

A Beating Heart

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A Samhain Publishing Freebie

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I remember the moment my heart stopped beating although I couldn't tell you what happened directly after. But those final thumps resounded in my ears for over a century. Every second of my undead life I remembered what it was like to hear the pounding stop and the blood cease rushing through my veins.

When I first woke up dead, I was possessed of a raging thirst and the helplessness of a newborn child. I didn't know where I was, who or what I was, let alone what I was supposed to do. But I figured it out quickly. The delectable scent of life led me through dark alleys to a drunken man, staggering down an alley. I fell on him, ripped open his throat and drank my fill of his blood. With sustenance came knowledge and immediately I knew what I'd become and that my new purpose on this earth was to feed my insatiable appetite at any cost.

To the young, everlasting life sounds like a remarkable miracle. The old know better. What worse torment could there be than watching the world grow, change, and evolve toward some uncertain goal, while you remain ever in stasis? Loneliness quickly becomes unbearable yet the desire to continue existing prevents a vampire from simply walking into the sunlight or falling on a carefully placed stake. Even in death we choose life.

So I existed with that phantom memory of a heartbeat in my silent ears for year after year, decade upon decade, ever solitary even when I made contact with others of my kind. There is nothing new, no stories to tell or hopes and dreams to share when you're treading water. Ennui can be a vampire's greatest enemy.

Mine had become quite severe by my one hundred and forty-fifth year of existence. It was all I could do to rise from my bed each night to go in search of something to eat. Personal grooming fell by the wayside. I blended in equally well with the cart-pushing homeless or shaggy-haired grad students, although my scent was more pleasant than either since vampires don't sweat.

"Gavin, old boy, you must snap out of this funk," Richmond declared one evening when he came by my place to see if I was up for hunting with him. "You've been wallowing for over a decade and that's quite long enough."

I pulled the blanket tighter around me and turned toward the wall. His upper crust British accent grated like fingernails on chalkboard, especially since I knew he'd been American and turned only about fifty years ago. Who did he think he was impressing with that faux drawl?

"I'm quite serious." He tugged the blanket off me. "You're concentration camp thin. It's very unattractive. Get up off your bed and go out to eat with me."

"Not hungry," I muttered. "Fuck off."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself."

I continued to lie there, listening, until the door shut behind him, and then I finally sat up and threw off the covers. Of course I was ravenous as I'd been every single night since the one I'd been turned. I could no more refuse blood than the moon could refuse to pass through its cycle.

After pulling on a threadbare gray T-shirt with a ripped collar, I gathered my dirty clothes and stuffed them into a duffel for a trip to the Laundromat. Even the undead have to attend to housekeeping on occasion.

I shouldered the bag and trekked the three blocks to the Wash 'n' Wear, nearly empty at one-thirty in the morning. Even the attendant's office was closed. Just me and the machines, an infomercial on the TV perched high on its stand in a corner, and a red-haired girl. I scanned her quickly and thought she might be a suitable dinner partner.

She sat on one of the molded plastic chairs, reading a book and occasionally looking up at the kaleidoscope of colors tumbling past the window of the dryer. She also cast a quick glance at me and smiled.

Something happened inside me, an inexplicable twinge as if a giant hand had taken hold of my heart and given it a punishing squeeze.

The young woman turned her attention back to her book and I concentrated on finding a couple of washing machines that worked. I stuffed the clothes into the machines with egalitarian abandon—no color separating for me—then went to the change machine and tried to make it ingest a crumpled bill. A few tries later and I was cursing under my breath in German my once-native language.

"Need some help?"

I nearly jumped out of my skin as the sweet, fresh voice chimed from beside me. The girl had approached as silently as a cat. Her delicious scent enveloped me, stronger than the reek of cigarette smoke and fabric softener that perfumed the Laundromat.

I turned to face her. Blue eyes as joyous as a carousel spun around me and invited me to ride. I held up my limp five. "It won't, uh, go in."

"Here. Try this one." She offered me a crisp green bill.

I remembered to manufacture breath for her benefit as I accepted it. "Thanks." The machine ate the clean bill happily and spat out a debit card to be used in the machines.

"Where are you from?" she asked. "I heard you speaking in...German, was it, or maybe Dutch? Also, you have a slight accent."

Still? After over a hundred years in this country. I don't think so. "You guessed it. I was originally from Germany but moved here when I was quite young."

She smiled again with blinding brightness and held out her hand. "I'm Serena."

"Gavin." It was the name I was currently using anyway. I took her hand and held it for a moment, simply feeling the lovely rush of blood through her warm flesh.

"Ooh, your hands are cold." Rather than pull away, Serena grasped my other hand and held both, offering her warmth.

I glanced at our joined hands and wondered at her lack of reserve. Hadn't her mother ever taught her the lesson about bad strangers who did things to unsuspecting girls? For that matter, didn't she watch the news?

However, it wasn't my place to teach her that lesson, except perhaps in a very illustrative way, so I let her continue to clasp my hands which would never warm up no matter how long she held them. And then an odd thing happened. Heat began to build between us, power crackled from palm to palm and through our curved fingers. It sure as hell couldn't be me providing that lively energy. I frowned and gazed into her eyes, crinkled at the corners with mirth.

"What are you?" I demanded.

"A student at Rutledge, studying human behavior."

"I'm a student of human behavior myself," I quipped dryly and broke away, turning to take the debit card that still poked from the slot. I held it up. "Thanks for this."

"No problem. I'm happy to help you." She smiled her pretty girl smile and I ducked my head, ashamed at how the delicate pulse in her neck pulled on me with an almost irresistible force. I didn't want that right now, even though the place was empty and such a feast would be easy. I simply wanted to talk with her and bask in her smile.

"I'd better..." I gestured toward the washing machines and went over to get them started.

After they'd sloshed to life, I sat down a couple of seats away from Serena. She had her book in her hands again, but lowered it when I joined her.

"Have you ever read this?" She showed me the title: *The Baghavad Gita*.

"Not really. I've never taken the time." I tried to stay away from most books exploring concepts of God. That wasn't a subject I felt comfortable with given the current state of my immortal soul—if I even still had one. "Isn't that heavy reading for a laundry night?"

"Not at all. I find washing to be a very contemplative endeavor." She nodded at the hypnotic cycle of colors in the dryer window. "They practically call for a mantra to be recited."

"Do you have one?" I asked, intrigued by her sprightly manner concerning what some would consider a weighty subject.

"Peace, love, joy. It kind of says it all." Serena slid over into the seat next to mine and faced me. "What about you, Gavin? What's your mantra?"

Desire, destruction, desolation. "I guess I don't have one," I said and my mouth watered at her nearness.

Not sensing any danger, she leaned closer to look into my eyes. "Maybe you should develop one. Mentally repeating the words can really help keep you centered." She reached out and touched the side of my face, a light caress that made my skin tingle. Then she pushed a hank of my long brown hair back from my cheek. "Such solemn dark eyes. My guess is you've been bearing a heavy burden for many years."

The way she said it didn't come across like a first year psych student trying to analyze everyone she met. Serena spoke with an assurance that belied her youthful appearance. Once again, her touch sent an electric shock through me.

I pulled her hand away from my cheek. "What are you?" I asked again.

She didn't answer, merely smiled sweetly. Her gaze was no longer focused on my eyes but on my mouth. Between one breath and the next, she leaned in and kissed me.

I closed my eyes. A ripple of warmth started at my lips and radiated outward. It had been a long while since I'd kissed anyone. I'd lost interest in that and all the other trappings of sex some years before. But suddenly my body was alert and awake in a way it hadn't been since the decade or so after I was turned. I yearned for something other than blood and felt a loosening and opening of something inside me. The giant hand inside my chest was back, kneading my nub of a heart.

I reached for her and slipped my hands around her waist, feeling her solid warmth and the expansion of her ribs as she breathed. Serena curved a palm around the back of my neck, pulling me to her and gripped my shoulder with her other hand. The strength of her hold surprised me. For a moment, I was certain she was going to devour me but I had no will to struggle against her.

Her tongue snaked between my lips and I curled mine around it. Every place her skin touched mine felt singed by holy water. But I welcomed the burn that spread from my flesh into the layers of tissue beneath. She was golden fire filling my arms and I wanted her to incinerate me. My fangs descended, the points nicking Serena's lips as I kissed her. I tasted her blood and it seared my throat as I swallowed.

She pulled back to stare at me with shining eyes. "Is this what you want, Gavin? To drink from me?"

Right then I knew she wasn't a normal woman. She recognized me, not just the human face I wore, and didn't fear me at all. In fact, I began to fear her.

For the third time I asked, "What *are* you?"

Her body singed the insides of my arms, even through the fabric of her clothing, but I couldn't let her go. She shimmered and glowed, the truth of her showing through the human body she wore like a gauze veil.

"What do you think I am?" Her smile would've brought tears to my eyes if I had the capacity to cry. But I did feel sorrow—and joy simultaneously as the answer came to me.

"An angel."

A horny angel it would appear as her hand slipped beneath my T-shirt, branding my belly and then worked at unfastening the waistband of my jeans.

"What do you want with me?" I asked.

"Peace, love, joy. That's all I wish for you."

"Why me? You know I don't deserve it after all I've done."

"It's not my job to judge. I'm only here to help you." She reached for my cock.

I jerked and an unneeded breath hissed between my teeth as her fiery hand wrapped around my shaft. "With your magic cootch?" I asked.

Serena laughed and the sound was like the jingle of sleigh bells in crisp winter air. "This body I've made has needs. I see no harm in indulging them at the same time as I fulfill my purpose."

"Which is what precisely?" I could barely form words and my eyes nearly closed as she stroked my length with her firm grip.

"To bring you peace." With that cryptic answer, she leaned in to kiss me again and cut off further chatter.

Flexibility is an important quality for a vampire. The world changes fast and if you can't adapt, you'll be left behind. I'd learned to adjust to whatever came my way. At the moment, it was an armful of angel. I stopped worrying about the *why* and *what the hell* and *will she try to kill me after*, and settled into enjoying the baptism of kisses, the holy fire of her touch. I slid my hands beneath her tank top to feel the smooth skin of her back, the delicate bumps of her spine. Then I moved one hand to her front to cup the soft curve of a breast. This angel was wearing a very sexy chassis.

Sitting in hard plastic chairs, trying to get closer to each other was awkward. I pulled her onto my lap, her knees straddling my hips and her groin pressed against my aching erection. As she leaned over me, her long, silken hair curtained both our faces. Auburn strands brushed my jaw and I inhaled the sweet scent of shampoo and woman. Easy to be distracted by her form and forget the being it cloaked, except for the fact her radiant heat continued to bake me.

In the background, the dryer continued to thump and hum, the washing machine broke into the whirr of a spin cycle and the happy voices on the infomercial proclaimed the virtues of their product. Otherwise the Laundromat was a quiet, sanctuary for two.

Serena slid her hands through my hair, cradling my skull and kissed me so deeply it seemed she'd suck the life from me if it weren't already gone. At last I broke away from the excruciating, exhilarating inferno to move my mouth to her jaw and then down the side of her neck.

Every beat of her heart sent an enticing pulse of blood through her corpuscles. Hunger crashed over me. I was starving, almost beyond my ability to control. I nuzzled her neck and licked the length of a thin blue trail. I needed a taste of her, only a taste. I wouldn't rip open an artery and drink my fill. I hadn't done that in a very long time. It wasn't my desire to be a killer so I'd tried to curb it. I'd learned to be judicious in how much I took, leaving my hosts mostly intact.

Mostly.

I pulled my mouth away from her neck. I wouldn't take from her. Not yet anyway. Besides, I had no idea what angel blood might do to my insides if the mere touch of her skin fried me.

Serena gyrated her hips, grinding against me and whispered, "Maybe we should move someplace more private."

She was right. We couldn't fuck right there in the middle of the Laundromat. And the position on the plastic chair was doing neither of us any favors.

I rose with her still in my embrace, her arms and legs clasped around me. I carried her to the little alcove where the restrooms were located and a bulletin board full of ads and lost dog posters. Pressing her up against a wall, I enjoyed the feeling of her soft body pinned beneath mine.

I pushed up her shirt and lowered my mouth to her breasts with their pert, pink nipples as tender and delicious as berries. I slid my tongue over one taut bud then sucked it into my mouth, hard.

Serena gasped and gripped a handful of my hair. She thrust her chest toward me as I suckled at one tit then the other—fangs firmly retracted. If my fangs ached to descend and impale, my cock was suffering equal pain. I wanted—no, *needed* to bury myself inside her.

Since she'd already freed my erection from my jeans, it pushed into her belly as if it would burrow through her clothes to find entry. I slid my hand up her thigh, pushing her skirt higher and reaching beneath. Her pussy was so hot and wet I thought it might melt my finger as I stroked her lips then pushed between them. And I planned to put my dick in there? Talk about a moth and a flame. I was set on a course of self-destruction.

Serena reached beneath her skirt and pulled her panties down, disentangling her legs from around me long enough to get them off. I caught only a glimpse of pussy before she was wrapped around me again and guiding my cock to her entrance.

I sank into her with the relief of a storm-tossed ship making harbor. I grunted with pleasure as her glorious, painful heat surrounded me. How something could be so torturous and so wonderful at the same time was beyond me. All I knew was that I was desperate for more.

She clung to me and I buried my face against her neck as our bodies merged. I groaned and thrust with mounting urgency while Serena pushed onto me. To a watcher our bodies might appear to be struggling against each other, grappling for dominance, good and evil, light and darkness, yin and yang locked in a perpetual embrace. Or maybe we'd just look like two people fucking in the dingy hallway of a Laundromat.

As the tension inside me pulled tauter and the heat enveloping me threatened to go super nova, I pulled my face away from Serena's neck to look into her eyes. They sparkled like gem stones and radiated so much light I thought I'd explode into flames.

"Go ahead." She tipped her head back against the wall, offering her throat. "I give you this freely if you dare to take it."

Was it a test? Should I refuse? What did this angel want from me?

And then all questions and reason left me as I thrust into her once more. Ecstasy gushed through me. I saw the white column of her throat through a red haze and could no more resist than the tide could refuse to wash the shore.

I bit, fangs slicing through tender skin, and I drank, sucking and lapping the metallic flow. The taste of blood was warm and familiar, but hers was tainted with something spicy and totally different from any human blood I'd ever swallowed. It was like drinking liquid sunlight and Drain-o. The honey-sweet liquid coated my throat and fizzed all the way down to my stomach. Immediately fire shot through all

my arteries. Don't ask me how without a heart to pump it there, but that's the way it works—instant energization like a super-charged espresso the moment a vampire drinks.

I was in agony, but I couldn't surrender that delectable nectar. I drank long and deep and when at last I did pull away with a gasp, Serena was visibly paler. But her eyes still glowed and her smile shone as she looked upon me graciously. "Feel better?"

I felt incredible, astonishing, super-charged...alive. The giant hand around my heart gave another powerful squeeze. I cried out from the pain and jerked away from Serena. She let go of me as I practically dropped her on the floor. I slapped my hand against my chest as if I could claw out the searing agony. Was this what a heart attack felt like?

"What have you done?" I groaned and closed my eyes as another wave of pain washed over me.

"You've earned this," she said calmly. "Your suffering and your attempts to change were noted. This is your reward."

"It sure as fuck doesn't feel like one," I spat through clenched teeth.

"The pain will be brief," she promised. "Just breathe."

What? I hadn't needed to breathe, except for show, in over a hundred years. Now I gasped and gulped a deep lungful of air. I exhaled and drew another. The pain in my chest eased as the hand released its death grip on my heart.

Then I heard a sound inside my head, a dull thud followed by a hissing rush. Beneath the palm I'd pressed to my chest, there was a soft bump like a rabbit kicking its hind foot against my breast bone.

Followed by another.

And another.

To say I was shocked would be putting it mildly. Questions tumbled through my mind, but I didn't ask any of them. Divine intervention by an angel seemed to answer them all. But was it really "help"? Did I want this supposed gift she'd bestowed?

As my erratic heartbeat slowed and steadied and my breathing became more normal and less the desperate gasping of a landed fish, I focused on Serena again. She appeared to be simply a pretty redheaded girl once more. I could no longer see her angelic aspect. And finally I did manage a question.

"Why me? There must be others, plenty of others, who are more deserving. People who pray. People who do good things. Why would you help me of all creatures?"

Serena smoothed her skirt over her hips, scooped her panties off the floor where she'd dropped them and stepped into them.

"You were once robbed of your life. Now you have another chance to live. You can erase all the evil you did in the past and strive for something better." She held up her fingers in a peace sign. "Remember, 'Peace, joy, love'. That's all you have to think about. It's not so hard if you cling to that."

I continued to feel the thumping of my heart and my chest rising and falling with each breath. My muscles cramped as blood infused long-dead tissue. Sweat popped out on my body as unused glands sprang back to life. I'd forgotten all the little tics of a human body, the need to sneeze or cough or blink.

Serena smiled at me. "Don't look so taken aback. This really is a reward, I promise you."

"Thank you?" I scanned her pale face framed in shining autumn-colored hair, the sprinkling of freckles across her nose and her lush rosebud mouth. "Is this your job, going from one assignment to another, bringing some kind of sexed up redemption? That doesn't seem very angelic."

She laughed her sleigh bell shimmer. "No. The sex was pure pleasure for me. An attraction I felt for you, apart from this body wanting yours. Angels aren't above having feelings, you know. I've watched you, learned about you and my understanding of you made this assignment personal."

At last I let my hand drop from my chest and the throbbing heart behind it. I followed Serena back to the chair where her purse, jacket and book lay abandoned and the dryer had finally stopped tumbling.

"So I'm human now. What do I do next?" Even though I'd dreamed of an end to my immortality, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of loss and a stab of uncertainty at the finite future looming before me.

Serena jerked a thumb at the washing machines. "I'd start with putting your laundry in a dryer."

Her practical answer made me a chuckle, which sounded like a gate with rusty hinges after years of non-use. It felt good to laugh, to become breathless and have to draw in a deep breath. I went to transfer my wet clothes to a dryer, while Serena took out hers and folded them on one of the tables.

When I'd finished my task, I began to help her. "With all your power, couldn't you instantly clean your laundry?"

"When I'm in this body on this plane, I do things the human way." She carefully folded a tiny pair of underpants.

"Will you stay here long? Will I ever see you again?"

"I do my laundry at the Wash 'n' Wear nearly every Friday." She looked at me from under a thick sweep of eyelashes, making heat rise in my groin—the normal reaction of a healthy human male. "Even an angel needs clean undies and a date now and then."

About the Author

I began telling stories as a child. Whenever there was a sleepover, I was the designated ghost tale teller. I still have a story printed on yellow legal paper in second grade about a ghost, a witch and a talking cat. Writing childish stories for my own pleasure led to majoring in English at college. Like most English majors, I dreamed of writing a novel, but at that time in my life didn't have the necessary focus and follow through. Then life happened. A husband and children occupied the next twenty years and it was only in 2000 that I began writing again.

I enjoy dabbling in many genres. Each gives me a different way to express myself. I've developed a habit of writing every day that's almost an addiction. I don't think I could stop now if I tried.

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<http://samhainpublishing.com/authors/bonnie-dee> . You may see my entire backlist at my web page, <http://bonniedee.com>. For updates on new releases, join my yahoo group at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/bonniedee/>