"You sure? Because he parks like he lives here."

"Not in this apartment." Flo pulled out nail polish remover and a sack of cotton balls. "I hate mysterious men. He keeps secrets. Pah! I have a secret for him. He's the worst lover I ever had." Flo's cheeks were pink, which meant she was really agitated. Vamps don't have enough blood to flush unless they've just fed. I saw three empty Fangtastic bottles on the table. Okay, so Flo had been hitting the red stuff pretty hard.

I can never read Flo's mind, though I sure as heck try. She reads mine, of course. Everyone does. Unless I block them. Unfortunately, blocking brings on another kind of headache. But I knew Flo was lying anyway. I mean, even "Sex and the City" reruns turned up full blast hadn't completely drowned out her shrieks of ecstasy when she'd been doing the wild thing with Richard. And, trust me, Flo doesn't fake it for anyone.

I let it go. She needed to vent. Neither of us had a decent boyfriend at the moment. And we live forever. Not a situation conducive to self denial of any kind.

It was almost dawn and I felt it. All day I'd be dead to the world, literally. I threw on a comfy nightgown, glad to be safe inside, no weird voice in my head. I let Valdez into the bedroom and he hopped on the foot of my queen-sized bed. You didn't think I slept in a coffin, did you? That would be so cliché.