

Blood Potion No. 9 – Chapter 1

The creaking of the old wooden stairs and the thumping of many feet warned me I was about to have company. I tucked my book under my arm and went to the mirror on the wall. Its luster had long faded with age but it still reflected well enough to make sure my upswept red hair maintained its pristine style. Yep. I looked pretty swell for a dead gal.

I made my way across Rebecca Sanderson's sitting room past the ornate armchairs. The skirts of my Victorian-era dress whispered across the Oriental rug lying upon the wide planks of the hardwood floor. Rebecca herself was long gone, not having become a ghost upon her demise as a tottering old lady. I often wondered what happened to the others not locked into Earth-bound existences. I wondered why I hadn't gone where they had, why I was still stuck here.

My name is Brandilynn Payson. I was murdered earlier this year by a vampire serial killer who had issues with women of questionable morals. But that's another story.

I sat down on the tufted sofa with carved wood trim and arranged myself just so. Fresh flowers graced the table in front of me, right next to the silver tea service. Their lovely fragrance still couldn't mask the mustiness of age that comes with old houses and their furniture. It doesn't matter how much you clean and air out an older place; it still somehow carries that scent of years past.

I could hear my visitors near the first room down the hall of the second floor of the historic Sanderson Cottage, located on Goose Creek Island, Georgia. The whole island was once a summer retreat for the ridiculously wealthy, but now it's a state park. All the cottages are still here, though the millionaires are long gone from this beautiful spot: the Vanderbilts, the Pulitzers, the Rockefellers, and the Sandersons themselves. Their winter homes remain, lovingly maintained and receiving their due appreciation from tourists.

I looked over my dress with a critical eye. I'd changed its color and trim no less than a dozen times tonight, and I thought it looked pretty good. Ruffles at my neck, wrists and the hem. Emerald green to match my eyes and flatter my porcelain skin. Darker forest green details. Even the lace-up boots matched, though I kept them hidden under the sweeping skirt. I hate my size 9 ½ feet.

No corset, of course. I'd died a size 4, working out and counting every calorie to maintain my figure, which my income hinged upon. Appearances were everything in the world I'd lived in. One of the nice things about being dead is never having to climb on an elliptical machine again.

I closed my eyes and felt for the earth's natural magnetic pulse. Sanderson Cottage sits a few yards from Goose Creek itself, a little stretch of water coming from the intracoastal waterway. Water is also a marvelous energy conductor, and I drew on the power it created. It fed my non-existent body, making me tingle at my fingertips and toes. I was almost ready.

Steps approached from down the hallway. A velvet cord in the open doorway kept the tourists out of the late Rebecca's sitting room, allowing them to admire from afar the fine antique furnishings the Sandersons had used when they were new. As the small group, no more than ten persons at a time, drew near I opened the book I held as if reading it while still drawing energy. It was the latest collection of sonnets by the Bard himself, who still creates beautiful tapestries of words after all this time.

One more gulp of energy, and I was ready. I opened my eyes and pretended to read my book as the tour guide and her entourage reached the doorway.

The tour guide, a self-assured woman of about forty and still tan despite our being only two weeks from Halloween, had a clear voice with enough Southern twang to charm, but not enough of one for Yankees to make fun of. She sounded genteel, not redneck-y.

“This next room was Rebecca Sanderson’s sitting room. The silver tea service was a gift to the family from President Cleveland.”

A woman interrupted the guide’s spiel. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that her blond hair was going frizzy from our notorious southeast Georgia humidity. We were currently having a hot spell, a last visit from the past summer as so often happens in October.

“Did the re-enactor’s dress come from Mrs. Sanderson or is it just a costume? It’s beautiful.”

The tour guide, Bethany was her name, looked at the woman with well-played confusion. “We don’t use re-enactors.”

I chose that moment to stand and leave the room via a connecting door to the small lavatory that no tourist saw. The extra power I’d drawn bled away a little at a time, and I knew I faded from sight a few steps from the washroom. I was rewarded by the gasps of the onlookers. I couldn’t help but grin as I listened to the excited chatter. Another stellar performance.

They’d seen a real ghost all right, but not Rebecca Sanderson’s. I wondered if they’d be as excited to know they’d actually sighted a murdered escort. I’d been one of over two dozen victims of the Fulton Falls Ripper, now dead himself and unlamented.

Another aged mirror greeted me in the not-so-well conserved bathroom (after all, who wants to look at the toilet Rebecca Sanderson once squatted on?). I played with my hair, smoothing my palm over the smooth parts, curling my finger around the curly parts. Bethany finished her spiel about Rebecca’s sitting room to the now breathless tourists, and they moved on, no doubt hoping to see another spirit roaming around. Sorry folks, I was the only one, and I’d been hired to do it. Sightseers love a haunted house, and they paid good money to catch a glimpse of a ghost. We’re hard to see.

A familiar voice spoke cautiously from the sitting room entrance, one that was thick with a down home accent. “Brandilynn?”

I tripped out of the bathroom, happy to see Lana Minchew. She was a round apple of a woman, heavy handed with her makeup, a terrible dresser, but an absolute sweetheart of a gal. She was also psychic, and one of the few living persons who could sense my presence and hear me.

She wasn’t alone. Taylor Allen, a clairvoyant, and Taylor’s girlfriend Patricia Keith were also on the other side of the velvet rope. The trio of women made a very unlikely looking group. In contrast to cuddly, lumpy Lana, resplendent this evening in a ruffled orange polyester blouse and black leggings – no doubt in honor of quickly approaching Halloween – Taylor was no-nonsense casual with her short brown hair and slender body clad in a polo shirt and khaki slacks.

Then there was Patricia. Imagine a young Katherine Hepburn, circa 1930, with sleek shoulder-length black hair, cool and elegant in a silk button-down blouse and pleated slacks, the creases precisely where they should be. That’s Patricia.

Oh yeah, add her lily-white skin and almost black eyes which went red-rimmed when she removed her glamour. Along with the fangs that appeared when she wanted you to be afraid. She’s a vampire.

I was delighted to see them. “Hey, girls. I didn’t know y’all were coming on the tour.”

Only Lana could hear me, of course. “Brandilynn says hi,” she told the other two. She turned back to me, looking slightly to the right of where I stood. “Actually, we just tagged along with the group because we needed to speak to you. Very nice job, by the way.”

Patricia nodded, her smile doing little to soften the predatory cast of her expression. Vampires always look like they’re on the hunt for something to suck the blood out of. If you can look at one without a shiver going down your spine, you’re a better woman than me.

Her voice was as chilling as a February midnight. “The dress is wonderful. Becky didn’t have anything with that many ruffles, but she would have loved it if she had.”

Back when Patricia had been alive-alive and not undead-alive, she’d worked for the Sandersons as Rebecca’s secretary. She’d spent many winters in this cottage and loved it as one might a childhood home. Until this past spring, she’d used the grounds as her body’s daytime resting place. A skirmish with other paranormals had necessitated her to hide her coffin elsewhere.

I like Patricia a lot during the daytime when she’s a ghost like me. She’s loyal to a fault and a great friend to have. As a vampire . . . well, I’m not a huge fan of vampires. Even now that I’m dead and don’t have to worry about them sucking me dry, they still give me the willies. I have to give Taylor all the credit in the world for her courage in having Patricia as a significant other.

Getting a compliment from Patricia-as-a-vampire was a gold star day. I burbled happily from the unexpected praise. “I probably should have stuck with historically accurate, but I can never leave well enough alone.”

Lana smiled, her hot-pink lipstick clashing horribly with her orange blouse. One of these days I’m going to make her go shopping with me after I wrest full veto power over her wardrobe and makeup choices. “You looked stunning, sweetie. We’re sorry to interrupt your fun, but Tristan would like you to go to the King George immediately.”

My heart jumped with equal parts delight and nervousness. Tristan is Patricia’s older brother, my sweetie, and the head honcho of Fulton Falls’ vampire clutch. To say my feelings for him are complicated would be putting it lightly.

That he wanted my presence at night when he can’t see me told me something was not going well. “What’s up?” Then I had a bad thought. “Is Dan okay?”

Lana’s jolly expression never faltered, always a good sign. “Everything is fine. Tristan just needs you to run an important errand for him.”

Taylor frowned slightly. She always seemed so serious. “I’d hardly call it an errand.”

Patricia touched her shoulder gently. Her fangs glimmered into view against her lower lip for an instant, a sure sign she was either thinking blood or sex. Probably both. Yikes. Her tone held a warning. “We’ll let him bring Brandilynn up to speed. It will save time. Will you join him right away, Brandilynn?”

“Sure. I showed up as Rebecca three times here this evening already. That should boost the haunted tour’s value.”

Lana nodded to the other two women. “She said she would. Brandilynn, Isabella is waiting for you with Tristan.”

I sighed. I really hated being channeled by the living, but it was the only way to communicate with them without having Lana around to interpret for me. “Okay. I’ll see you all later.”

Time to materialize at Para Central, where Tristan conducted business when he wasn’t downtown at the county commission offices. The refined surroundings of Rebecca Sanderson’s

sitting room smeared into a haze of lantern-lit colors for an instant before a paintbucket wash of gold and burgundy replaced it.

I appeared on the raised bandstand of the old King George Hotel's ballroom. Well, I would have appeared if there'd been any other ghosts to see me. But no, it was all the living and the undead here in Para Central.

In its heyday, the King George Hotel had been the crown jewel of Fulton Falls, Georgia, which lies opposite the intracoastal from Goose Creek Island. The Big Fire of '36 had destroyed the hotel, along with most of downtown. The current Fulton Falls was built on top of the old, leaving ruined structures crumbling in decay beneath the world of the living.

Some of the more well-loved structures have their own afterlife, showing up to the dead in all their pre-fire glory. The old First Baptist Church, the original Fulton Falls Library, and the King George Hotel are such buildings.

Ford County Commissioner Tristan Keith, alive back when the King George originally stood, has set about restoring the still intact, though badly damaged, ground floor of the grand old hotel. He works out of here during the night, along with a staff of vampires, shapeshifters, gargoyles and a few supernaturally gifted humans like Lana and Taylor. Most people don't know about this place. Before I died, I had no idea there was a town beneath the town. Now it's home to me and so many of the dead.

I looked around the old ballroom, which was now more office space than a party place. Tristan and Patricia's executive desks sat up on the bandstand. Large chandeliers hung overhead. The parquet wood floor gleamed. Burgundy wallpaper with gold designs dressed the walls. It was a fancy business center for the three rows of utilitarian desks that marched across the room, manned by Tristan's staff. Paras of every type punched commands onto computer keyboards, answered ringing phones, and traded gossip over cups of coffee. Behind me, a giant dry erase board hung on the wall, every spare inch covered with scribbled notations of zoning issues, budget juggling to provide the local police with badly needed new patrol cars, and the bitter fight between the county and the city about the new jail's location. The city wanted it near the courthouses for security's sake, which made sense, but that would put it right on the scenic waterfront near the parks and tourist-friendly downtown, a huge no-no for most of Fulton Falls' residents and the county commission.

The ballroom, or Para Central as I call it, smelled of warm fur and dry reptilian scales. Underneath that was the hint of smoke from the long-ago fire, which was now familiar enough to me to be comforting.

All that made little impact on me right now, because the first nice thing I saw was Gerald leaning against Patricia's desk. He was her bodyguard and a very rare werepanther. Body-builder thick with muscle, this man-beast was absolutely gorgeous. An open denim vest displayed his dark mocha chest covered with subtle black markings to advantage. The fangs that indented his well-formed lower lip were gleaming white. Black-furred triangular ears parted the tight cornrows of braids that hung down his very broad back. Green-gold eyes glowed in the darkness of his handsome face. Gerald was a feast of eye candy, and I was gorging.

It was odd to see him not hovering over Patricia. I couldn't imagine anyone getting the best of her, but being the sister of Fulton Fall's head vampire certainly put her at risk. She must have put her foot down hard for a girls' night out tonight. Gerald looked bored and a bit morose as he perched on the edge of her desk, more like a puppy waiting for her return than a deadly werepanther. I suspected he was sweet on his mistress, a crying shame since she preferred to bat for the home team.

My ruminations over this hot hunk of heaven ended at the sight of Augustus heading towards me. My heart leapt at his approach. He and witches are the only living creatures I know of who can see me.

His voice was the sole unattractive thing about him. A squawking shriek, he'll never be a contestant on American Idol. But his words were poetic once you figured out what he was saying. Beaks don't form words nearly as good as lips.

What I heard him say was, "Belubbed sabing grabes, bishun ub dordured byoodee." What he actually uttered in that shrill voice to greet me was "Beloved saving grace, vision of tortured beauty."

I wrapped my arms around his neck in a heartfelt embrace as I tried to interpret his words. As usual, I wasn't quite sure how much was compliment and how much was prophecy. Augustus is an oracle and usually talks in riddles. I debated how to take his characterization of me as a 'tortured beauty'. Griffins, half-lion and half-eagle, are hard to understand, even when you get past their inability to pronounce letters like V and F.

A majestic creature, even on all fours he comes up to my chin. I spoke into the softness of the feathers that covered his eagle's head. "Hi, Augustus. Having a good night?"

His rigid beak allowed no smile, but I sensed contentment from him just the same. "The cool air was swift against face and wing. I am invigorated by the briskness of harvest time."

"You've been flying. I wish I could fly too. You make it sound so wonderful."

A cold, elegant voice flowed over my ears, bringing a thrill of fear along with desire. "I take it you're talking to Brandilynn and not yourself, old friend?"

I straightened and looked at my boyfriend. Well, the vampire aspect of my boyfriend. I love Tristan Keith with all my heart during the day when his body is dead and he's a plain old ghost. But when he's a vampire, all sharp with hunger, I'm a little freaked out.

Okay, I'm a lot freaked out. Vampires are scary.

He's gorgeous whether man or vamp. Tristan has hair as black as night, cut short in an elegant 1920's 'do. Already handsome, the predatory aspect of his fanged self lends dangerous charm to his well-formed features. If GQ ever wanted to put a vampire on their cover, Tristan should be at the top of the list. He dresses well in custom-made suits that flatter his lean muscled frame. Tristan has never had to drink pouched or bottled blood. The groupies line up for him.

A small, well-padded Hispanic woman stood behind him. She looks like the best mom in the neighborhood, the one whose house all the kids gather at for milk and cookies. I thought she might be somewhere in her forties, but she's got one of those ageless faces where it's hard to tell. She might have been anywhere from 35 to 60. She radiates kindness.

She sat down in a leather chair in front of his desk. "I will prepare myself."

This was Isabella, my channel. I sighed. I like Isabella, but I don't like using her body. It's weird and uncomfortable. When I'm inside her, I see both the real world and the spirit world, which can play hell on my equilibrium. Fortunately, Para Central is the same in both realms. As long as we didn't go for a walk anywhere, I wouldn't be too off-kilter.

I watched her close her eyes. It didn't take long for her body to relax completely and the light lines in her face to smooth out. She's a pro at this. I went to her and sat down on top, as if to give her my Christmas list. Instead of landing on Isabella's lap, I ended up inside her. The heaviness of a corporeal body settled over me like a suffocating blanket. I felt a twinge of her in the back of our shared mind, but she was very quiet. When Isabella is channeling, she's unaware of what's going on. Lucky her.

I opened her eyes and looked up at the black-eyed vampire looming over me. "I'm here."

He smiled, a little human warmth creeping into his pale face. “How is your haunting of Sanderson Cottage going?”

It was at his request that I’d been giving Halloween thrills to tourists at his former employer’s home. My payment for being all spooky was staving off boredom. Being dead gives you a lot of time on your hands.

I told him, “It’s fun. Patricia liked my dress. What’s up?”

“I need you to replace Dan for a little while spying on the Beasts.”

Oh, this definitely sounded interesting. One of Tristan’s campaign promises at the last election was to clean up Fulton Falls’ crime problems, and the Beasts Motorcycle Club was at the top of his list. Composed of violent were-critters, the Beasts were suspected of everything from blackmail to murder. As organized as any crime syndicate, the Beasts had chapters all over North America, Asia, and Europe. Even little ol’ Fulton Falls has a group of about three dozen getting up to heaven knows what.

My other boyfriend, Dan Saling, had been spying on the Beasts for weeks now on Tristan’s behalf. Dan is like me, a full time ghost. As to why I have two boyfriends ... well, that’s a Brandilynn-inspired mess. Neither man is thrilled about sharing me, but they’re putting up with it. For now.

First things first. Playing spy sounded fun, especially since weres can’t see ghosts. No real danger there. “Sure. What am I doing?”

“Just keep your ears and eyes out for anything unsavory.”

“By unsavory, you mean illegal?”

Tristan’s eyes narrowed. His fists clenched and opened, clenched and opened. Good heavens, what had his dander up tonight? “The leader of the Beasts is very careful, even among his own people. Only his closest lieutenants know anything about what his exact undertakings involve. The majority of the group is mainly concerned with collecting protection money, beating up others, murder, the smaller time stuff.”

I raised my eyebrows at him. “Murder is small time?”

He scowled. “For this group, I’m afraid so. Gerald, will you fill Brandilynn in?”

I stared at Tristan. He was on edge tonight, his usually cultured voice snapping words like whips.

Before I could call him on it, tall, dark and purrfect (hey, I never claimed to be funny) stepped forward. As if the werepanther wasn’t sexy enough, Gerald’s deep rolling voice sealed the deal. Cool and smooth, it was the kind of voice you’d want to rub all over your naked body.

He smiled, his catman face wearing it well. I realized I rarely saw this hired muscle smile. “Hi Brandilynn.”

“Hi Gerald. You doing okay?”

“Just fine, thanks.” His ears twitched this way and that, forever patrolling for trouble. His nose, hinting at the triangular shape of the big cat he turned into on occasion, flared as he tested the air, as if he tried to scent me on Isabella’s body. “Here’s the lowdown on the Beasts. They’re organized crime, pure and simple. Human trafficking, drug and arms smuggling, contracted killings ... you name it, they do it. They swear loyalty to their organization above all else. Once a part of the Beasts, no one leaves, not alive anyway.”

I couldn’t help myself, not even in Isabella’s body. I batted my eyes a little and made her voice high, light and happy. Flirt should have been my middle name. “What a lovely sounding bunch.”

He went down on one knee in front of me, like he was going to propose. Of course he was only being polite; he knows full well it's hard for a spirit to move around in a channel's body. That's why I stayed sitting, and he was doing me the kindness of sinking his six feet plus frame down to where I wasn't breaking Isabella's neck to look him in the face. But boy, it made my heart go pitty-pat to have such a handsome man at my feet.

Steady girl, I reminded myself. *You've already got one boyfriend too many, and Gerald is head over tail about Patricia.*

He eyed me seriously. "What you're going to see, it's going to be plenty ugly. I want you to be prepared. The Beasts' women are all human and regarded as property if not outright slaves. It's nothing to the shifters to slap 'em around or make them do—" here he paused and took a deep breath, "—acts of a personal nature in front of others."

Okay. Message received. Eww and gross. I don't mind watching people put on a show, but it has to be consensual. I had the feeling what Gerald described wasn't always that way.

Tristan stepped closer, his hand briefly touching on Gerald's shoulder. Dismissed, the werepanther gave me another rare smile, rose, and went back to leaning gorgeously on the desk.

Tristan said, "The Beasts themselves are all werereatures, mostly alligators and feral hogs. Besides the women, there's only one non-shifter in the group. He's a witch. Every chapter of the Beasts has one to keep their club warded."

Oops. The danger factor just went up a millionfold. "He'll be able to see me." All witches have second sight that allows them to see the dead. I'd run afoul of a particularly nasty one a few months back.

From his oak perch, Gerald rumbled, "You'll have to hide when he's around. This guy is a really good witch and really bad news."

Tristan nodded and patted my shoulder. "Dan can catch you up when you get to the club. Do you know where it is?"

Everyone knew where the Beasts club was. The black-painted concrete building stuck out amongst the small cottage-style homes that lined the same road. "Yeah, it's right off Blount Highway."

A smile warmed Tristan's sharp expression. "Try not to go off course."

Sheesh. No one would let me live down my many miscalculations in transporting from one place to another when I'd first become a ghost. I scowled at Tristan. "Ha ha. I haven't landed in the wrong place in two months, thank you very much."

He went all businesslike again. When Tristan is a vampire, we have more of an employer-employee type of relationship. It bears little resemblance to the hot and heavy stuff we do during daylight hours. Not that I'd want him that way while he was a vampire. Shudder.

"Have Dan get here as soon as possible. Be careful."

Sometimes he gets paternal on me, which I don't appreciate at all. Never mind he's got a good sixty-five years of existence over me. I am a grown woman. "Hey, this is me you're talking too."

Tristan snorted. "In that case, be very careful." He motioned to someone behind me, and a lovely brunette female vampire, perpetually in her mid-twenties until a stake or the sun found her, stepped up to us. "Wendy, would you call Jason and tell him I need him to channel Dan within the hour?"

She gave him a quick nod and had a cell phone to her ear before a second could click by. Isabella doesn't channel male ghosts. Way too intimate.

I'd seen Wendy around before, but she usually sat at a desk. "Did you give Penny the night off?" I asked Tristan.

Tristan stared at me long and hard, and I realized his extra vampiressness this evening had not as much to do with me as I'd initially suspected. "Penny suffered her final death early this evening."

My mouth dropped. I hadn't been close to Penny, but she'd been Tristan's aide the entire time ... seven months ... I'd known him. A newer vamp, she'd had the bad taste to wear black, not at all flattering against her bluish-white skin. She'd been a secretary in life, and her skills as an aide were second to none.

No one knows what happens to vampires when they are dead for real and for good. They never return as ghosts. They just disappear.

"What happened?" I asked, my voice hushed with respectful shock.

Tristan's lips narrowed and his fangs glimmered into view for an instant. He kept most of his calm, but that little slip told me how furious he was. "She drank tainted blood. It's Fulton Falls' third such death in the last year. That's why I need Dan off the Beasts and on this matter."

Most vampires didn't get live donors like someone with Tristan's clout did. They were forced to drink the pouched stuff you could pick up at any grocery or convenience store. Lately the more expensive Blood Potion No. 9, sold in slim black bottles dressed with fancy gold labels, had been flying off the shelves because dragons' blood was somehow getting into the cheaper stuff. Dragon's blood is lethal to vampires. A single drop, hard to detect in an eight-ounce pouch full of human blood, will eat up a vampire from the inside like acid. The tampering was claiming vampire lives all over the southeastern United States. Officials couldn't track it down, and despite close inspections of all the packaging plants, bad blood was still getting out.

I usually don't like to touch Tristan when he's a vampire, but I knew this was messing with his head bad. I took one of his cold hands in mine. "I'm sorry, Tristan."

He nodded. "She was a good assistant. I've ordered a shipment of Blood Potion for all my clutch until the matter of the tampered pouches gets resolved."

"That's good."

"But for Penny, it's too little, too late." Again his fangs appeared, along with a red rim around his black eyes. I sat very still, like a hiding rabbit waiting for an eagle to pass overhead. Tristan would never hurt Isabella's body. He had too much control.

But accidents happen around enraged vampires. There are graveyards full of drained humans to attest to that.

In the space of a breath, Tristan was cool and collected as ever. His voice smooth as butter, he said, "If nothing important happens at the Beasts' club, I'll see you at daybreak?"

I smiled, proud I'd kept Isabella's body from trembling. "Sure."

He turned away, and I gave Gerald a little wave before exiting Isabella. Free and light as air again, I ran to Augustus to give him a hug and a peck on top of his feathered head. As far as I know, I'm the only person the grand ancient allows to have such liberties, and I take full advantage.

"My adored child will break hearts; her own and others," he intoned, one paw curling about my waist. "But keep yourself from harm, for your existence ensures mine."

That's Augustus for you. Enigmatic as can be. I've gotten to where I hardly listen to his words; it's the warmth in his voice that matters to me.

I took off for the Beasts Motorcycle Club in high spirits. I felt a little bad that anticipation so easily replaced my shock at Penny's second death even though I hadn't known

her that well. But she was gone, bless her poor heart. I couldn't help her, so I looked forward to having something exciting to do.

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I materialized in a sea of black-and-chrome, surrounded by motorcycles parked in front of the Beasts club. The scent of exhaust mixed uneasily with the rotting vegetation aroma of the nearby marsh and the rotten-egg funk of Fulton Falls' pulp mill. The thick bass heartbeat of heavy metal music, punctuated by yells and laughter, issued from the building. A couple of security lights and the orange-yellow gleam of the streetlight behind me clearly showed the white designs painted over the black background of the painted windows. On the left one was the head of a snarling tusked feral hog. No Halloween mask ever looked more ferocious. The right window's design was a hand giving the old single-finger salute. Charming, especially when you considered the building sat right off Blount Highway, where heavy traffic ensured plenty of small children would be driven by. The continuous wash of passing headlights proved my point.

It sure looked like a good place for poltergeist play, the kind of mischievous spirit activity that might include lobbing rocks through the glass. Maybe if it happened often enough, these fools would cease and desist in painting such rude pictures.

Then again, they might sic their witch on me. Not a pleasant idea.

A rough voice, grumbly and warm, spoke up behind me. "You're a bit overdressed for this party, baby girl."

I turned, only now realizing I still wore my sweet confection of an early 1900's dress. As Dan slid into view, I got all warm and tingly. My second boyfriend was as handsome as Tristan, though they looked nothing alike. For those of you old enough to remember the Marlboro Man cigarette ads, you'll have a pretty good idea of the rugged deliciousness that is Dan Saling.

Unruly brown hair, chocolate brown eyes, a strong jaw, and face weathered to robust perfection made me feel all gooey inside. Despite looking fit as a fiddle, Dan had died young in his late thirties of a heart attack. He looks good. He feels even better. And he puts up with a lot of doo-doo from me.

I grinned, thrilled to see him. His assignment spying on the Beasts had kept us apart for days at a time, probably no accident since Tristan wants me all to himself. Then again, when Dan gets the chance, he keeps me from Tristan too. It might have been fun being fought over by two hunkalicious men had I not loved them both so much and hated to see them hurt. But I have issues with being tied to just one man. Boy, do I have issues.

"You don't like my dress?" I pretended to pout.

"I love it. It's just a bit much to hang out with this bunch."

"Well, let me tone it down then." With a thought, the dress and boots disappeared, leaving me in my birthday suit.

Behind the concealment of his khaki trousers, I saw Dan salute me in a much better fashion than the painted hand on the building behind me. "Oh baby, you just found yourself a whole heapa trouble."

His clothes disappeared too, and he marched right up to me, his divine divining rod leading the way. Dan yanked me close for a bone-melting kiss, rough with furious passion. I was swept up in the almost animal savagery he displayed as he plundered my mouth with a ruthlessness that made my knees buckle.

Dan broke the kiss, and without so much as a how-do-you-do, seized my upper arm and whirled me around. Then his hand was on the back of my neck, bending me over a black leather motorcycle seat. A flood of oil, gasoline and leather scents washed over me.

Dan's feet nudged mine apart, opening me up. I gasped as he shoved two thick-knuckled fingers in my pussy, thanking my stars that I'd gotten wet the instant I'd laid eyes on him. My big man was eager and demanding, and it made me eager too. I moaned as his fingers dove in and out of me. Ladies, start your engines. He had my motor revving in an instant.

I responded to his uncompromising dominance. I'm submissive when it comes to sex, gladly handing over the reins to Tristan and Dan when hanky-panky gets going. Tristan's an old pro at being a Master, but Dan's polite upbringing left him not exploring his take-charge tendencies until he met me. He's still a little too careful for my tastes sometimes.

This was not one of those times.

His fingers worked me hard, making me shudder all over as he brought my ever-simmering libido to a full boil. Little flashes of ecstasy, so sharp they were almost painful, had me jerking helplessly against the bike he had me pinned to. I wanted more. I wanted that big, thick cock of his that filled me so well.

"Please, Sir," I gasped.

His voice was as growly as any shifter. "That's it. Beg me." His hand moved faster, the liquid sounds we made growing louder. I thought I must be pouring like a rainspout.

My voice had a desperate whine as those lightning pulses of pleasure nudged me close enough to taste bliss but not close enough to gorge. "Please put your cock in me, Sir. Please take me, take me hard."

"That how you want it, baby girl? You want it hard?"

"Yes, Sir. Please." My breath sobbed in and out. My toes dug into the tire-churned ground. I gripped cool metal parts in desperation.

"How hard?"

God, he loved to torture me. But that's a Dom for you. They're not happy until you're pleading at the top of your lungs, completely mindless with need.

"So hard it hurts. As hard as Sir wants me to have him. Please, Sir! I need your cock inside me," I sobbed.

Without another word, his fingers were gone. I felt his hand an instant later, fisting against my slit as he positioned himself for that first thrust. I made myself relax in anticipation. I'd asked for it to be hard. Dan would give me what I wanted with no mercy.

He plunged in, burying himself to the hilt in me with one brutal thrust. I screamed with the excruciating delight of mixed pain and pleasure. And kept screaming as he pounded against me until my body adjusted to him and there was only delight in being ridden violently.

Ecstasy beat through my body, curling my insides tight with tension. Dan had barely started when I began pleading with him. "May I come, Sir? Please, may I come?"

"Not yet," he snarled, his hips making harsh gunshot reports against mine as he drove and drove and drove. "Take that cock, Brandilynn. Take it, baby."

"Oh please, Sir." He was hitting that special place inside, the place that roiled with sensation until I thought I'd explode. "Please, I gotta come."

His palm cracked a buttock, making it sting. The heat of the blow added to the inferno consuming my inner parts. I cried out, my hips thrusting back in invitation.

"You like that, baby? You like me putting you in your place?" Another slap, sending zings of intensity through my flesh.

"Please, Sir." It was all I could do to not climax as his cock worked in and out of me, filling me so completely, rubbing all the good bits with a burning friction that made my hair stand on end. But if I came without permission, I'd be disciplined. And it would be more

punishment than finishment. Tristan was teaching Dan to be a harsh taskmaster, the exact thing a bratty sub like me needed.

But I wanted to come so badly.

“Whose pussy is this?” Dan’s hand on the back of my neck tightened. He gave my bottom another spank.

“Yours, Sir.”

“Does this pussy come without my consent?”

“No, Sir.” At least it shouldn’t. I wasn’t going to hold out much longer, no matter how hard I tried. His cock was rubbing nonstop on that nest of nerves now, and goosebumps broke out over my arms. My insides wound in a tight band, beginning to fray as the tension moved to the breaking point.

“Good girl. You may come now.”

His hand moved around front as he spoke, giving my clit a pinch. I started up screaming again, jerking hard as climax rumbled through my belly, sending ripples into my chest, making my fingers and toes tingle and my hair stand on end. I flailed wildly, Dan’s grip on the back of my neck the only thing that kept me from rocketing straight up into the black velvet sky.

“Nice, baby,” he praised me after I’d settled down a bit. He pulled his cock free of my still trembling slit and repositioned to enter my house through the back door.

Very nice indeed.

Dan pressed in, and I warbled a sigh as my tightest orifice stretched to receive him. He’d given me no foreplay back there, and there was a bit of an ache, but I’m something of a pain slut. With the right mindset, a little bit of discomfort goes a long way for firing up my libido. Right now, being slung over a motorcycle seat, pinned helpless and made to take my man the way he loves it was turning pain into a whole lotta pleasure. It was more intense sensation than hurt.

And despite being in a very macho state of arousal, Dan moved carefully. His slide in was steady but slow. As he made me take his entire length, my legs quaked in reaction. Oh heck, I was going to come again.

“Nice and tight and hot, baby girl,” he said, his deep voice breathy. “I’ve missed this. I’ve missed you.”

Is it any wonder that I love this man?

His strength and rhythm weren’t nearly as violent as when he’d taken my other passage, but with anal pleasure, a little goes a long way. That deeper, almost G-spot sensation of excitement that I get from rear entry was coiling my insides up again. “Sir,” I groaned.

“Getting close again, baby?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“All right then. I’ll tell you when.”

His groin slap-slapped against my buttocks, and he let go of my neck to spread my cheeks apart so he could see our intimate joining. Imagining how it looked from his point of view made my insides tighter still. Is there any more profound way to give yourself to a man? I sure couldn’t think of one, and my thoughts were all twisty-tied with submissive delight as he took me.

Dan moved harder and faster as my body adjusted to the intrusion and softened to his need. His hands closed over my hips, holding me still for his quickening thrusts. Hot, molten eagerness expanded my belly, threatened to rip it open. Throaty moans announced my growing craving for release. Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

“Pretty soon, baby. Nearly there,” Dan gasped.

Sweet yearning suffused my body, fed by the sensation of him filling me to bursting. The rapid tattoo of flesh meeting flesh, the musky scent of our shared excitement, the sloppy wet sounds we made, all that added to the poignant demands of our bodies. A tremor of pure, physical glee shot through my loins. Orgasm was right on top of me, refusing to be denied. Dan's rhythm suddenly went away, replaced by erratic jerks.

"Now, Brandilynn!" he shouted, and I felt his pulse within me.

My climax tore loose from its fractured chains, clawing and tearing through me, ravaging me from the inside. My shriek joined Dan's cries, ringing wildly through the air. We yelled fit to startle the living, feeding on each other's ecstasy as we bucked against one another. Heaven help me, I really do love that man.

Time passed, marked by our gasps which rang out the seconds. In times of extreme emotion, our spirits remember the involuntary functions of our shed physical bodies, and we know again what it feels like to breathe and have our hearts thundering in our chests.

Except for our heaving lungs we were still for a little while, me hanging over a Harley and Dan standing between my legs as the last convulsions of pleasure faded. Even after we grew silent we stayed put, Dan's hand warm on my back as he gently rubbed lax muscles. The nearby traffic lulled me, and had I been capable of dozing off, I would have. Unfortunately, the dead never sleep.

At last, my sweetie pulled free of me. I turned around and perched myself on the motorcycle, sitting on it sidesaddle. Dan clothed his gorgeous self with his usual uniform of khaki pants and a white button-down shirt. I sighed. Some things should never be covered.

He grinned at me, the corners of his eyes creasing pleasantly. He was like a kid who'd cleaned out the cookie jar. A rough, rugged man may not be capable of adorableness, but Dan was making a pretty good try.

"Boy, what got your motor running?" I asked. Now that the sex was over we were back on equal footing, and I could be as demanding as my temperament declares.

He shrugged. "You know I'm always glad to see you."

I stroked my long, loose hair into obedience. The careful updo had disappeared with my dress. "Tristan's going to be cranky. He wanted you to come to him right away. Did you know Penny died again?"

Dan paled and shook his head. "Ah hell – sorry, I mean heck. What happened?"

I smiled to let him know his apology for using profanity around me was accepted. "Tainted blood. Tristan wants you on the case."

He nodded. "The feds haven't done much about the pouch tamperings. Para justice always ends up on the bottom of the funding ladder."

I nodded at the Beasts' lair. "Anything I need to know before stepping into the animal den there?"

Dan's arms went around me, and I snuggled against his chest, wishing he wasn't wearing that darned shirt. "Listen out for anything major like smuggling or planned hits. Report any crimes planned to me or Tristan besides collecting protection money and that kind of small time trash. And keep your head down. They've got a male witch they call Hazel who's in and out of here."

I snorted. "Witch Hazel?"

He chuckled. "They're not very original. Everyone goes by a nickname. Hazel owns the local strip club, which is where he is right now. Avoid him and when possible stay close to the club's leader who goes by 'C.K.' If anything goes down, it's his call." He sighed and released

me, stepping back. “I don’t expect you to find anything. This guy keeps whatever major stuff he’s got happening really quiet. These last few weeks have been one long goose chase.”

“Maybe there’s nothing to them?” I suggested. “All bluster, no real crime?”

“Don’t you believe it for a second. C.K. may be in a small town, but he’s not small time. I can tell.”

Dan had gone to prison, so he has more insight into the criminal mind than most. I let the inference to his jail time slide. He doesn’t like to be reminded that he once committed a crime totally against his nature. “Okay. C.K. isn’t much of a nickname,” I mused.

Dan gave me a non-humorous smile. “It’s short for ‘cop killer’. The Beasts accept he took an officer out early in his career, but nothing’s ever been proven. The guy might not look terribly impressive, but underestimating him is definitely a no-no.”

“Oh yeah? What’s he look like?”

“He’s a werehog. Short and ugly. Just look for the little pig everyone kowtows to.”

I suddenly had a vision of the Big Bad Wolf calling, ‘Little pig, little pig, let me in.’ I knew Dan wanted me to take this seriously, but I couldn’t help but snicker a tiny bit. At his glare, I immediately wiped my expression clear of amusement. “Short, ugly little pig. Got it.”

“Okay. I’d better get going.” He leaned down to give me a kiss.

“See you later.”

“And watch out for the witch.”

I arched an eyebrow at him. “Don’t worry about that. I know how dangerous they are.”

Dan nodded. He knows how careful I am around witches, having been on the wrong end of a wand. Then he was gone.

I was still naked. With no other ghosts or Augustus around to see me it was no big deal, but I decided to get into the spirit of things. I conjured myself a formfitting black leather mini-dress and thigh-high boots. A spike-studded collar joined the ensemble, and I went to the black painted window, the one with the snarling hog, and checked myself out in the reflection aided by the nearby streetlight. I admit I looked more Domme than submissive, but since I wasn’t entering a BDSM club, I figured it would be okay.

I fluffed my hair out to accentuate my high cheekbones, pleased with my appearance. I wished myself some fire-engine red lipstick on my pouty lips, along with smoky eyeshadow. Oh yeah, I was all that and a bag of chips now. The dress fit me like a glove, doing justice to my size 4 figure that I no longer have to fight to keep. I thought I looked pretty hot.

It was time to get to work, and I readied to enter the biker club. Beauty, meet the Beasts.