



“MOONLIGHT SONATA”

by

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Little Havana was a lively place, even on a late Sunday evening.

Pedestrians of every imaginable race crowded the walkways and Latino music filled the air, along with the excited chatter of hagglers at the shop stands. A gentle March breeze spread the scents of spicy food, cigar smoke, and human sweat.

Victoria strolled down *Calle Ocho* in her clingy, white silk dress and high-heeled sandals. The night gradually became quieter and her surroundings grew more deserted. The famous street had its lonely areas. Occasionally she would hear a dog bark – followed by its master’s sharp admonishment – and sounds from a Spanish TV show would come wafting out an open window.

The stranger mimicked her pace now, not bothering to soften his footsteps. He had been following her for several blocks.

Victoria paused casually, and then headed down a narrow alleyway. She could feel the baked-in heat radiating off the brick walls on either side of her as she sashayed along, deftly avoiding the smelly garbage that littered her path.

The man turned down the alley after her and quickened his pace. She knew he could still see her tall, slender figure clearly – thanks to the illuminating rays of the bright full moon. He was close now, so close she could hear his erratic breathing, smell his cheap cologne.

She smiled. It would happen soon.

Victoria nonchalantly removed the white silk scarf from around her neck and let it hang by her side as she walked. Under her breath, she sang the opening lyrics to *You Better Go Now*, a jazzy blues ballad by Billie Holiday.

That lady had serious style.

Now.

The stranger rushed up behind Victoria and put a calloused hand over her mouth. His other hand held a switchblade to her throat.

“My pretty, blond *señorita*, you will like what I can do.” The man’s breath smelled like the dregs from a beer bottle that had been festering in the hot sun. “There is no need to scream.”

Victoria grabbed both his wrists and pulled them down. “I know.”

She pushed the stocky stranger back against the brick wall and spun around to face him, knocking the knife out of his hand.

He stared at her wide-eyed, his mouth opening and closing like a catfish that had been yanked out of the water.

“You crazy b-b-bitch,” he finally said, lunging past her.

She whipped her scarf around his neck and flung him backwards.

“My name is Lady Victoria.” She lifted him off the ground by his throat and pinned him to the wall. “And believe me, *señor*, you won’t like what I can do. You won’t like it at all.”

Victoria bared her fangs and moved in for the kill.

Terror filled every crevice of the man’s swarthy face. He let out a weak, strangled cry, his arms flailing against her, vainly trying to push her away.

Victoria wrinkled her delicate nose as a dark stain appeared on the front of his faded jeans. She set his feet back on the ground and moved behind him, gripping him around the waist, pinning his arms to his sides.

The stranger began wailing in Spanish, his voice hoarse and nearly useless.

Victoria sank her fangs into the soft part of his neck, and he struggled even more desperately, kicking her shins.

She forced him to the ground. The blood, so salty and sweet, flowed into her, warming her pale skin, her cold bones. The red nectar sharpened her senses even more – and made her loneliness melt away.

The stranger soon grew limp and quiet, but his heart still struggled. It wanted to go on beating. It wanted the body to live.

Too bad.

Victoria drained her attacker to the point of death, and then released him. She stood and adjusted her scarf before removing the little jeweled dagger from the sheath worn on her upper left thigh.

Quickly, she bent over the man and slashed his throat to hide the bite marks. It was an ugly, gaping wound. She carefully licked the blood off the razor-sharp knife blade and slipped the dagger back in its sheath.

Victoria, my darling, I have found you again. We shall see each other soon.

Damn. She'd let her guard down just long enough to feed, but it had been long enough for the Count – her sire – to succeed in invading her mind for the second time in six months.

It was awfully bloody annoying.

She sighed, and began the long walk back to her hidden Mercedes. She could have sprinted back at preternatural speed, but she was in no hurry to return to the echoey Bal Harbour mansion that she now called home.

Her evenings usually began with a drive down to colorful, trendy South Beach. Seeing all those beautiful, uninhibited humans running around half-naked and half-drunk in the Art Deco District never failed to whet her appetite. Tanned skin and sparkling gems went so well together.

Even if one couldn't worship the sun, living in a balmy climate definitely had its rewards.

An hour later, Victoria cruised past the short, fat palm trees lining Balmoral Court and eased through the wrought-iron gates of her palatial estate. She parked her baby blue convertible in the detached garage and headed over to the Mediterranean-style mansion's rear terrace.

She picked up his scent immediately. He was inside, waiting in the darkness.

Smart cop. She hadn't fooled him after all.

Victoria crossed the uneven flagstones and paused in front of the stained-glass doors.

How would it feel to see him again? She had to admit she was pleased at the prospect.

No, more than pleased. She was elated – despite all the trouble that lay dead ahead.

Rayne Flannery had been patient all evening – which wasn't his nature.

At around eight, after finding no one home, he'd jimmied the lock on one of the kitchen windows and let himself in. After searching the premises thoroughly, he had gone into the solarium at the back of the house and settled into a halfway comfortable wicker chair.

It was now close to midnight.

He stretched out his long legs and ran a hand through his wavy, dark brown hair, wishing he hadn't smoked his last cigarette so soon. Maybe he should start nosing around for a liquor cabinet. He could use a shot of whiskey.

Not that he needed any courage.

Victoria Ashton-Harrow was playing a dangerous game, but he had every intention of turning out the winner.

He'd last seen his mysterious lover five months ago, back home in Manhattan. He would never forget that night. The lovely lady had taken a dive off the George Washington Bridge right in front of him, wrapped in the arms of the Austrian Count he had doggedly been pursuing. The authorities had searched the Hudson River and had found no trace of the couple.

Rayne had gone back to Victoria's penthouse and discovered all her fancy clothing and jewelry missing. He'd bribed the nosey maid, the security guards, the doorman; anyone who'd had contact with the British beauty. Finding her became an obsession, and he'd used all the resources available to a detective to make it happen.

Incredible to think he'd only known her for six weeks – six exciting, unpredictable, intoxicating weeks. They'd met because Rayne had been convinced she was about to become the Count's next victim.

Victoria had been amused by this theory.

The strange murders had stopped right after the incident on the bridge. No coincidence there, as far as Rayne was concerned.

Did Victoria act as an accomplice? Why had she been seen with the Count? Was what he had witnessed an actual struggle between the two?

And how the hell did they survive that fall?

He had a mind-boggling number of questions for the lady of the house, and he wasn't leaving until he got some answers.

Rayne stifled a yawn, and then stiffened as the doors leading to the rear terrace slowly opened. The scent of jasmine wafted into the room and Victoria appeared before him, hands on her hips, looking like one of Lucifer's angels in the moonlight.

"Isn't breaking and entering a crime, Detective Flannery?" Her sultry voice mocked him.

He got up out of the chair and rubbed the back of his neck. "Yes, but aiding and abetting a murderer is a much bigger one."

She closed the doors and flipped on the overhead light, her full red lips curving into a seductive smile. "So, here on business instead of pleasure. What a shame."

His warm blue eyes met her cool green ones, and he shrugged. "Maybe you'll answer all my questions and convince me to go off duty."

"Maybe I'll convince you that questioning me is pointless, and we can enjoy ourselves sooner."

She moved across the tile floor like a sleek, satisfied feline – her high-heels barely making any noise – and opened a massive teakwood cabinet. Dozens of colored-glass decanters and crystal tumblers jammed the shelves.

“I’m surprised you haven’t helped yourself to a drink yet.” She threw him a provocative look over her shoulder. “What would you like?”

“How about the truth for a change – along with a shot of Jack Daniels?”

Her musical laughter rippled through the air. It had a strange effect on his spine.

“Ah, the truth.” She grabbed a bottle off the lower shelf and went about fixing his drink. “You won’t be ready for that until you’ve downed a fifth of whiskey.”

“I won’t be getting drunk tonight. You can start by explaining how you survived that fall off the bridge. I assume the Count is alive, too. I half-expected him to be here.”

“I’m glad he isn’t.” Victoria strolled over and offered him a tumbler half-filled with amber liquid. In her stiletto heels, she was almost eye-level with his six-foot frame. “Count Nestroy and I go way back, but I would hardly call him a friend. I’m not his accomplice either.”

Rayne noticed a tiny red spot on the end of her white silk scarf. Was it wine, or blood?

She must have read his thoughts, for she immediately removed the scarf and draped it over a wicker end table.

“Do sit down again Detective and enjoy your drink. You make me nervous standing there, like a member of the Gestapo.”

Rayne’s gaze focused in on Victoria’s sensuous mouth before sliding down to her small, pouting breasts, tantalizingly visible through the shimmering white silk.

He felt himself becoming aroused and quickly looked away. He couldn’t allow the lady’s many charms to distract him.

He sank into his old chair. “Why ‘Detective this, Detective that?’ It used to be Rayne.”

She stared down at him reproachfully. “Darling, you broke into my house and then accused me of all sorts of vile behavior. I didn’t think our previous romantic interludes mattered anymore.”

Memories of their last lovemaking session intruded upon Rayne’s thoughts, and he wanted to smile. The woman had an inhuman amount of stamina. He was lucky she hadn’t left him comatose. The fact that she’d survived a fall off a bridge shouldn’t have come as any surprise.

His stomach decided to growl ominously.

“Would you like a midnight snack?” she asked, smiling. “I usually get peckish myself around this time.”

“Let me guess – brie and crackers.”

“I’m flattered that you remember. I’ll just pop into the kitchen for a minute. I need a wine glass for my Bordeaux. And don’t worry, I won’t try to escape.”

Rayne took a sip of his whiskey. Brie and crackers and liquor were all he could ever find at Victoria’s place.

It seemed like barely a minute had gone by before she was standing in front of him again, holding out a silver platter.

“Here we are. It’s all yours – I’m only in the mood for spirits.”

She filled her glass with dark red wine and sat across from him on the antique wicker loveseat.

He laid the platter of food aside and gave her a hard look. “If you aren’t the Count’s accomplice, why did you leave town without telling me? Why did you want me to think you’d been killed?”

“Because I’m a cold-hearted bitch, Rayne. I’m surprised you haven’t noticed.” She sighed when he continued to stare at her. “Really, darling, you know the Count is dangerous. He’s been hounding me for years. Drastic measures were needed to convince him I was dead. A brilliant, daring plan, don’t you think?”

“Too bad it didn’t work.” Rayne swallowed the rest of his whiskey with a grimace. “If I wasn’t convinced, don’t you think that rabid Count of yours would have his own doubts?”

Victoria smiled in a way that made Rayne think she was way ahead of him. She took another sip of wine, and then set her glass on the tile floor by the loveseat.

“Have I answered all your questions, Detective? I was hoping we could have some fun now.” She reached up and removed the jeweled pins from her hair, letting the pale blond tresses spill over her shoulders like moonshine.

With a calmness he didn’t actually feel, Rayne grabbed a gourmet cracker off the little tray and dipped it into the soft, warm brie.

“I’m still looking for the Count,” he said. “If he’s obsessed with you, he’ll be clever enough to find you. All I have to do is keep an eye on the place.”

“Are *you* obsessed with me, Rayne? After all, you found me first.”

Rayne tried not to choke. “My reasons for wanting to find you aren’t the same as the Count’s,” he said.

“Oh, really?”

Victoria got up with one fluid movement and casually walked over to him. She stood between his knees and buried her cool fingers in his thick hair, letting them slide through in a long caress.

It felt phenomenal.

“Are you sure you don’t have time to play, Detective?”

Maybe he did.

She moved closer, pressing against the crotch of his tight jeans.

Rayne put his hands on Victoria’s dainty waist, but before they had a chance to roam south, she pulled away from him.

Feeling a little dazed, he looked up at her smiling face. Her expression reminded him of a cat that had just finished a saucer of cream – after having eaten the caged canary.

“You’re welcome to spend the night, love. I’ll be upstairs if you decide you want company.”

He watched the graceful sway of her hips as she moved across the room. She paused in the arched doorway.

“Since you’ve already been in my boudoir once this evening, I’m sure you won’t get lost along the way.” Victoria turned her head to look at him. “And no weapons allowed, Detective. I promise I won’t bite – unless, of course, you want me to.”

Poor Rayne. She hadn’t been able to control herself. It had been so long.

The ruggedly handsome man was definitely in shape, but now he lay beside her wrapped up in an exhausted dream, his left arm thrown across her – light brown skin against alabaster.

At least she felt warm to the touch. Her temperature rose whenever she fed or had sex, a convenient side effect of pleasure.

Victoria looked over at Rayne and his ridiculously long eyelashes. What was she going to do with him?

She'd let things go too far back in New York. One-night stands were safer and they usually kept the loneliness at bay.

She hadn't planned on having an affair. She hadn't planned on falling for a human. Her secret had almost been exposed.

Victoria moved Rayne's arm and sat up, her skin prickling. Another pleasurable distraction had kept her from sensing his presence sooner.

Listen now, sweet lady, to our song. Tis my birthday gift for you. Even though you've been unfaithful.

The Count was playing the grand piano in the living room below. She could hear the faint, haunting strains of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*.

Victoria slid out of the monstrous canopy bed and threw on a white satin robe. She left Rayne sleeping in the master suite and made her way down the curving stone stairs. The spacious blue living room was just off the foyer, to her right.

The pocket doors were open. She walked into the candlelit room, where Count Nestroy sat at the white piano by the east windows, facing her.

He was dressed all in black, his favorite color, his silk shirt open at the throat. His calf-high leather boots gleamed in the soft light of the candelabra, as did his shoulder-length jet-black hair.

Nestroy looked up at her, continuing to play, and smiled in that superior yet charming way of his that never failed to irritate her. When she was twenty-one, that smile had been her undoing.

Young Victoria – rich and orphaned – had met the Count during a visit to Paris in 1901. He'd swept her off her feet, literally, right after the Bastille Day fireworks. Nestroy had forced

himself on her, taking her virginity and her human life. He'd thought she would depend on him forever to survive, but a month after the change, right before dawn, she had silently slipped away.

In the beginning, she'd been afraid that her flaming hot hatred of him would eventually consume her. But over the course of ten lonely decades, it had gradually cooled off to intense dislike.

Victoria waited impatiently for the last note of the sonata to weaken and die.

When the room fell silent, the Austrian Count stepped out from behind the piano and bowed with a flourish.

She crossed her arms. "Forgive me for not applauding your noble efforts, but I was hoping I would never see you again."

The Count laughed softly. "As gracious as ever, my darling Victoria," he said, in accented English. "You know I will never give up trying to win back your heart."

"It was never yours to begin with."

Nestroy flinched. "So cold you are tonight. I would have thought your mood would be sweetened, thanks to that inferior creature upstairs in your bed."

"He's quite luscious, really. And unfortunately, he's not asleep anymore."

The overhead light came on and Rayne stepped into the room.

He leveled his gun at the Count's chest. "Didn't anybody ever tell you that insulting a cop with a weapon is a really bad idea?"

Nestroy threw his head back and laughed.

The evilness of the sound echoed around the high-ceilinged room, and Rayne suddenly wished he'd taken time to put on more clothes. He stood there barefoot in his jeans feeling naked and vulnerable, even though he was holding a 9mm Smith & Wesson.

“My dear, young man,” the Count said, chuckling, “You are still quite obviously in the dark about who you’re dealing with.” Nestroy looked over at Victoria and wagged a long finger at her. “For shame, sweet lady. I thought you knew better. Relationships with humans never last.”

“Listen,” Rayne said, “whatever game you’re trying to play, it won’t work. I intend to take you back to New York and book you for murder – several murders, as a matter of fact.”

Nestroy’s sigh sounded tragic. “It pains me to admit it, but you were right, Victoria. I should have been more patient and covered my tracks the way you always do.”

“You kill indiscriminately,” Victoria replied, her voice filled with disdain. “You should only hunt the predators – let them come after you.”

“Yes, I suppose that would ease my troubled conscience as well – if I had one.” Nestroy punctuated his remark with a malicious grin.

Rayne stared at Victoria. “Are you playing along with this maniac, or are you as crazy as he is?”

She looked over at him, her expression somber. “This is no game. Nestroy is a monster, but he was evil even when he was human. He wanted the change – this blood disease – but he didn’t give me a choice.”

“Oh, please, Victoria, spare me.” The Count rolled his eyes. “If I hadn’t forced the issue, you would be nothing but a moldering pile of bones right now.” He smiled at Rayne. “Today is your lover’s birthday. Can you guess how old she is, my boy?”

“I don’t have time for this crap,” Rayne said. With his left hand, he reached for the handcuffs that dangled out of his back pocket. “I’m placing you under arrest, Count.”

Rayne felt a slight breeze rush past him and suddenly the handcuffs were gone. So was Nestroy.

“What the hell...?” Rayne heard a noise behind him and whirled around.

Nestroy was leaning against the doorjamb and twirling the handcuffs, a smug expression on his face. “The ravishing Lady Victoria was born in 1880. In fact, she was named after the Queen of England.”

“Stop showing off, Nestroy,” Victoria said. “You’ll scare away my guest.”

The Count ignored her. “But still, your lover is young compared to me. I was over two hundred years old when I made her.”

“I think you just like to hear yourself talk.” Rayne moved closer to Nestroy, his gun still aimed at his chest. “You’re good with the tricks, too, like a magician. But there’s no way you’re going to stop me from doing my job.”

The next thing Rayne knew, he was sitting on the Oriental rug with the handcuffs lying in his lap. His handgun was missing.

The Count was standing by the stone fireplace on the west side of the living room, examining the Smith & Wesson.

“Quite sufficient, I think, to stop a mortal, but quite useless against me – and Lady Victoria, of course.”

Rayne watched in shocked disbelief as Nestroy bent the end of the gun barrel straight down and then tossed the useless weapon into the fireplace.

He jumped to his feet, feeling numb all over.

The Count turned around and grinned widely, revealing a pair of gleaming white fangs.

This couldn't be real – it couldn't be happening.

But it was.

“What are you?” Rayne whispered.

Nestroy bowed his head slightly. “I think you already know, dear boy. We are not a myth, as you now realize, and the legends have little to do with our reality. We are known by many names – none of which I care to acknowledge.”

Rayne felt his stomach get queasy. Why wasn't he wearing the crucifix his late mother had given him? His sister had warned him about giving up on the Church.

“Crosses don't work that well against us, Rayne.” Victoria walked over to his side and placed a cold hand on his arm. “Faith, or no faith.”

Could they read minds on top of everything else?

“Only if we care,” Victoria said, smiling. Loving him, a mortal, also meant she was prevented from compelling him to forget the truth.

Rayne pulled away from her and pointed to a mirrored wall on the far side of the room.

“I can see your reflections in the glass.”

Victoria brushed back her long, blond hair. “Darling, do you really think I would look so fabulous if I couldn't use a mirror? The legends are a mixture of fiction and truth. I can even eat garlic, when I have a craving.”

“Speaking of cravings,” Nestroy said, approaching Rayne, “I have a rather strong one at the moment, for fresh, human blood.”

A healthy dose of adrenalin coursed through Rayne's body. He shoved Victoria at the Count and made a wild dash for the front doors.

He wasn't even halfway across the foyer when he felt himself being lifted into the air and launched backwards.

Rayne heard Victoria scream as he landed on the thick, Oriental rug in the living room.

The impact knocked the wind out of him.

"Nestroy, you lying bastard swine! Leave him alone!"

Before Rayne had a chance to recover, the Count grabbed him by the throat and hauled him to his feet.

"I'm so sorry, my darling," Nestroy said, glancing at Victoria. "I know you've gotten quite fond of your pet, but he knows our secret now."

Rayne gasped for air as the Count tightened his grip. They were standing face-to-face, eye-to-eye. To an outside observer, they would look like equally matched opponents.

Nestroy grinned. He lifted Rayne off the floor with one hand and hurled him at the glass coffee table.

Rayne's weight shattered the thin glass tabletop into a million tiny shards. The pieces cut into his back, stinging him like a swarm of angry bees. He lay on the bloodied floor as limp as a rag doll, dragging air into his lungs, watching helplessly as the Count struggled with Victoria.

Nestroy half-carried her, kicking and screaming, out of the living room, beyond Rayne's line of blurred vision.

The Count would return soon, and Rayne knew he would die. After all the close calls and near misses he'd survived on the job, he was going to be killed by a monster out of a freaking fairy tale.

He almost laughed.

Nestroy was older and stronger. Victoria realized she wouldn't be able to stop him with brute force.

Still, she tried desperately to get away as he dragged her across the foyer – wishing the whole time that she still had the little jeweled dagger strapped to her thigh.

The Count was taking her to the vault room behind the stairs, where the steel walls were twelve inches thick.

The jealous fiend had done his homework.

He laughed, obviously reading her thoughts. “Yes, it should hold you long enough for me to take care of your lover. Of course, I plan to feed off him first. It would be a sin to waste all that precious blood, don't you agree?”

“I'm going to kill you for this.” Victoria tried to kick him between the legs, but he anticipated the move.

“How many times have I heard that threat from you, my love?”

Nestroy forced open the heavy vault door and pushed her roughly inside the small, dark room. She landed in the middle of the cold tile floor, and immediately leapt to her feet.

He slammed the door hard in her face, deliberately jamming it.

Victoria briefly considered allowing herself a good crying binge – for the second time in a year – but her stubborn anger won out.

“Get a grip on yourself, Tori, old gal.”

Her vision was keen, even in the dark. She found the light switch by the door and flipped it on.

“Brilliant.”

She looked around the empty, sterile room. No windows, of course.

Ah, but air ducts? Victoria looked up.

There it was, in the middle of the ten-foot ceiling.

She tied another knot in her satin sash, and, crouching low, sprang straight up into the air, punching open the vent with clenched fists. A few seconds later she was crawling through the narrow, grimy air duct system.

Victoria reached the library next door and pushed out the metal grate. It clattered onto the mammoth oak desk below.

She quickly followed it, headfirst, and did a handspring onto the thick carpeting.

She tore open the library door and sprinted back to the living room at preternatural speed.

Nestroy was standing across from the east windows, holding Rayne from behind. The detective's feeble struggling seemed to amuse the Count. He bared his fangs and lowered his head, just as Victoria swept into the room.

The clock on the fireplace mantle told her it was dawn.

She flew over to the windows and grabbed hold of the blue velvet drapes. Both men stared at her.

"No!" They shouted the word in unison as she yanked down the curtains, revealing a magnificent ocean view – and the large, brilliant sun ball hanging low in the sky.

Nestroy instantly erupted into flames. Rayne fell to the floor as the Count began spinning like a dervish, shrieking at the top of his lungs.

Victoria rolled away from the windows, her right arm on fire. She smothered the flames with the heavy drapes and backed up against the wall, away from the deadly sunlight.

The Count collapsed into a pile of smoldering ashes. The rancid smell of burning flesh permeated the room.

Rayne pulled himself up into a sitting position. “Victoria, are you all right?”

“Of course I am, darling,” she said, smiling. “How are you?”

“Alive, which is better than I expected.”

“I’m so glad. Have you guessed that I’m in love with you?”

“The big rescue just now kind of gave it away.”

She laughed softly. “Come over here, out of the sunlight.”

He stood up slowly and walked over to her, wincing all the way. His lip was cut, his face bruised.

Victoria grabbed his hand and pulled him down. He sat next to her, away from the wall.

“Is your arm going to be okay?” he asked.

“I heal quickly.”

“Because you’re not human.” He shook his head. “I slept with you and I never knew.”

“Most mortals believe only what they want to believe. They ignore all the evidence.”

“I’m a cop, for God’s sake. I can’t be with someone who goes around killing people.”

“Those people tried to hurt me first, Rayne.”

“I’m sorry sweetheart, but that doesn’t make everything hunky-dory.”

“What will? What can I do to convince you we have a chance together?”

“Take away my memory?” He struggled to his feet. “I don’t think I can get past what you are – what you’ll always be.”

Victoria looked up at him with pleading eyes. “Are you sure your feelings will never change? You’ll never be able to accept me the way I am?”

“I’m crazy about you, but you’re a man’s worst nightmare.” Rayne turned away from her with a sigh. “Nestroy was right. It would never work out between us.”

Nestroy was right.

The realization hit Victoria like a thunderbolt, and she had to smile.

The Count hadn't given her a choice because he was lonely and desperate for a companion – just like she was now.

A split second later, Rayne was on the floor and she was straddled across him, holding him down.

The expression in his eyes was one of stunned disbelief.

“Don't look at me like that, darling,” Victoria said. “I'm going to take away your pain, make everything hunky-dory.” She licked the blood off the corner of his mouth. “Soon, you'll be a woman's worst nightmare.”