



THE WITCH'S GHOST

By Dr. Douglas Courtney

All good Halloween stories begin with death. It's not too surprising. Halloween is derived from All Hallows' Eve, the time before All Saints Day, a day religion sets aside to honor those who have died. All Hallows' Eve itself is a time for celebration, preparation and acknowledging the end, or death, of summer. It is a time of magic when the veil of death is thin between the living and the dead.

I thought of this as I trudged down the gravel lane towards my home. It was only a short trek, but the journey gave me time to ponder existential musings. Musings were a nice departure from the humdrum problems of everyday life. I picked up an errant limb recently felled from one of the many odd trees on the property. Absentmindedly, I tapped the limb on the hard ground. The tapping became a beat and the beat became an intonation. Soon I was entranced. My thoughts turned to Maria and I saw the tree once again.

Rain had gathered into a small pocket on the leaf. The leaf had bent under the weight and a constant drip, drip, drip fell from its tip. Each drop splattered over the unseeing eyes of Maria as she lay cold in the forest. I had called emergency services after I found her, then waited for them to arrive. I stared with little outward emotion as I watched each drop fall upon her face. Inside, the pain bade me reach out. I had taken her small hand and held it. It was so cold. There was little comfort in the touch for Maria or me, but I could not, would not release. No one should die alone. Not even Maria.

"Must be Halloween, or close to it," said a disembodied voice.

I looked up from my reverie and saw her dancing in the breeze. Her clothes were still all black and her eyes dark as coal. She wore a ragged turtleneck sweater covered in twigs and dead leaves. Dirt stains made patchwork across its length. Her skirt reached just below the knees and covered her black leggings. Both were adorned as her sweater and ended in scuffed and worn black work boots. If her form had not been floating an entire foot and half above the ground, she would have passed for some random witch of the woods. Well, except for the fact you could see right through her.

"A day away," I replied. "Nice to see you again."

"Yeah, well. Can't say the same. You know how it pisses me off to keep coming back. And seeing you each and every time. Good gawd! Makes me want to retch. If I could."

"Well if I had known..." my words trailed off.

"Yeah, yeah. You wouldn't have held my hand." Maria smiled at her effort at sarcasm. "So how many years is it now? Four? Five?"

"Seven, actually," I replied and smiled in turn.

"For Christ's sake! Seven? Dude, we have to find a way to end this curse. Hate to tell you, but you're getting old. Is that a little gray I see at the edges?"

"Subtle as ever. I see you never change. Still wearing that crappy turtleneck."

"Hey, it was all the fashion. Besides, don't think I haven't tried. Hard to do when you can't touch anything."

"Want me to give a try?"

"Perv. Just the thing – a naked ghost floating all over the place." Maria broke out a giggle and I joined in. "So, any ideas yet? Or are we going to wing it?"

"Just something out of left field," I said as I resumed my walk down the lane. I remembered the first time Mad Maria, the ghost, had appeared. I'd been literally caught with my pants down. I was answering nature's call in the upstairs toilet and she just popped into the room. If I hadn't already been thus engaged I would have shat myself.

"Jesus Christ!" she screeched at me. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Me? What the hell are *you* doing? A little privacy?" I yelled back. Then she vanished. Just like that. I rushed to gather myself, pulled up my pants and streaked for the door. There she was again, bobbing lightly in air and I damn near fell through her before I caught myself.

"Watch it, jerk!" she yelled, bringing me up short.

Our relationship was defined from those moments. I came to understand Maria had little filter in her thoughts or language. I had little tolerance for her. Somehow it worked.

“So, you gonna keep me in suspense?” Maria smirked. “No pun intended.” Her comments brought me back to the present.

“Clever,” I retorted with more than a bit of sarcasm. “Remember the Turnbull house?” We had reached the end of the lane and I found a seat on the back porch. Maria floated before me.

“That artistic piece of tourist crap that sits at the edge of town?” Maria asked.

“No, that old wreck of a building that sits next to it. The one that sits way back off the road surrounded by vines, old oaks, busted furniture, the odd mattress, rats and a colony of cats.” I reached for a beer from a cooler I kept close by.

“You talking about my old house? That wasn’t Turnbull’s. That pristine piece of gawker’s paradise next door is his house,” Maria spit out.

She had lived at the decrepit old mansion I was describing when she was alive. Or rather she was the resident squatter. No one really lived there, and no one wanted to. It was falling apart. The house was a two-story wood frame with no visible means of support. Everyone was amazed it was still standing. It included a three-story turret at one end and a wraparound porch. Both were full of rotted wood and large holes in their infrastructure. The few windows that remained were cracked or filled with web-infested shards. The city hadn’t torn it down because of issues with ownership and the fact it really couldn’t be seen from the road, obscured by overgrown vegetation.

“That pristine tourist trap wasn’t Turnbull’s home,” I corrected. “It was some unscrupulous merchant’s who was trying to increase the value of his property. He built a few secret passages, a couple of dead end tunnels and passed it off as Turnbull’s treasure house. Made a pretty penny selling it off. The current owners know it isn’t Turnbull’s place, but keep it quiet so they can keep the money coming in.”

“Well I’ll be...”

“Damned.” I finished with a chuckle.

Maria looked up. “Nice. Make fun of the dead witch. You looking for pain?”

I held my hands up in surrender and apology. “No, not really.”

Maria may be a ghost, but she was – is – still a real witch. You put the two together, you get some very serious potential for pain. More than once over the years she’d possessed my body and mixed some herbs and vile creatures inside a cauldron. I couldn’t stop the possession and it wasn’t comfortable. But not nearly as uncomfortable as the results of the spells. I shuddered remembering the episodes of intense agony after each occurrence.

“Remember, we are in this together,” Maria reminded me as I took a swig of beer. I set down the beer and turned my attention to her.

“Yeah, I know.” We didn’t know why, but we knew Maria’s curse was my curse. If I didn’t solve it before I die, we would both be damned to a limbo of time and space. Neither alive nor dead. Ghosts eternal. In its own way, that would be worse than hell itself.

“So, my old place was Turnbull’s. What’s that got to do with the curse?” Maria asked.

“The treasure.”

“The old cursed pirate treasure tale? You kidding? That’s all you got?” Maria’s reaction bordered on incredulity.

“I told you it was out of left field,” I replied. “You got anything better?”

Maria floated about. Her form shifted and twisted. She was obviously in deep thought. “I mean cursed treasure. That is so unbelievable. I mean it’s fantasy, a fairy tale for suckers.”

“You mean like the idea of witches and ghosts?” I retorted with mock seriousness. Maria looked my way and her form sagged.

“Point taken. This whole thing is incredulous. So why couldn’t the treasure be real, too? Remind me. What is the whole tale?”

I began. “Turnbull was a pirate born in the depths and poverty of Haiti in the 15th century. He served with Bartholomew Roberts until about 1620 when Roberts gave him one of his prizes. Turnbull was tall, dark black

in skin color and demeanor, and very muscular. He wore a head full of dreadlocks that framed his face and focused attention on his dark charcoal eyes that burned with an inner red flame. He hated landowners and slavers with a particular intensity. He also believed strongly in Voodoo. He had a priestess, Madam Latrue, who sailed with him on every voyage. His crew consisted of creoles and ex-slaves, born of black heritage.

“Over twenty years at sea on the ‘Vengeance,’ he and his crew developed a reputation as vicious, cruel, sadistic and rich. He gave no quarter to woman or man, infant or child. Each was brutally beaten, maimed and killed and eventually sacrificed to Madam Latrue’s Voodoo gods of black magic. It took a fleet of Spanish galleons to track Turnbull down. In a battle near Traitor’s Point, the Spaniards finally blocked his ship and bombarded it with cannon fire. As flames leapt from every spar and sail, the Spaniards watched as Latrue climbed the remaining rigging and shouted a curse. Her body turned to flame as the fires consumed the rigging and she perished when a shot pierced her brain. The ship sank shortly after. They found Latrue’s body, but never found Turnbull’s.”

“They also never found his treasure,” Maria added. “Ten years later, a large black man with a sailor’s bent bought the land where that old mansion sits. He paid gold for the land and paid off the local constables to keep the curious away from his estate. It was only after he wasn’t seen for a month that the authorities went to his house to see if he was still alive.”

“It was inside the house that they found his identity,” I continued. “They found it in his journals and logs that he’d kept from his time at sea. They also found his rotting corpse slumped on a chair at the dining room table. His last act was to write a curse in blood. It damned to undying torment any foul being that touched his cache of gold.”

“Hell of a story,” Maria said. “People been looking for that gold ever since.”

I nodded agreement. But my concern was on the curse, not the treasure. The dark pirate’s story was one of extreme anger and hate. You didn’t tell your kids his tales because the depth of their depravity would scar them for life. Only as an adult could you even begin to handle the accounts. What was also left unsaid between Maria and me was that Voodoo witches did not get along well with other witches, especially Voodoo witches engaged in black magic. If Turnbull’s curse was real, if Maria had somehow touched the treasure, if the treasure’s curse was Voodoo black magic, then Maria would be considered a foul being. She and I could be in more serious trouble than we ever anticipated. I shuddered at the thought.

“What’s next?” Maria asked.

“We wait until Halloween night. Then we go look.”

“I was afraid you were going to say that,” Maria replied. She shivered as if inwardly frightened by the prospect.

“Meanwhile, let’s do a little Halloween,” I grinned.

The abrupt change of topic was by design as well as purpose. Quite simply, if we had to go to Turnbull’s old mansion, whatever forces of evil existed wouldn’t let her pass until dark on Halloween night. Over the years, we had tried more than once. I could get in, but Maria couldn’t pass. Apparently, before her death, Maria had cursed the house. She didn’t remember why. One of the apparent byproducts of death is loss of memory.

Whatever the reason for the curse, it limited our ability for meaningful investigation. Because, at the stroke of 1 a.m., the end of the ‘witching hour,’ Maria vanished. I wouldn’t see her again until the next Halloween.

Maria had other reasons than the curse to avoid the house. It tore at her emotions whenever she entered. Maria had lived here after being shunned by the town. Her family was vile. Thieves, con artists, and crooks of the worst kind. She was the mistake they kept for the government assistance and tossed out as soon as she entered high school. Everyone in town refused to help her, thinking she was no better than the trash that raised her. The old mansion was the only place that offered shelter. It was here that she sank into witchcraft, donning the attire that she now wore in death.

But the mansion also tore at her soul. After she died, demons and foul beings of every kind inhabited the place every Halloween. The place had become a portal to the depths of hell, a place where the veil between

death and life had become so thin it almost ceased to exist. The touch of a demon could scar or render a painful blow to a mortal. But the same touch could send a ghost into agonizing spasms of screaming pain as it raked across their souls. Considering the dangers Maria faced, I could fully understand her reluctance and fear.

So, to unburden Maria and because meaningful investigation was impossible at the moment, we might as well have a little fun. Maria had perked up at my suggestion.

“Aria still at Martin’s, Sam?” she asked.

“She is, and she is waiting.”

Martin’s was the local chocolate factory. More store than factory, they made some of the best chocolate to be found. Aria, its owner, inherited the whole thing when her father died a few years back. She was one of the few people that knew Maria was a real ghost. She has also become one of Maria’s best friends.

When I say one of the few people that knew Maria was a ghost, I mean it. The first year Maria appeared was chaotic, and that’s an understatement. I had tried to hide Maria as we went from place to place in our quest to understand what was going on. I failed spectacularly. But, something weird happened. Maria had clung so close to my side that the locals thought it was a trick, a spoof on Halloween and them. It may be natural instinct for people to try to understand something that defies understanding. But in any event, Maria became my Halloween ghost, a neat trick to see each and every Halloween.

Maria played to the audience and attention. In her limbo of death, she finally received the love and caring she had so longed for in life. It was a sight to see. Her smile filled her face. Her eyes sparkled at the excitement. She found many friends that took a moment to dance with “the ghost.” She laughed and giggled, and on occasion even cackled like the witch she was and is. It was that cackle that sent chills down children’s backs on Halloween night and made young teens laugh with delight.

Aria had known the truth, from the first Halloween. When I had walked into the store at the front of the factory with Maria, Aria stood with her hands on her hips and stared. It wasn’t a stare of fright, anger, or concern. It was a stare of recognition. Aria had gone to school with Maria. For a brief time in elementary school they had been friends. Aria hadn’t forgotten. After a few moments of staring, Aria spoke.

“Hello, Maria,” she said.

“Hello, Aria,” Maria replied.

Maria floated over to Aria and they went to the back room to talk. Fifteen minutes and three chocolate bars later, Maria floated out with Aria in tow. I never knew what they talked about, but they had become very close after that day. Every Halloween after that, Maria and I went to Martin’s. Aria was always waiting. They spent time together and I ate chocolate. Now, how bad could that be?

Soon, word spread that Sam’s ghost was at Martin’s. People lined up at the door and the counter buying Halloween candy and supplies, waiting for me to show my “ghost.” Without fail, after a good crowd had built up, Maria would swoop down through the roof and scream a bloody scream. Kids would freak out; young teens would take off in a moment of terror and then the oldsters would begin to laugh. Suddenly a party broke out and Aria, Maria and I would “do” a little Halloween.

This year was no different. As soon as I left the house, Maria took up her position bobbing and floating next to me. We walked down Main Street, turned left on Pine and pulled up to Martin’s just at the corner of Pine and Maple. The ten-minute trip had taken almost an hour as everyone wanted to see and dance with “Sam’s Ghost.”

When we reached the store, Aria was ready. A basket of her finest chocolate bars was sitting at a back booth with a drink. My simple compensation for bringing Maria by. I took up my station at the booth and opened the first bar. You have your simple commercial chocolate, even your finer deeper chocolates, but I have never, never tasted anything so luxuriously milky smooth as Martin’s chocolate bars. Damn, they were good!

Maria, meanwhile, had gone into the factory with Aria. They discussed whatever they discussed for at least an hour. The crowd meanwhile began to assemble with the first bite of my second bar. The room was set to explode as the crowds outside were getting restless when Aria finally emerged from the back. She smiled a

mischievous smile, put a finger to her lips and sat down at my booth. Sure enough, I heard the scream a moment before Maria tore through the roof. Aria clapped and laughed aloud at the performance. Maria grinned back, then swooped and dove at everyone she could target. The party had begun and Halloween was at hand.

When the revelry was done and most of the guests had left, Aria returned to my table. Maria was floating next to me as if seated in the booth. It was quite a scary sight to the uninitiated, but to us it was normal.

"I'll be there at eight, Maria. Don't let him take you in without me," Aria said as she looked toward her friend. Maria nodded agreement.

"Be where at eight?" I asked.

"The old mansion. I am going with you two," Aria replied.

"The hell you are. I'm not going to risk your life."

"I will not let my friend go alone. The matter is settled," Aria said as she stood and walked to the back room.

"I'm sure somewhere that this is all wrong, but it's all my fault." I was not a happy camper.

"Finally. Now you're beginning to understand," Maria laughed as I fumed.

Halloween arrived with little more fanfare. Maria and I had made the rounds to many of our favorite "haunts." I was hoping they wouldn't become my real haunts anytime soon, if ever. All in all, it had been a pretty good Halloween, as Halloweens go. But as darkness approached Maria and I began to get a bit more than nervous. Just as darkness began to fall, we found ourselves on the street next to the lot where Turnbull's mansion stood.

"The spell is weakening. I can feel it," Maria said.

I looked around for signs of ghosts, goblins or demons, preparing to jump and run at the slightest provocation. As I looked down the street, I saw a solitary figure coming toward us. It was Aria.

"Thanks for waiting," Aria said.

"Don't thank me. I think it's a big mistake," I replied.

"Don't pay him any mind," Maria chastised. "The big coward wouldn't have gone in without me, and I couldn't go in until it was fully dark."

"Which are good reasons why she shouldn't come," I replied. "These demons are dangerous."

"It's gone," Maria said. She started to move past the overgrowth and down the old stone path toward the house.

"What's gone?" Aria asked.

"The spell she cast to keep her out," I said as I started down the lane, flashlight in hand. "We better move to stay close or we will lose sight of her."

Dead leaves crackled and loose stones crunched underfoot. The tall grass withered from the autumn sun and vines clung to the few remaining leaves too stubborn to fall. The lot was filled with stands of pine, old oaks and maples. Even with their leaves gone, the sheer magnitude of limbs and branches served as a curtain of death against the sight of Turnbull's mansion. Death consumed the area not only from the rotted debris of ages, but you could feel death itself as if it were corporeal. Maria glided along her manifestation, passing through trees, limbs and debris without resistance. She was compelled to move forward, to return to her former home.

We followed as well as we could, trying not to make too much noise. After about fifteen minutes we were staring into the front porch of the old mansion. Maria floated there in the air, barely a foot off the ground. She didn't move. Only the passing of wind rustled her apparition. We saw her against the backlight of a full harvest moon. Without it we might have missed her completely.

Maria turned to me. "There is something familiar. Something I forgot."

The house groaned. I mean, the whole damn house groaned as if it were a large beast. I just about pissed my pants. Aria's nails dug into my palm but I didn't care. I was frozen to the ground.

Maria waved us forward. "Don't worry. It won't hurt you, yet. It remembers me. It's inviting us in."

Maria moved into the house through the old front portal. It's formidable door, hanging askew and open as it held onto its last hinge. We picked our way over debris and followed Maria into the mansion. A movement in the shadows drew Aria up short.

"I swear I saw something move," she said, pointing in the direction of a pile of busted furniture, dirt, cobwebs, and rotted carpet.

"Probably did. Could be rats or cats," I said.

"Probably demons. They're beginning to emerge. Cats and rats have already left this sinking ship," Maria offered.

"Demons?" Aria asked in hushed alarm.

"Damn it, Maria. I told you not to scare her," I said.

"She might as well know the truth. She's here. She should be prepared. Look, we only have a few hours to find something, anything, before hell shows up. I'll search the library. You two go upstairs and search his bedroom and study. Look for anything – hidden doors, old papers, secret passages. There has to be something keeping me here. If it's the treasure, find that. I can deal with what I know. It's the unknown that's hard."

With that last comment, Maria vanished. I started up the dilapidated staircase, Aria in tow. Being human, we didn't have the advantage of popping in and out of rooms. We had to find good footing on each step and gingerly make our way to the top. Aria had brought a flashlight for her own use, which proved useful because there was no way I could take the light away from my own next step.

When we reached the top, we worked our way into the master bedroom. There was a massive four-poster bed centered under a large framed picture of a sailing ship. I assumed it was Turnbull's doomed 'Vengeance.' Aria and I tore through what hadn't already been ravaged by time and vandals. We tossed the bed, examined the picture, stomped on the flooring in search of hidden caches, and beat on the bed frame itself looking for clues. Nothing appeared.

Aria and I moved to the adjoining study. All that remained was a single weather-damaged circular table at the center of the room and one chair without a single arm. It took short work to thoroughly search this room as well. Nothing revealed itself.

"I thought you said Maria lived here?" Aria asked.

"She did." I replied.

"So where..." Aria's voice trailed off.

I stopped foraging and turned to look at Aria. "She lived in the downstairs parlor, next to the only functioning toilet, right off the kitchen. Or what was a pantry back in the day. She didn't need or want to use any of the rest of the house. Said it attracted too many gawkers."

"So why doesn't she look there first? Seems that's where she was when all this began."

"She will. She has been back before. But it is hard. I mean how would you like to go back to the moment you were alive, then weren't? We just need to give her a minute. Let her do it her way. Besides, we really don't have a clue what we are looking for. Just a theory. But my hope is that maybe with the theory we can focus Maria's search if she has to go in there."

"You care about her." It was a statement not a question.

"That witch? Are you kidding? One year she covered me with boils for a whole day. Used my own hands to do it. Don't think I'm inclined to care. Just don't want to spend eternity with her."

"Yeah, you care," Aria repeated, then tentatively headed back to the main floor.

I wouldn't admit it, but Aria was right. I did care. After seven years of Halloweens and numerous searches for the truth, potions, curses and scary nights, I would miss her cackle, her laugh, her smile. But her curse, my curse, had to end. She needed her eternal rest. I needed closure.

Our search had taken the better part of two hours. We only had a little more than an hour before the "witching hour." Less than two hours before Maria vanished again. Worse, the mansion's internal temperature was rising. Pretty good trick for a place with no functioning heating system or fireplaces. I knew what that meant. Demons were coming straight from the pits of hell itself. We made our way back to the parlor. I looked

in and saw Maria floating above her workbench. Her shoulders sagged and the mournful look she wore seemed ever so much worse. My heart ached to see her like this.

Maria recovered when she saw us. “I know what the notes mean now. Putting them in context with the treasure gave them meaning.”

Aria looked at me for clarity.

“Maria made some notes before she died. We’d found them before but couldn’t make heads or tails about them. She couldn’t remember, and I sure as hell didn’t know. We thought they might be clues but without context, they were just gibberish.”

“Yeah. And now, when you put Turnbull, the treasure, and Latrue all together it makes sense.” Maria was excited.

“Latrue? Oh, shit. You didn’t say Latrue?” I panicked.

“Yeah, I did. I will explain later. But right now, I need hands. I need to caste. But I need little hands, not your meat hooks.” Maria looked at Aria pleading for her help.

“You mean you want to possess me?” Aria’s eyes widened in fear and concern. Then with the trust of a true friend, she nodded her head.

“How does this work?” She asked me.

“Just lean your head back, grab hold of the table and don’t tense up.” I stepped back a few feet. “Might help if you close your eyes.”

Aria did as I told her. Maria shot straight up to the ceiling and, like an eagle stalking prey, swooped down into Aria’s parted lips. It happened in an instant. With a buck of her body and a stomp of her foot Aria was now Maria.

Aria/Maria moved quickly. She lit a candle, flipped the page of the book before her and grabbed a kettle. It was a whirl of motion. Within twenty minutes Maria had her cauldron bubbling some witch’s brew and she was mumbling incantations. As she waited for the mixture to settle, Maria began to explain.

“The book was opened to a protection spell. A very specific protection spell against Voodoo demons and the undead.” She pulled a notebook forward and continued. “Here, right here is my symbol for love. Next to it is the symbol for horns. I could never figure out why I loved horns. But love Turnbull makes it all fit in place. I didn’t love Turnbull, but Latrue did. Her final curse was not a curse to damn the Spaniards, but to protect her lover. She shouted it to the heavens, not the sailors. But her curse also protected the treasure.

“Latrue and Turnbull hated, truly hated, merchants, landowners and foul beings. They did not want any of his fortune to fall in their hands, to be used for their purposes, to enslave even more of their kind. So, to secure the fortune, Latrue not only cursed it, but Turnbull hid it. And apparently, unfortunately for me, I unsuspectingly found it.”

“The basement,” I said, as a matter of fact, not a question.

Maria looked surprised, but continued. “Yes. It was hidden in the walls. Everyone searched the dirt floor and the ceilings. But no one searched the walls. They looked to be foot-thick boulders, a solid foundation used back when these old mansions were built. No one thought they could be moved, let alone hold an entrance to a treasure vault.

“I usually kept out of the basement. I didn’t like the feel down there and the basement didn’t seem to like me. But I needed a particular mushroom that could grow best in a dark, damp place. Like the basement. So, I went down there. Digging in the ground next to the wall, I hit a chain. I pulled on it. A small door opened in the foundation. Curious, I crawled through and there it was, the treasure.”

“Don’t tell me. You touched it.”

“Well, yeah. I didn’t know what it was. It wasn’t exactly sparkling gold. It was hidden in a dark room and I had no flashlight. I touched it to find out what it was,” Maria explained.

“Is that when you lost your memory?” I asked.

“No. That is when the explosion of Voodoo hatred hit me hard in the chest. It threw me back against the wall and slammed the door to the vault shut. I could tell by the stench and the tingle on my body it was Voodoo

black magic. I knew what I had done and rushed back to my spells. I cast as strong a spell as I could to keep the demons and hatred inside these walls. Then I flipped the book open to a protection spell for any in this house. I wrote those notes right before Latrue's magic fell on me like a hammer."

"And when I found you dead in the woods," I said.

"And when you touched my hand. It's also when you sealed your fate, Sam. Touching me made you a foul being as far as Latrue's curse is concerned."

"What made you remember all of this after all these years?"

"Don't know. Maybe when you made the connection. Maybe Aria being here. I really don't know. But I tried to reach for the book, to look at the symbols I made and like a kick to the head it all came back. I don't know Voodoo magic. I really don't know Voodoo black magic. But the memories flooded back and I knew what I had to do."

"So, what now, witch?" I asked.

"Drink the potion. Bring Aria back to the present and kill the curse. All in about an hour with demons floating around."

"Oh, I thought we were going to have to do something hard," I replied rolling my eyes.

Maria handed me a cup and took one herself.

"Bottoms up, asshole." Maria said.

As soon as we stopped sputtering and coughing from the wretched taste of the brew, Maria exited Aria's body and Aria fell to the floor clutching her stomach.

"Makes you want to retch when she does that, doesn't it," I grinned as I helped her up.

"God, yes. Add that horrid drink and I'm surprised I can stand at all," Aria said.

"Sorry. Don't know any better way," Maria said. She was hovering in front of us just off the floor.

"No worries. Grab the book, kettle and knife," Aria told me as she pointed to the table.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Gotta break the curse. Voodoo magic is the only thing that can break Voodoo curses. Maria has already found the cure. We have to apply it." Aria said as she headed for the door. "Come on. We have little time and it has to be done before the witching hour ends."

I grabbed the items from the table and followed Aria in a rush out the door. I pulled up as I saw where she was headed.

"The cellar. Isn't that where all the bad demons and nasty monsters play? You want to go there?"

"Yeah. That's where we have to go. It has to be done at the source, at the peak of power. You know, now! The witching hour!" Maria said as she floated ahead.

The cellar was glowing orange. Black demons and other nasty things were crawling around the door and moving towards us.

"But what about them?" I pointed at the crawly, creepy things only a few feet away.

"Protection spell. Worst they can do is draw blood from a hot wound. It won't kill you, but it will sting like hell," Maria explained.

"What about you? You didn't drink the potion. Why do you have to go?" I asked, looking directly at Maria.

"She's bait," Aria said as she pulled at my shirt.

"Bait? What's that make me?"

"Ingredients," Maria said. "Would you quit your bellyaching and hurry up. We ain't got much time. It's just now after midnight. The witching hour has begun."

I didn't like it. Not one bit. Somehow both Maria and Aria had come up with a plan that involved going down into a haunted cellar, past angry, nasty demons, and into the jaws of hell itself. And I didn't have a vote. Shit, I was screwed. But I hauled butt and moved quickly to the cellar door. I hoped if I moved fast enough the creepy things wouldn't see me or at least miss me with those fangs and claws. I found out before I hit the first step that it wasn't going to happen.

"Geezus—K—Rist. That hurts like..."

“Hell?” Maria said with a smirk.

I shot a mean look at her sarcasm and tripped even more quickly down the steps. Maria swooped by and gathered herself at one end of the cellar. It was the farthest point from the now hot, emblazoned portal that was expanding on the cellar floor. It didn't take long for the demons to smell their prey. Maria's cackle became wild screams of agony. I looked at her as demon after demon, creepy thing after creepy thing reached up and clawed at her ethereal form.

“They'll tear her apart!” I shouted as I rose to go to her rescue.

Aria pulled me back to the task at hand. “She was inside me when I drank the potion. She'll be OK. Now give me the pot!”

Aria had started a fire at the portal and set the cauldron on top of it. She threw in herbs, spices and, I swear, a newt. I didn't know what a newt was, but that dead thing had to be one. It was the definition of ugly. As she worked the portal grew larger. Maria's screams became the screams of the damned. I saw one of the demons heading toward me. I started to defend myself when Aria grabbed my hand.

“It knows you're here. You touched Maria at her death. You became a foul being when you touched her.” Aria shouted over the deafening roar of hell fire and death screams.

“What do I do?” I asked Aria in terror.

She grabbed my hand, took a knife and cut a line through my palm.

“Bleed,” she commanded as she put my hand over the bubbling pot of stench.

My blood fell in with the newt just as the demon took a swipe at my arm. I screamed like a little girl. I screamed until I could draw another breath and then I screamed again. Aria let my hand go and I smashed it into the demon's face. My blood splattered into the demon's eyes. It screamed a deep guttural sound. A booming, caustic, guttural sound that I had never heard from man or beast. The demon's reaction was immediate. It retreated to the safety of the shadows.

“It's your blood,” Aria explained. “To them it is foul and toxic. Stay by me until this potion finishes. We only have a few minutes left.”

She stirred the pot and watched it boil. She glanced toward the portal, still growing. Demons were climbing out of the hole in droves, escaping up the stairs or moving over to torture Maria. Maria's screams had fallen to low moans when I heard it. It was a deep moan followed by a high-pitched scream. Something was lumbering to the surface and it wasn't going to be good.

I looked to the portal and saw him. It was a beast of a man, broad shoulders and thick with muscle. He was black within and without. His head was filled with dreadlocks and his eyes were dark unmoving holes of death. There was no compassion in his gaze, only the red flame of hate. Beside him stood a beautiful woman equally dark and black with hands that ended in claws. Hate filled her eyes.

“Turnbull and Latrue!” Aria shrieked. She turned to me and pointed to a chain next to the wall.

“Now Sam. Now!” Aria yelled. “Pull the chain. Pull with all you've got.”

I dove for the hidden chain. The chain that opened the treasure vault. I pulled as hard as I could and the vault door opened. Aria rushed from the fire carrying her pot of potion. Latrue saw what was happening and streaked to stop Aria. But she was too late. Aria had thrown the mixture onto the treasure. Latrue screamed in agony and reached to exact her revenge. Then the town clock struck one.

It ended. Just like that, it was over. Aria and I were alone in a dark cellar with only the flickering of a small fire set on the dirt floor. I reached around and grabbed a flashlight from my back pocket and flicked it on. I looked at Aria and she looked at me. Then I looked at my hand. The blood was still trickling from the wound.

“Didn't have to cut so deep did you?” I asked.

Aria threw her hands around me and sobbed just a little bit.

“Well, you are a guy,” she said with a naughty smile.

We waited on the front porch in matched rockers as Halloween night approached. It had been a year since we'd fought the demons. We wanted to know if Maria was at peace, if the victory was complete. The only way

to truly know was to see if she turned up on Halloween. We figured the best place to wait was the mansion that she and Turnbull had lived in. So, we had taken possession of it just after all the paperwork had cleared in early June.

We saved what we could and rebuilt the rest. We hired the right contractors and the best lawyers. It was surprising what you could accomplish if you had money. Thanks to Turnbull's treasure, we had the money. I mean, we were possessed, not stupid.

It turned out that the potion Aria had mixed removed the curse by fouling the gold. The gold was fouled by the use of my blood. The only fouled blood in human form, being that Maria was a ghost. Once the curse was removed, the treasure was good to go. And there was a lot of treasure. Aria and I decided it was best to keep the treasure together so we married in August. I was finding out there were benefits to marriage, especially marriage to someone that still owned a chocolate factory.

I asked Aria once how she knew what to do that night. She let me know that while Maria possessed her they still could communicate. Maria and Aria had hatched the plan while they were together. Communication apparently was much faster when you could do it with thought instead of speech.

So, it was that with all secrets explained save one, we waited on the porch and rocked. The wind blew lightly. A few bats flew across the lawn. Curious tourists were having a party at the "Turnbull Mansion" next door. A full Harvest moon hung in the air. The town bell chimed midnight and we sipped our wine. The town bell finally chimed 1:00 a.m. but Maria never appeared. We both wept just a little for our friend.

"You know what bothers me a bit?" I asked Aria.

"What's that?"

"That the shunned sister of this town is the one who saved us all. If she hadn't cast that spell that kept her out of the mansion, those creatures could have wreaked havoc on every man, woman, and child. Seems she should get a little recognition for her efforts."

"True. But then again, she started it." Aria smiled.

"Think she's at peace?"

A small piece of paper blew up from the yard and landed at Aria's feet. She reached down and picked it up. Turning it over she read what was on it. A smile and a small laugh followed the reading.

"Oh, I think she is just fine. And waiting for you apparently." Aria handed the paper to me.

Looking over the paper, I caught my breath.

"Aria? Aria, honey. Maria didn't teach you how to do this, did she?" I looked down at the paper again. It was titled "Boils and Blisters for Misters." It was the very potion Maria had given me. I shuddered as I ran after my wife. She had a scary, weird look on her face.