

## Drop Dead Sexy – Chapter 1

I sobbed, staring at the Southern yellow pine woods that surrounded me. My head whipped this way and that. Only lines of gray-barked trunks, topped by evergreen needles, greeted my wide-eyed gaze. The nightmare had begun again.

The daytime terror possessed me this time. My nightmare's sunlit version was infinitely better than my woods-at-night dream. Nothing stalked me while the sun shone down. Still, heaviness bore down on me, letting me know terrible things had happened here. Things so horrible, it coated the atmosphere like an August afternoon's humidity.

Nothing hinted at the dread that filled the hushed woods. The dry pine needles beneath my shoeless silk-stockinged feet were a carpet, layered thickly over the ground. Nearby, a humped, rumbled splash of teal fabric lay in a drift of the brown needles and pine cones.

I wouldn't look at *that*. I couldn't look at it. My eyes skittered over the bright scream of color, refusing to focus.

The early spring air was warm, just starting to hint at the muggy, breath-choking humidity that would descend over southeast Georgia within a few weeks. The pine trees marched in neat, unnatural rows. I stood in the middle of one of the many tree farms that served the nearby pulp mill in Fulton Falls, where I lived. The sun hung golden in a powder-blue sky, peeking between gray-brown branches.

It was as peaceful a scene as you might imagine, far from the terror of the nighttime version of my dream. When the sky turned velvet black, something darted through the trees nearby, growling and searching. I had the ugly feeling it looked for me. I always tried to make myself small and invisible in those sleeping fantasies, because if the unseen something caught me I would be in a world of hurt. I knew that as sure as I knew my own name.

For these hours of light, I cringed from nothing beneath the pines. Alone, without that cold, brutal presence haunting the woods. This place still scared the heck out of me. Sure it was only a dream, but that didn't change the sick, watery feeling in my stomach. God, I so wanted to wake up.

"Hello," said a quiet voice behind me.

I jumped a clear mile. A high, thin scream streamed from my lips. The stalking thing that filled my after-dark nightmares was here after all, and it had found me at last. I whirled to see what shape my doom would take.

I don't know what I expected to see waiting to gobble me up with pointed dagger teeth, but it sure wasn't this smiling dark-haired man wearing a nice button-down shirt and pressed slacks. He didn't have sharp teeth. Or claws. No, he looked nicely normal.

Okay, he looked a little better than nicely normal. Clean-cut with a little bit of a five o'clock shadow on his ruggedly handsome face. And I do mean ruggedly handsome as in the stereotyped Marlboro Man sense. This guy was not a pretty boy, what Yankees probably referred to as 'metrosexual'. He was a manly man with a capital MAN. Strong jawed. Wide browed. Sharp chocolate brown eyes with creases in the corners. More light creases in his forehead and around his mouth told me he was no wet-behind-the-ears youngster. Late thirties, early forties, perhaps? Yummilicious, in a word.

It didn't end with the face either. Oh no, Mr. Rugged was the whole package from top to toe. He wasn't tall, maybe only five inches higher than me, but that suited me fine. He'd still be taller when I wore heels. His wide chest tapered to a trim waist. Thick thighs pressed the

boundaries of his slacks. Shoulders to die for started arms I would just love to be scooped up and carried away in. He possessed a body that did hard work and could work a girl hard.

From terrified to turned on in a couple of heartbeats. Yeah, I liked my dream plenty just about now.

But even in dreams, a lady doesn't jump on a solid piece of walking sexual real estate. Introductions are a must. "Who are you?" I asked.

His deep voice was gentle, a muffled bark of sorts. "I'm here to help you. You seemed very upset when I got here."

Oh glory, my subconscious served up gentlemen today. And I am very good in the Damsel in Distress role. It happens to be several of my clients' favorite.

Sniffing decorously, wiping at the real tears I'd cried only moments before, I said, "I don't know what I'm doing here. Tell me it's just a bad dream."

Marlboro Man winced, his eyes closing in seeming pain for an instant. He looked at me again and stepped closer, near enough to touch. I had a hard time not running my hands over those muscular shoulders or the chiseled chest I knew hid behind that very professional white shirt. I was like a kid at the dessert bar, and he was the buffet.

"My name is Dan," he said.

Okay, it wasn't Bruce or Lars or Travis or anything super macho sounding, but Dan was not a bad name. It wasn't a sissy name at least; I swear if I meet one more Brent or Chip in this town I'll scream. "I'm Brandilynn," I said.

He took my hand. Smiled. "You're very pretty, Brandilynn. I'd like to help you."

*And I'd like to help myself to you. A big ol' heaping helping of Mr. Dan the Marlboro Man.* And why not? Dreaming meant the barriers had fallen. No harm, no foul when it came to nocturnal fantasies.

"Will you hold me? This nightmare is usually very scary." I gave him wide, helpless eyes.

He hesitated. How sweet, he really was a gentleman. Taking the lead, I stepped close enough that the fronts of our bodies touched. The softness of my breasts brushed his chest. There's something to be said about being close to each other in height. It makes all the good parts touch.

Dan's arms closed around me. I moved nearer, snuggling tight against his very nice body. His groin pressed hard against me, letting me know of his intense interest. My arms circled his neck, and I nibbled on his chin. His face inclined to mine, and he took my mouth with his. Dan didn't commit the sin of a tentative embrace. He gave me one of those good, strong kisses I prefer, like it was his right to claim what he wished from me.

Well, of course he kissed me the way I wanted. It was my dream, after all.

When our lips parted I asked, "What would you like?"

His grip on me loosened, and he took a half step away. "Do you remember how you got here, Brandilynn?"

Oh pooh, what was with the serious conversation? I wanted him to shut up and kiss me again. Then again, whiny girls do not get the guy. I made myself not pout at the delay. "I must have gotten lost. I never go in the woods, except in these stupid nightmares." I snuggled close to him again, wanting to feel more of this dream lover before I woke up. "I'm glad you found me."

Heavy footfalls sounded behind me, and I turned to see figures moving towards us. Crap. The dream was taking another turn and I had a feeling my sexy man and I weren't going to have

fun after all. Oh well. Sex came easily in my line of work. Too bad none of my real-life regulars resembled Dream Dan.

His arms tightened around me. “Brandilynn, you’re about to hear some bad stuff. No matter what happens, try to not be afraid. It’s going to be okay, and I’ll be right here the whole time to take care of you.”

The tone of his voice made me scared once more. Yeah, despite the iron bands of his arms around me, this fantasy was definitely going downhill again.

The footsteps came ever closer, and I peered through the line of trees to see who interrupted my wet dream.

I recognized one of the approaching men right away as Sheriff Grayson, head of Ford County’s law enforcement. I’d never met him, but as the county and Fulton Falls grow, so do their problems. Burgeoning drug crimes, the local shapeshifter biker gang, and of course the ongoing serial killings kept the sheriff’s weathered face on the local news.

Grayson looked like the good ol’ boy he was, his ample belly held up by a thick belt. You’d be a fool to think him soft, however. His arms were big slabs of muscle that had slammed many a felon against various surfaces: the hoods of cars, building walls, asphalt roads. You didn’t cut smart with Grayson. He didn’t play.

His blue eyes could be soft with compassion as he patted a new widow’s arm or steely with intent when facing a suspect. An equal number of laugh and frown lines bracketed his mouth, and his eyes nested in a cobweb of deep wrinkles. His skin was like old tanned leather.

He played Santa for the special education pre-k school at their annual Christmas party. He bought presents for each and every child out of his own pocket. This year there had been over one hundred.

Grayson also showed up at the state legislature every time the death penalty threatened to be overturned, arguing not only to keep it in place but to cut the appeals process in half. To paraphrase comedian Ron White, the sheriff wanted to put an express lane in Death Row. He didn’t believe in giving killers a second chance to murder again.

A young slip of a man followed in the sheriff’s wake, so unremarkable in appearance that my gaze slid right over him. A brief impression of mouse brown hair and a beak of a nose entered my conscience before I took in the two women in their company.

One was tall and lean, her frame boyish. Her short chestnut hair and lack of makeup reinforced the slightly masculine appearance. In her polo shirt, jeans and sneakers, she dressed right for a walk in the woods. She walked with her head down, her attitude one of rapt attention, as if searching for something. Her eyes shifted from side to side, scanning the path before her.

*If she lost a ring in this pine straw, she’s pretty much out of luck.*

The other woman couldn’t have been more her opposite. She too wore jeans and sneaks, but her rayon pink shirt had ruffles at the neckline, and she’d overdone the big jewelry with chandelier earrings, four gold necklaces, chunky bracelets on each arm and rings on every finger. Soft and round, she was a cuddly looking gal. She’d bleached her hair within an inch of its life. The platinum locks hung in improbable Shirley Temple curls. Her makeup was garish and loud: blue eyeshadow, thick black eyeliner, screaming fire engine red lipstick. Her powder caked in her many laugh lines. Her too-serious expression sat wrong on a naturally jolly face.

I wanted to rush up to her, give her a hug, wash her face and take her clothes shopping. That cheap blouse did nothing for her apple figure.

The walking fashion disaster suddenly stopped and closed her eyes. “She’s near. Dan’s with her. Oh, the poor girl.”

I frowned at Dan. "Is she talking about me?"

He nodded. "Lana's a psychic. She can sense you, but no one else can. The other woman, Taylor, is a clairvoyant. She's trying to find your ..."

He stopped and reconsidered what he was going to say. "She's trying to find you," he finally finished.

What a weird dream.

Sheriff Grayson halted, his big hands touching the two women's shoulders. They stopped too. The deputy goggled over their shoulders.

Grayson pointed at the pile of teal my eyes refused to settle on. "You found her, bless her soul. Stay back, ladies. Come on Buck, let's have a look at her before we tape it off and call in the big boys."

The two officers walked over to the splash of color, Grayson stepping heavily, the deputy almost prancing with nervous energy. They halted next to the teal pile and looked down at it. The younger man went very white. Buck staggered away, getting behind a tree before yanking up his last meal. Grayson's mouth drew into a tight line. He shook his head sadly.

"Poor little thing."

"Is that a person?" No wonder I didn't want to look at it. My subconscious had known it was a dead body. I inched a little closer, fascinated despite myself. Buck the deputy still leaned up against the tree, though he'd stopped barfing. I didn't want to see the corpse's face, but curiosity got the better of me.

The splash of teal was a dress. It had gold and burgundy trim, the skirt ruffled up to the black-stockinged knees of the dead woman. "Hey, I have a dress that looks like that," I told Dan.

"I know," he said softly. "You're wearing it."

I looked down at myself. Darn if I wasn't wearing that dress, a favorite of mine. I'd gotten it on sale, marked down from \$150 to just 40 bucks. Lucky me. The matching jacket, like my shoes, was missing.

Lana whispered loudly to Taylor. "She doesn't know."

Something in the psychic's voice gave me a jolt of alarm. I suddenly needed to see the dead woman lying on the ground. I had to see her face after all. I started towards Sheriff Grayson.

Dan grabbed me and pulled me close. "You don't want to do that, baby girl."

"Why not? You said they can't see me. I won't get in trouble."

"They can't see your spirit." He nodded at the body. "You've probably been out here several days, Brandilynn. It's been warm and raining. They're just lucky the wild pigs didn't find you yet."

Oh, this dream was so not turning out, not even with Dan the Marlboro Man holding me tight against his broad chest. "You're saying that's me over there? That body is mine?"

Lana pulled a tissue from her pocket and dabbed at her eyes. To Taylor she whispered, "Dan's telling her now. This is not going to be good."

Dan's hand snared my chin, forcing me to look at him. "I'm sorry, sweetheart, but you're dead. The Fulton Falls Ripper got you."

I snorted, ignoring the sick twist in my gut. "This is the nuttiest dream I ever had."

When Dan didn't let me go, when his chocolate eyes remained locked on mine, when his arm tightened almost painfully around my waist, it took all I had to quell the rising panic. I jabbered to hold the terror at bay. "The Ripper only kills prostitutes. I'm an escort. I don't

sleep with all my customers. Shoot, I don't sleep with even ten percent of my customers. I sure as heck don't do vampires. I'm not a whore."

"She thinks she's dreaming."

I jerked my head free of Dan's grip and twisted around to glare at the leaky-eyed Lana. "Would you stop with the play-by-play? Gosh, you're like John Madden over there."

I pushed away from Dan, and he reluctantly let me go. Good thing; it spared him from me punching him in the mouth. Of course, with those rugged good looks, a bloody lip would only enhance his uber-manliness.

I stomped over to body and discovered the woman lay facedown. No way to prove it wasn't me beyond all doubt. Yeah, the dress looked just like the one I wore right now. So what? I'd bought it off the clearance rack last fall. Who knew how many women owned the same dress?

The black hose with the sexy seam up the back were like mine too. Didn't prove a thing. The rumpled skirt hid my favorite garter belt ... or it would have, had it been me. It couldn't be me though, because the body looked thicker than mine. In fact, it pushed hard at the seams of the dress. I worked hard to maintain my size four figure. Of course the body had bloated, but someone my size wouldn't get that big, right?

The woman's terribly frizzed hair matched my shade of copper penny red. I always iron my hair after spraying it into submission with three different smoothing products. Southeast Georgia's humidity plays heck with a girl's tresses. I would never walk out of my apartment with my hair looking like that.

"Sorry, but I don't really see it," I said out loud. "I guess I can understand how you might think it's me, since you don't know me. And even if it was, I can be dead in a dream and it won't matter."

My cheeks tickled something fierce. I rubbed at them, surprised to find wetness on my hands. Why was I crying? It was just a dream. Just a stupid nightmare that had been going on and on for what felt like forever now.

Just a dream.

Dan gathered me in his big, strong arms again from behind. "Let's go, baby girl."

Lana spoke softly. "Go with Dan, sweetie. It's all over now. You're going to be okay."

Taylor added, "Death isn't the end. You'll see."

Dan's breath warmed my ear. "Hold on and don't let go. This'll only take a sec."

Suddenly the world around me blurred in the muted earth tones of brown and green and froze in a smear. Then, as if someone had thrown a bucket of multicolored paint over our surroundings, hues of golden sunlight mixed with ivory splashed around me.