

## Once Bitten Twice Dead – Chapter 1

Tipsy and giggly, I sat in a grassy clearing in the middle of a stand of pine trees. I was near the electrical station off Highway 303 in Fulton Falls, Georgia. The hum of transformers and distant traffic was a monotonous tone, hardly even noticed now that the five of us had been here for well over an hour.

We'd just finished a midnight Girls Only Thanksgiving Feast Dinner, or 'GOT F'D up' as Isabella had dubbed it. With only scraps of food left from our nocturnal picnic, we were a happy bunch of hens indeed. Sitting on blankets, three of the five of us huddled against the cooling night. We gathered around a spread bed sheet under the illumination of a full moon and security lights.

Lana Minchew, a roly-poly forty-something, her dyed blond hair styled in improbable Shirley Temple corkscrew curls, sighed and rubbed her belly. "Taylor, your amazing cooking has given me another five pounds to whine about. You are incredible."

Isabella Rodriguez and I raised our champagne glasses, saluting Taylor Allen in complete agreement. Isabella, another cuddly lady who I thought of as the quintessential image of a Hispanic mom, had allowed me to inhabit her body to sample Taylor's stellar cuisine.

You read that right. Isabella is a channel, and I'm a ghost. My name is Brandilynn Payson, and I've been dead for around eight months now.

Patricia Keith, who'd been forced to spit out the delicious food after each taste, raised her bottle of Blood Potion No. 9 to the rest of us. Cool and elegant, she reminds me of a young black-haired Katherine Hepburn. Regal as ever, she'd managed to be subtle about getting rid of her tiny nibbles of the superb meal. Vampires cannot digest solid stuff.

With a cold smile, her glamour keeping it from turning too toothy, she toasted us. "Happy Thanksgiving to all my favorite turkeys ... you four."

We groaned and laughed, raising our glasses in kind. Isabella and Lana, along with Patricia's trim and buttoned-up-tight girlfriend Taylor, raised their glasses of Dom Perignon. I had a bottle of 1908 Pol Roger to myself, courtesy of the memory of a dead sommelier at the King George Hotel. We were all a little drunk except Isabella, who still sipped from her first flute. Patricia had gone through six bottles of blood, making her almost serene.

As a ghost I don't get drunk from alcohol. My buzz came from the nearby electrical station. The power feed had me not only feeling happy, it also allowed my companions to see and hear me. Spirits are usually invisible to the living and undead.

In honor of the holiday, clairvoyant Taylor had eschewed her usual uniform of polo shirt and crisp creased pants. She always looks neat, but she's not one to fuss over her appearance. Tonight she had actually curled her short brown cap of hair and looked lovely in black tuxedo slacks and a silk button-down blouse. Her leopard print ballet flats were a cool bit of flash, and the coral colored shirt set off her still-tanned skin to advantage. The town of Fulton Falls, located on the coast of southeast Georgia, is generous with the warmth and sun late into autumn. It's no stretch for the living to maintain a bit of bronze even up to December.

Taylor grinned at me from across the blanket that held the sad carcass of the turkey she'd brined and roasted to perfection. "Brandilynn, you never gave us your list of what you're thankful for." She suddenly grimaced, realizing how that must sound. Shamefaced, she added, "I guess that's to be expected, after the year you had."

I didn't take offense. Shaking my long copper-red hair back, I waved off her embarrassment. "I am thankful though. My murderer is dead, no one's trying to kill anyone I like, and I've got such charming, gorgeous, and witty friends..."

That earned a round of laughter. Our resident psychic Lana nodded, her curls springing like yellow Slinkies. "True, true." The psychic is one of the few breathing people who can hear and sense me even when I'm not soaked in electromagnetic energy. She was typically over the top in a brown and green horror of a sweater. Pilgrims, Indians, and turkeys circled her pudgy waist. Red polyester pants joined the ensemble. Coco Chanel is weeping somewhere. Thank goodness Lana is enough of a sweetheart that her hideous fashion sense can be forgiven.

"You forgot smart," Isabella informed me, which earned cheers. Her long black hair was twined in a French braid, and her pale pink eyelet dress with the white hand-knitted shawl was perfectly adorable.

Can you tell I love clothes?

It was Patricia who pointed out the best and worst part of my afterlife. "Plus you have a couple of men who absolutely adore you."

"Yes. I have that." I looked away, smoothing my hands over my green pencil skirt which went so well with my ivory blouse that featured a scalloped sweetheart neckline. My two boyfriends were indeed something to be thankful for. They were also behind a lot of angst and guilt for me.

The others went quiet. They knew my struggle too well.

Lana can no more stand an uncomfortable silence than she can leave sparkly blue eyeshadow to fashion-challenged pre-teens. "Still trying to decide?" she asked.

I sighed and shrugged. "Well, look at my options. It's like trying to pick between a Porsche and a Ferrari."

Patricia's tone held no rancor despite being closer to my too-many men situation than she would like. "You know my vote."

I did indeed. Her brother Tristan is one of my lovers, a vampire like herself. She and I had already had the big talk about either committing to him or letting him go. To give her credit, she does understand I'm not stringing Tristan along because I get a thrill out of it. No, I am actually head over heels in love with two men. Plus I have serious commitment issues when it comes to settling down with just one of them.

A lot of people have had to be really patient with me. I'm not so stupid that I don't realize there are limits to their patience though. I have to make a decision soon.

Lana sighed theatrically. "Some of us should be so lucky to have a problem like yours, Brandilynn. Then again, I wouldn't want to have to decide between Tristan and Dan. Two handsome, smart, good men ... on second thought, I would like to have those options!"

We chuckled at her effort to make light of what had become a very big problem for me.

Taylor laid her head on Patricia's shoulder, looking up into the vampire's near-black eyes. "I can't imagine loving two different people. Not when one is so perfect for me."

As Patricia tilted her face down to kiss her sweetheart, we all groaned with good-natured disgust at the mushy display. I tried to ignore a little tremor of unease as lust made Patricia lose some control over her glamour, allowing her fangs to shimmer into view. Just because one of my boyfriends is also a vampire doesn't mean they don't creep me out when their true nature is revealed.

"Get a room!" Lana laughed. "I hate being the only unattached member of this group."

Fortunately for us non-sentimental types, Patricia's cell phone chose that moment to ring. Taylor blew an uncharacteristic raspberry as her girlfriend checked the caller's I.D.

Patricia arched an eyebrow, flipping the phone open to answer. "Speaking of Brandilynn's harem ... what's up, Tristan?"

Isabella took another delicate sip of her still half-full glass. "Boo. No men. This night is for the girls."

Lana grinned as she rooted around our dinner's remains for a deviled egg. "He's so needy when it comes to an election."

Tristan Keith was currently the only paranormal member of Ford County's Board of Commissioners. A vacant spot in Georgia's state legislature had him eyeing a representative seat in Atlanta. Paras don't usually do well with the majority of voters who are human. However, Tristan's recent involvement in stopping a nasty shapeshifting gang from killing thousands of humans as well as vampires had made him the frontrunner in the upcoming race.

Isabella plopped a second slice of sweet potato pie onto her paper plate. To Lana she sighed, "I've got news for you, my single friend. Men are always needy."

"Hear, hear," I agreed. Were they ever.

Patricia finished her low-voiced conversation and switched her phone off. All the rare merriment had fled her expression. "Tristan would like us all to return to the King George. He says something bad has happened, but he won't tell me what it is over the phone."

Taylor huffed, champagne making her more emotive than usual. "You vampires and your drama. It's Thanksgiving, for heaven's sake. No one is working tonight."

Patricia stood, her pantsuit blameless despite her having sat on the ground for so long. Even wrinkles don't dare challenge that chick. Her dark stare sobered us all. "He's really upset." To Taylor, she said, "Coming with me or riding with Isabella and Lana?"

Taylor stood and began to clean up the remains of our feast. "It's too cold to fly. I'll meet you there."

Patricia gave her a quick peck on the cheek, and then gathered herself to launch into the air. With a superior smirk, both because I felt it and also wanted to take some of that grimness off her face I called, "Don't be too slow."

Vampires might be able to fly, but ghosts can materialize anywhere we want in the blink of an eye. Being superior is fun.

Patricia wasn't going to let me have the last word. "Ha! I remember all those wrong turns you used to take. Aren't you the one who 'ported herself into a septic tank instead of the state aquarium?"

Oh yeah. Cancel haughty disdain. The stray thought of septic tanks instead of fish tanks had thrown me off course on my way to see the Titanic exhibit a couple of months ago. That misdirection had caused no end of delight to my supposed friends.

I stuck my tongue out at Patricia as she launched into the air. She was just jealous I'd get to Tristan before her.

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I materialized at the place I'd dubbed 'Para Central'. It was actually the ballroom of the beautiful King George Hotel, which had been southeast Georgia's premier party spot back when railroad barons were in vogue.

The King George burned down in the Great Fire of '36, only its ground floor surviving more or less intact. Like most of the charred remains of Old Fulton Falls, it's buried under the present town, forgotten by most of the living norms. It's gotten a second life as my sweetie

Tristan's headquarters. He's done a lot to restore the ground floor; some to its original grandeur, and some of it for functionality.

There are guest rooms for people to use for sleep and other things – wink, wink. When I say 'other things', yes, I'm referring to sex. But it's mostly of the vampire variety, and unless you're a blood groupie, it's best I don't share anymore than that. For vampires, sex and blood-taking go hand in hand, and it's utterly creepy. 'Nuff said.

Those restored guest rooms aren't fancy, not what you would have seen at the King George in its heyday. To experience the hotel in all its finery, you have to be a ghost. We dead enjoy this grand old hotel as it was, its spirit as solid to us as we are to each other. Buildings, especially well-loved ones, can continue on in the spirit world. It's a joy to be able to experience the King George in all its former glory.

The newly rebuilt conference rooms and offices are thoroughly modern. Tristan is forever holding meetings with his staff, my ambitious sweetie constantly brainstorming plans and plotting moves to further his and Fulton Falls' combined fortunes.

His latest renovation project is the once-grand lobby of the King George. As a ghost, I still see it as it was: the huge gold-and-crystal chandelier, the patterned marble tiled floor, the burgundy and gold wallpaper, and the gleaming white staircase that leads to the floors above. The giant fireplace always crackles with warmth, and fine furnishings allow the dead to lounge in the opulent surroundings. At the desk, a wonderful man named Charles greets everyone, his smile welcoming beneath his waxed mustache.

Work started just a couple of weeks ago to return the real world's charred and debris-cluttered lobby to its original splendor. Contractors have begun to replace burnt timber, and we dead often hear the eye-watering racket of buzz saws, the head-splitting thunder of hammers, the crash of large things tumbling, the roar of the generator that powers their tools. Once in awhile the living world appears in our midst even as we appear to it because of the energy their work generates. We stare at one another across the divide of death, the contractors with startled shock and us with eager curiosity.

Just as the mundane human population knows it shares the world with vampires, shapeshifters, gargoyles, and other paranormal creatures, it knows some of the dead don't go on to ... wherever we're supposed to be. We just don't appear to them that often. Ghosts are rarer than Bigfoot sightings.

The King George's ballroom where I stood has already been restored. Large chandeliers hung over my head. The dance floor was rich parquet wood. There was a bandstand. Two large wooden executive desks sat on its raised stage. Also at odds with the sumptuous space were the three rows of utilitarian desks that marched across the room, covered with computers, paperwork, and telephones. Welcome to Para Central, where about fifty of Fulton Falls' nonhuman population gathers to work for County Commissioner Tristan Keith.

It was a holiday, so the place was strangely quiet. Only four solid people were in residence right now, gathered around Tristan's desk on the bandstand. Patricia's desk was the other one that sat there. To call Patricia Tristan's right hand would be downplaying her importance to her brother.

And speaking of tall, dark, handsome, and fanged, Tristan himself was among the tiny group. His haircut and clothing still reflects the 1920's; the last decade he saw as a mortal man. But trust me when I tell you, he is present-day sex-ay. His short hair is as black as the night he inhabits, and his eyes are nearly as dark. He has model-perfect features and will be the cover

boy for the first issue of *Night Shift*, a vampire business magazine set to launch in the new year. His long, lithe body has just the right amount of lean muscle. The man was built for sin.

During the day while his body lies in a coffin, Tristan is a ghost like me. His skin carries a golden-brown hue, his laugh comes easily, and his smile is warm and un-fanged. At night, however, it's a different story. Oh, he's still absolutely gorgeous ... to die for, har-de-har-har ... and just as elegant and charming as you can imagine. His skin is paper white though, like most vampires. If he relaxes his glamour, you'll see those dark eyes go red-rimmed and his fangs will appear. And while that's freaky enough, it's not these physical changes that fill me with dread. It's the cold, detached way he looks at others, at the way his hunter's gaze sizes them up. Vampires are always hungry and even the most civilized has that hint of predator lurking beneath. I love Tristan, but if I was alive we would not be sweeties, nor would Patricia and I be friends. I just can't cope with feeling like an item on someone's menu.

My other boyfriend was here too, though he was a little difficult to spy. He was channeling through a young man named Jason Somerville, and the effect couldn't be weirder to see.

Jason is in his early twenties, one of those too-cool kids who coasts the sidewalks on a skateboard, says 'bro' a lot, and wears the waistband of his pants in the mid-butt region. He's a bit of a goofball, but he is a smart kid who studies engineering at the local college. He's got the same gift as Isabella, the ability to consciously allow the dead to use his body to communicate with the living. Tristan pays him pretty good to let my second sweetie Dan borrow some flesh time.

Ah yes, Dan Saling. Where do I start with this man?

He'd died young of a heart attack. I call him my Marlboro Man, not because smoking took him out, but because he has that robust masculinity the old cigarette advertisements used to promote. His face has a gorgeous ruggedness that screams All Man. Rough and ready. Muscled from good old-fashioned hard work. You know what I mean. Male, male, male, male, capital MALE.

Heavens, I was getting horny just contemplating him.

As a ghost, only I could see the weird image of him melded to Jason. Seeing that strange double-exposure effect of Dan's delightful brawn on top of Jason's slighter boyish frame just about made me cross-eyed. It's a good thing ghosts don't get nauseous, because that's what I wanted to be looking at them.

As I drew closer, I saw the other two members of this grave-looking company (no pun intended). They were shifters, Gerald and Eddie.

Talk about your yummy beast. Not so much Eddie, who's a werehog. Hogs and humans are not a pretty combination. Panthers and humans, on the other hand...

Gerald is as gorgeous as he is a rarity. Muscled almost to the point of too much bulk, he is sooo easy on the eyes. His braided cornrows reach to his chiseled chest, parted by the black furred triangles of his ears. His green eyes practically glow in his mocha-brown face. His nose carries a slight suggestion of felineness, as do the fangs that peek out over his luscious lips. Subtle black markings accentuate his handsome catman features. He looks like what he is: hired muscle. He's Patricia's bodyguard, though I've rarely known her to need that kind of protection. Tristan insists, however, and Gerald certainly has no complaints. He has a big case of unrequited infatuation with his vampire mistress, a terrible shame considering she doesn't care for men in that way. When he smiles, he's the handsomest male I've ever seen.

Gerald wasn't smiling. His ears were flattened to the sides, a sure sign he was worried. He snapped his fingers in front of his best friend Eddie's face.

Eddie was sitting in Tristan's chair, an event in and of itself. The werehog is more hired muscle, usually sticking close to my vampire sweetie. His brown hair had been shaved into a mohawk between his pointed piggy ears. Eddie wasn't pretty to look at; no werehog is. But he wasn't as ugly as most, his snout more a hint than obvious on his roundish face, and his tusks curled only a little bit over his upper lip. He's one of the nicest guys I know when he's not having to play the heavy.

His expression was totally blank, his eyes not seeing the men leaning towards him, not blinking as Gerald snapped those fingers only a couple inches away. Concerned, I quickened my pace as I hurried down the aisle towards them.

Dan noticed my approach and straightened. He was in full possession of Jason's body, with the young channel in a trance elsewhere in his head. Channels are not aware of what is going on when they give control over to a ghost. I have to give Jason and Isabella credit; I sure wouldn't trust someone else with my body if I had one.

I heard both Dan's rumbly voice as well as Jason's lighter tones whisper to Tristan, "Brandilynn's here."

Tristan's worried gaze never left Eddie's face. "Go ahead and bring her up to speed."

Dan/Jason descended the bandstand to meet me. Out of habit, Dan attempted to stroke my hair when he reached me. Jason's hands passed over me, sort of like an errant breeze. With a rueful snort, Dan dropped his arms.

"What's up? What's wrong with Eddie?" I asked.

"We think he's been made a zombie. Lana will be able to tell us once she arrives."

I gaped. "Holy crap." Then I realized I didn't know if this was one of those hard-to-fix situations or simply a hiccup in the usual passage of the universe. From the looks on everyone's faces, I was betting on the more difficult option.

In other words, same doodie, different day. When you hang out with paras, drama is always on call.

So I admitted, "Okay, I'm not totally up on my knowledge of zombies. It's like a possession, kind of, right?"

Dan shook his head and lowered his voice. Bad sign. "Not quite. This is going to be hard for you to hear, Brandilynn. I know you like Eddie, as we all do, and the situation is really bad." He blew out a breath and raked his fingers through Jason's stiffly gelled 'do.

"Okay, I'm braced for the news." Famous last words.

"I'm hoping it's just some stupid witch's spell, but it's not looking good."

Dan was waffling, something he doesn't usually do. A cold tendril of real fear wormed into my stomach. But I've faced really bad stuff before, including being killed by a sadistic serial killer. Surely I could handle what was coming. So I gently prodded him. "Start from the beginning."

He nodded. "Eddie's been mentoring a kid who became a were six months ago. Kind of a big brother deal, you know?"

"Gotcha." I hated it when kids caught the Zoo Flu, the animal-borne virus that had only two outcomes if caught by a human: life as a shapeshifter or death.

"They spent the afternoon together because Eddie was teaching the boy how to stay in control and not shift under stress. Eddie's car broke down on the east side of the town limits after he dropped the kid off at his house."

“Not a good spot.” That area of Fulton Falls is badly run down, a haven for drug deals, prostitution, and the like. It was also a ‘thin’ place, which meant the ghost and physical worlds tended to affect each other. The buried Old Fulton Falls beneath that area is rife with black magic dealings, sorcery, all sorts of bad stuff. As above, so below. It’s hard to know which plane damages the other more.

Dan continued. “Eddie called Gerald to come and pick him up, which he did. Gerald found him like this, standing in the middle of the road.”

“So he brought Eddie here, hoping somebody could help. He was lucky to find you guys, it being Thanksgiving and all.”

Dan/Jason gave me a smile. “You know how Tristan is. He never rests when there’s an election on the horizon. I had nothing else to do, what with all you ladies having your own celebration.”

Aw. He’d missed me. It made me all warm and gooey inside and I blew him a kiss.

Patricia came in through the ballroom’s ornate glass double doors, finally arriving. Slowpoke vampire. She beelined straight for Tristan, sparing a nod for Dan/Jason as she went by. Now that we were away from the power station, she could no longer see me. She reached Tristan less than a breath later. As Gerald stood helplessly by the blank-eyed Eddie, brother and sister moved to one side to talk quietly.

I asked Dan, “So what will happen if Eddie’s a zombie? I take it that will be hard to fix or everyone wouldn’t look so freaked out.”

Dan started to reach for me again and stopped himself. It’s tough remembering the restrictions a physical body puts on you when you’re used to being a ghost. He had to settle for giving me his most comforting yet concerned look. “If he’s a zombie, then his soul is gone. He can’t be fixed.”

“You mean ... he’ll stay like that? Just an empty body?” I looked over Dan’s shoulder at the werelog, my stomach doing a slow, sick drop. Oh, this couldn’t be happening. Not to Eddie.

Dan spoke carefully, as if to a child. Normally I get ruffled if I’m condescended to, but in this case, I knew it was because I was not only clueless but ready to be upset. It turned out I had plenty more to get upset about.

“Zombies are dangerous creatures, sweetheart. If his soul is gone, he’ll have to be – his body will have to be destroyed.”

I tore my gaze from Eddie’s too-still form. Gerald was starting to shake as he stood next to his friend, and I was reminded of how good shifter senses were. Though Gerald couldn’t catch my end of the conversation, he could probably hear Dan speaking through Jason.

“Destroyed? As in killed? What the heck, Dan?” My voice was rising.

Dan swallowed. “A zombie is like an automaton. All it knows is what its body tells it. If it’s tired, it stops where it is and goes to sleep. If it’s hungry, it grabs the closest thing and eats. And I’m not talking a cheeseburger and fries from the nearest drive thru, baby girl.”

A shudder ran through me and I went colder than cold. “People. You’re saying Eddie will eat people.” I’d thought that was an urban legend.

“Zombies prefer fresh meat. So fresh that it’s still breathing.”

I felt ill. Again my mind insisted, *this can’t be happening*. But apparently, it was.

“I guess he’s not hungry then,” I said weakly.

“Not yet.”

“Who’s going to kill him if he’s a zombie?” My gaze went to Gerald. The werepanther was tough and bad to the bone, but no way would the big man be able to kill his best bud. I looked at Tristan and Patricia who stood to one side, their predator faces as sad as vampires could get. I really wanted to think my sweetie and his sister would find it too difficult to destroy someone who had stood ready to take a stake for them.

Dan said, “Execution of a zombie is a matter for the authorities. If Lana says Eddie’s gone, we’ll turn him over to the police, who will take him to the hospital. He’ll be sedated, his family called to say their goodbyes, then they’ll cremate him.”

I couldn’t stop shaking. “Cremate?”

“Much like a vampire, it’s the only way to make sure a zombie stays down. You have to turn it to ashes.”

Something occurred to me then, something that should have bothered me before this. But hey, Eddie was sort of a friend. I think in my shock I can be excused for overlooking the obvious right away. “How did Eddie become a zombie – if that’s what he is?”

A flicker of anger drove back the pain in Dan’s eyes. It was kind of good to see. I know from personal experience how much better being mad is to feeling sorrow.

The dual expressions of controlled fury didn’t sit well on neither Dan nor Jason’s face. “Somebody, a voodoo priest or priestess usually, separates the soul from the body in order to make the body their slave. No one’s quite sure what happens to the soul. It just disappears, kind of like when vampires suffer their final death. But somebody made this happen. If we find that person—”

He didn’t finish the statement. He was really mad, and the threat didn’t need to be spoken.

Getting revenge sounded pretty all right to me. But my own anger was tempered by a bigger, scarier worry. If someone had cast Eddie’s soul out to make a slave out of him yet we had possession of his body, then that someone was potentially out there looking for another person to zombify to take his place.

This situation was only getting worse by the second.

It seemed like forever before Lana, Taylor, and Isabella arrived and were brought up to speed. With surprising dexterity for her size, Lana knelt by Eddie and took his hand. She looked up into his blank face, searching for some spark of life in the faraway gaze of his light brown, almost tan eyes. Her usually beaming face had gone really, really dim.

We all gathered close, as if the warmth of so many bodies could spark Eddie to life once more. The others stood around the psychic and werhog, shoulder to shoulder. As the one non-corporeal being, I was forced to look over Dan and Patricia’s shoulders. Tristan, Patricia, and I had no need for air, but the others seemed to have stopped breathing too.

The gravity of the situation hit me all over again like a punch in the stomach. I wished I could hold someone’s hand, but Dan was still animating Jason. I had to settle for crossing my fingers like a schoolgirl.

*Please, Eddie. Please.*

Lana’s voice trembled until it was almost a warble. Leaning close to him, she entreated, “Eddie? Eddie, if you’re in there, you need to come forward and talk to me.”

We waited, hoping for some sign. Lana closed her eyes, and I could almost feel her reaching into the space the werhog’s body occupied, listening desperately in the dark for some sign of movement. The silence spun out into forever as we waited and waited.

“Eddie, please.” Lana’s plea was a choked sob. Her eyes opened to blink tears, sending black rivers of her too-heavily applied mascara down her pale fleshy cheeks. The next moment, grief shook her. “He’s not there. His body is empty.”

Gerald had been gripping Eddie’s shoulders. I saw black fur run out of his skin and his fingernails narrow to claws. In his grief he lost control enough to start shifting. His hint of a triangular nose had become a full panther’s muzzle. Everyone averted their eyes, pretending not to notice. Gerald is a very proud man. We would never humiliate him, even though his loss of restraint was more than justified and he had nothing to be embarrassed about.

Tristan pulled a cell phone from his jacket pocket, stepping away from our tight huddle around Eddie’s vacated body. “I’ll call the authorities to come get him.”

Weeping started in earnest from Lana and Isabella. Taylor’s stricken face was awash in tears too, and Patricia gave her a grim hug before imperiously motioning to two vampire aides. I hadn’t noticed them coming into the room.

She told them, “I want a list of all voodoo practitioners within a one-hundred mile radius. I want to know where they were tonight and witnesses to back up their alibis.”

The male and female gave quick nods before hurrying off. As they left, three more paras, a werewolf, a gargoyle, and another vampire, walked into the ballroom. Word was apparently spreading fast that something had gone down.

It was our ever-practical Taylor who asked, “Does anyone know when Eddie last ate?”

Gerald had regained his composure, once again looking more man than beast. His deep voice was edged with growly pain, warning us he’d found his restraint under great duress. “He took his little brother protégé out for hamburgers a couple hours ago.”

Isabella dabbed her pouring eyes with a handkerchief. “He should be safe to be around until the Para Patrol gets here.”

That gave everyone some measure of relief. I sensed the real concern hadn’t been as much for their own lives as the fear of having to put Eddie down themselves. Even if the real gift of him had been lost, no one here wanted to destroy the packaging.

I looked at Dan, fighting to make his gorgeous face clear as he lurked within Jason. “This is awful. Poor Eddie.”

My sexy Marlboro Man nodded. He rubbed at his eyes, momentarily too overcome to speak. He’d known the werewolf for years.

Tristan flipped his phone closed. “Para Patrol and the police are on their way. When I get my hands on the son of a bitch who did this—”

His glamour disappeared, revealing the vampire he was underneath that elegant show he put on for the public. Tristan’s handsome face thinned, his eyes turned to black holes rimmed with fire, and his fangs flashed like pearl daggers. He became chillingly beautiful, the way an agitated cobra is. I gasped despite knowing this was who he was half the time.

Dan misinterpreted my shock. “Close your ears, Brandilynn. There might be a lot of profanity before this night is out.”

I swallowed, looking away from the fearsome aspect of my vampire boyfriend. Instead of telling Dan it wasn’t my profound dislike of foul language that had made me react I said, “You can all curse until my ears fall off if you want. This is a cuss-worthy situation.”

If I found the S. O. B., I might have a few choice words myself.