

For an instant, it was like being in heaven. I soared like an angel through the moonlit night, the world silvery beneath me. It reminded me of the dreams I'd had when I lived. It felt like the most natural thing in the world, as if I'd been born to this ability to fly. I lifted light as a feather, leaving earthbound cares far below, the freest I'd ever felt. If not for America's omnipresent soundtrack of distant traffic, I could believe myself beyond the grasp of reality. I'd been liberated from the grind of the mundane.

But only for an instant. When the first moment of elation passed, I felt the tug of gravity. I fought it, and it got worse. And then the ground rushed at me; furrowed dirt littered with the broken remains of cornstalks and husks loomed ever larger. At least this time I remembered to keep my mouth shut as I dove with bone-breaking force into the long-plowed field. Nothing says defeat like the grit of dirt between your teeth for hours on end.

The painful snaps of facial bones and my left collarbone giving way would have stolen my breath had I still been among the living. All it did was make me mad however. No sooner had the body I inhabited slammed to the ground, when I jumped up with a scream. My howl of frustration, streaming between broken teeth and sounding comically nasal – well, comical to anyone but me – startled the few birds who chose to call on this cold February night. No doubt it curled the hair of anyone who chanced to hear it echoing over the wide, fallow fields that served as my practice area.

Like magic, a huge brown hand appeared by my face. Liberally sprinkled with tiny ebony hairs, it held a gracefully shaped black bottle. Burgundy letters proclaiming it to be *Blood Potion No. 9* blazed across its gold-trimmed label. Had I been in the mood to continue reading, the fancy calligraphy would assure me that it was the purest elixir next to what one could drink straight from a vein.

My name is Brandilynn Payson. I was murdered less than a year ago, my soul left to wander as a ghost. I am not a vampire. I had the bad fortune to get sucked into the body of one when its owner's soul was eaten by a creature known as the lamia. But that's another story. Let's stick with this one.

I'd been guzzling bottles of BP9 almost nonstop since I'd risen from the grave at sundown. I was saturated with the foul stuff. Despite its certified status, Blood Potion tasted nowhere as good as fresh. Boy, how I craved real living blood. That desire only made me angrier. It gave credence to those who argued with me that I'm an actual bloodsucker.

I'm not, darn it. I can prove it too. My own corpse is respectably buried in the cemetery, not stalking the earth and shaking down the living for a hot drink. This is not my body. I am not a vampire.

Case in point: vampires fly. So far I am a dismal failure in that realm. This had been my third attempt and third crash in the 15 minutes I'd been out here. As for previous tries in the last few weeks, I'd lost count.

I felt my bones knitting back together, the regeneration fed by all the BP9 I'd consumed. I shoved Gerald's hand with its offering away. "I'm fine," I said, glaring at the werepanther.

Green kitty-cat eyes gazed at me with dubious regard. Despite my frustration, I found it hard to remain angry looking at Gerald Clark. For one thing, he's one of the few real friends I have left. For another, he's good to look at. Plain and simple, he's a yummy man-beast.

I'm not kidding about the 'beast' part of that description. He is one of those unlucky people who contracted Zoo Flu, a virus that kills more often than it transforms its victims. There is no consensus on which fate is worse. Zoo Flu is awfully contagious, jumping from animal to human easily. Those who survive it are often shoved to the fringes of society. Despite para rights

making gains in the last couple of decades, shifters still make up the majority of the homeless and discriminated against.

Gerald's particular flavor of shifter is Florida panther. Both animal and werereature are nearly extinct, so he's a rare one. In fact, he's the only one of his kind that I've ever seen. As far as shifters go, he's gorgeous. Soft triangular ears split the long cornrows braided in his hair. Those green eyes seem to glow against his mocha skin with its subtle black markings. I knew from seeing him naked that the markings enhance his muscular physique. At over six feet tall, Gerald looks like the hired muscle he is. But this is no dumb, insensitive brute. He's as true blue as people come, and he's in charge of keeping me sane while I adjust to being – I mean, inhabiting – a vampire.

One thing I have learned control over is the glamour that takes my borrowed body from red-eyed, fanged fiend to the appearance of something a little more human. I concentrated on doing that. I tried on a smile that I wasn't even close to feeling. "I said I'm fine. Just give me a moment to finish healing, okay big guy?"

His ears twitched forward from their near-laid back position. They tended to flatten when Gerald sensed danger. He smiled back, his sculpted and slightly feline features devastatingly handsome with the warm expression. Pride beamed from that dark face at the control I exercised. He lowered the bottle. "Sure, Brandilynn. Let me know if you change your mind."

I held back a sigh. I had no illusions that I would be guzzling another bottle of BP9 in the very near future. Probably within minutes. I'd nearly polished off a case already.

At least I wasn't chewing on a warm body yet. Gerald and I are not sweeties, but he's been my live blood donor more times than I care to count. I don't like doing that to him, though he heals as fast as I do and he never complains.

Another point to consider when it comes to whether or not I'm a real vampire. In most cases, vamps who can get to the real live stuff eschew bottled blood. There really is no comparison between the two.

I watched Gerald as he paced back and forth, admiring the strong body that stalked rather than walked. His breath plumed from his nearly triangular nose. Even southeast Georgia gets frigid in February, with temps sometimes reaching freezing. Not that it matters in a vampire body. I'm always cold in this form, except when I lose control and feed on Gerald.

I didn't have to breathe. I inhaled anyway, catching my companion's warm, musky scent. Man, Gerald smelled good. For once I ignored the throb of want for his blood, focusing on the man himself. Gerald had it tough dealing with me.

I was trying to learn to fly, not because I want to be more like other vampires, but because it's a darned useful skill. It had been left to the poor werepanther to coach me. He was not a good instructor because ... hello! He's landlocked. However none of the local vampire clutch wanted anything to do with me. Especially their leader, Tristan Keith.

I shied away from thinking about Tristan. Pain too easily turned to depression which shifted too easily to anger. Anger leads to bloodlust. I was determined to get through one night without jumping Gerald ... because taking blood from another person wasn't the worst thing that happened when I lost control and fed.

Needing to distract myself from bad thoughts, I focused on what needed to be done. I threw back my shoulders and lifted my chin. Steeled my spine. Gathered my courage. Pretended things would work out some sweet day.

Right.

I called to Gerald, "Okay. I'm going to try this again."

He stopped his stalking to grace me with a smile, flashing white teeth and impressive fangs. Unlike me, Gerald can't glamour his appearance. "Good. Now stop trying to power your way through this. The others told me they just think about it and it happens. They don't force it, sort of like how you walk from place to place without really trying. Get it?"

It was good advice. Too bad it never seemed to work. I twitched a wry smile. "Our first steps took effort too, Gerald. We don't remember that. All right. Here I go."

I closed my eyes. I tried to think about leaving the ground calmly. Serenely floating. Every vampire – that is, every vampire body – could do it. Patricia did it as easily as the rest when the body that now cloaked me had belonged to her. I had all of Patricia's other abilities: glamour, healing, quickness, amazing strength. I had this ability too. There was no reason I couldn't fly.

I felt the pressure of the ground fade from beneath my feet. This was good. Simple levitation was easy. I had this. No problem.

I opened my eyes to discover I'd gone a few feet up. I'd drifted out of Gerald's reach even if he'd stretched that big body up to grab me. Yep, no stress, no mess. Now the time had come to move.

"Just a little," I coaxed the temperamental powers that I wanted to wield. I began to coast forward, slowly at first. I willed myself to ignore the pull of gravity that made my movements jerky.

"Float, float, float," I chanted. I was so busy trying to stay aloft, watching the ground below me, that I didn't notice I trucked right for the magnolia at the edge of the field until Gerald's shout warned me.

My slow pace had quickened too. The tree loomed a few feet away and came at me in a rush. I yelled and panicked, jerking to one side and gaining speed as I did so.

I tried to slow as the tree spun from my view, but I was still turning. All was confusion in an instant. The earth and sky traded places several times as I cartwheeled through the air, a squalling, out-of-control Brandilynn.

I went down hard. Because I was already rolling, much of the impact lessened that time. I didn't even break anything. It didn't matter. I'd fallen once again, barely doing better than the first time I'd tried to fly. When my body stopped spinning like a tumbleweed, I yelled and pounded the hard earth with my fists. Frustration bloomed bold and furious.

Red hazed my vision. Anger dripped acid in my brain, melting any sanity that lived there. Hatred for my condition exploded from my non-beating heart until every fiber of my body quaked with it. I tore clods of soil from the ground, wanting to claw the world apart.

I saw movement at the corner of my eye. I sensed warmth, smelled life. Without thought, I launched myself at it, mouth gaping wide open.

Shifters are fast. Vampires are faster. Gerald had no time to reverse course or put up a defense.

I had him by the throat in less than a breath. My mouth filled with heat, the only heat I could feel in this body. The thick fluid spilling from the rent I'd torn in the werepanther's flesh fairly sang against my tongue. All conscience fled as I drew on the man I'd toppled to the ground.

What does it feel like to feed on real live blood? The best way I could describe it would be the elation of Christmas morning, graduation, and your wedding day all rolled into one. It's joy so incredible that it can't be contained.

My whole being warmed as I filled with that sweet elixir. My stolen heart thumped once, twice, and then pounded against my sternum. I drew breaths between swallows. I was alive

again. Alive! And more alive than when I'd lived in my own body. I felt hyperaware of everything, particularly the man lying beneath me.

Patricia had been a long, lithe gal, elegantly slender without veering into skinny territory. With her body I draped lightly over the behemoth werepanther giving me a small taste of animation. My breasts, lovely teacup mounds, mashed against the concrete swells of Gerald's heaving chest. The tops of my thighs cradled within his hips.

My pussy throbbed to life, as it always did when I attacked Gerald. Live blood made my entire being want to celebrate every possible sensation of warmth ... especially that of sex.

As I continued to suck hungrily at Gerald's throat, I tore at his fly. He helped, shoving his jeans down as soon as he was able. His cock matched the rest of him: big and swollen.

He was eager as always. Sometimes I thought he didn't put up much of a fight on purpose. Not because he knew he'd lose, but because he *wanted* to lose. Gerald had suffered an unrequited love for Patricia when she was still with us. With no hope of winning her, he contented himself with being her bodyguard and protector. The man definitely had a knight-in-shining-armor complex when it came to his former charge.

Having sex with me in Patricia's body was the closest he could come to being with his lost love. Plus sex with a feeding vampire was supposed to be as good for the victim as it is for the bloodsucker. At any rate, Gerald showed no hesitation when I ripped open the slacks and panties I wore and plunged down on his avid cock. His hips bucked upward, spearing deep into me.

My senses rioting, I came on the spot. My pussy clenched hard around the thickness within, pulling as hard on the flesh as my mouth did on Gerald's throat. Now all was elation, 4th of July fireworks, and a New Year's Eve celebration.

I rutted clumsily, trying to screw and feed all at once, unable to get enough of either. Gerald heaved beneath me. He flipped us over so that I lay on the hard ground with him on top. None of that bothered me, not so long as my brief flirtation of life was affirmed to the utmost.

I reveled in being between the concrete-like field and the hard muscled man. When it comes to sex, I'm naturally submissive. Patricia's body is that of a predator, but when it feasts it doesn't mind being on the bottom. The real Brandilynn gets her goodies.

Shifters were stronger than humans. Gerald told me he had to be careful with the occasional lady brave enough to chance deadly Zoo Flu in exchange for beastly sex. There were people who had that kink. I guess the danger upped the excitement for them. I loved sex too, but I didn't think I'd put my life on the line for it. My current body couldn't catch Zoo Flu, thank goodness.

Gerald didn't have to hold back with me. Vampires could take real punishment, and he delivered a rutting that would have broken the pelvis of any human gal. Jackhammers had nothing on a werepanther for a good pounding.

His groin thudded against mine, a deep, steady thump-thump-thump. His cock was thick and long, hitting all the good spots that made my toes curl. A staccato moan rose from my throat between swallows of his precious blood.

My legs curled around his butt, pulling him in as deep as he could go with every gorgeous thrust. I'd come with the first invasion, but I primed fast for another. Thick, warm blood brightened every cell of my body. I could feel him with the very hairs on my head. Lust churned in a delicious roil deep in my belly, seeping to fill me. I clawed at Gerald's wide, muscled back. Keening with pleasure and want, I arched to rub my clit against the rough curls coating his pelvis.

Brighter and brighter, I lit within. My body gathered itself, feeding on the ultimate pleasure of devouring life and lust. Gerald's gasps and low growls added to the delight. The light that

grew inside me grew more brilliant. Then came the dazzling blast, an explosion as intense as it was silent and unseen.

My mouth yawned wide, screaming with ecstasy. My back bent the wrong way as a convulsion of elation shattered me. My pussy seized on the interloper, coaxing it, demanding it be fed my lover's seed even as he'd fed my need for living blood.

The shriek that poured from Gerald's throat was all animal. Through lust-hazed eyes I saw glossy fur running out of his face and arms. His nose extended to a muzzle. Long whiskers erupted from his upper lip. He held onto his human form otherwise, but there was no denying the beast teetered a mere instant from appearing. He even smelled like animal, of trees and dirt and fresh air.

And power. We both crackled with it, pretend vampire and near-beast creatures, sizzling the atmosphere as we drove against each other. We embodied lust and fury, two violent beings striving for brutal release.

I exploded again. Filled with life, the 100-year-old body responded to pleasure's call. It conceded to lust's demands as living blood ripped it from its undead existence.

Vampires couldn't take blood from a living being without having sex or expending all that energy in some violent form. As far as the sex was concerned it made sense. The most ardent expression of life was the drive to create it. No, Patricia's body could not bear children ... no matter how it felt for this too-short time, it was still dead. But that didn't mean it wouldn't try its darnedest to grasp what it could.

Even when Gerald finished spilling and my pussy's seizures had ebbed to minor convulsions, we kept moving against each other. Each of us tried to hold onto the glory, to sip every last drop from it we could. Even the tiniest surge was an affirmation for me. I loved feeling alive.

At last we were still, gasping in each other's ear. My heart beat and my lungs breathed for this brief time when the blood filled me. How I missed being alive! Bittersweet remembering hit, a counterpoint to the exalted flush of vitality.

Gerald rose from me. He'd reverted back to being more man than panther, the fur reduced to stubble on his cheeks and chin. The muzzle had receded, though the triangular shape of his nose was a constant. He gazed down at me with a heartbreaking look of want.

It wasn't Brandilynn Payson Gerald saw. He stared at his long-lost Patricia, the woman he'd loved so dearly. The woman who'd gone beyond the reach of the living, undead, and dead.

I covered my face with my hands, partly because I couldn't stand to see such naked yearning on my friend's face. But mostly because I had let anger get the upper hand yet again. I had fed on the living. Worst still, I had had sex with Gerald.

"Dang it. When will this get easier?"

The werepanther pulled away from me. Conscientious as ever, he tried to arrange my clothing to save my dignity. Ha. My clothes could have doubled as confetti. I'd torn my pants off with a vampire's strength, and Gerald had shredded my blouse. Werepanthers have claws.

His rich voice heavy with what I took to be regret, he said, "It's okay, Brandilynn. It can't be helped sometimes."

I sat up, gathering my tattered clothing and poise as best I could. "Tell that to the people who die when a vampire loses control. Tell that to Dan."

My voice trembled in the cold night air. Life felt good, but it brought sharpness to emotions like remorse as well. I managed to feel vibrant and like a big barrel of poo at the same time.

Gerald put his arms around me and held me close. His comfort was that of a caring brother instead of a lover now. “You won’t kill me, and Dan understands how things are right now. Hush, little girl. It’s all right. It’s all right, honey.”

He rocked me like a little girl, petting my short black hair, humming a quiet tune in that deep, soothing voice. I let him, feeling the quiet pleasure of a friend who never judged. Gerald was one of the few bright sparks in my pathetic existence. I appreciated it while I could; while hunger and coldness and anger didn’t ride me like a sadistic jockey. Contentment seeped in, displacing the uncertainty and pain.

“I never would have pegged you for a cat person, Brandilynn.”

The amused voice cut through my quieting emotions. In an instant Gerald and I were on our feet, alerted predators ready to take on whoever had dared to encroach on our territory.

I relaxed with an inward groan as I recognized the interloper. Levi Ward. Great. As if things weren’t screwy enough, I’d been caught banging Gerald by the werewolf federal agent who also had the hots for me.

I self-consciously covered my naughty bits with my arms. I tried to hide my discomfort by glaring in defiance at Levi. “What are you doing here, Bane?”

Our intruder identified, Gerald eased up and adjusted his clothing. His had come through our amorous encounter in dirty but otherwise decent shape. He eyed Levi with overt warning. The men had never met, but Gerald knew the story.

I delighted in Levi’s scowl. I’d called him Bane. He hated the name he’d been given when working undercover with a criminal motorcycle gang. I use it every time he ticked me off.

Levi Ward ticked me off quite often.

His golden gaze turned to Gerald, sizing him up. Levi was almost as muscled and every bit as handsome as the werepanther. His mouth was more pronounced, a definite though slight muzzle. His golden-brown eyes were riveting. His dark hair was shot with gray, the color of his wolf. The way his black tee shirt stretched across his defined chest would make a nun scream for strength. Jeans clung lovingly to carved thighs.

Seeing him and Gerald put evil thoughts in my head. My libido, still enlivened by Gerald’s blood, perked up yet again. I firmly shut it down. Levi was never, ever on the menu. I made that mistake once and vowed never to do it again.

Unfortunately Levi was one of those for whom the word ‘no’ translates to ‘maybe if you keep trying’. He looked me up and down with unconcealed interest as he said, “I came looking for you. Dan Saling sent me.”

“Dan? Try again, dog breath. You can’t see ghosts.” I let go of my glamour to show off my fangs.

Gerald sighed and picked up the full bottle of BP9 he’d dropped when I’d jumped him. Most had spilled, but about a quarter of it was left. He shoved it in my direction. “Don’t provoke her, Wolf Boy.”

Levi frowned at him as I shook my head, indicating I didn’t need the juice. The agent asked him, “What’s the matter, kitten? Can’t handle Ms. Payson?”

“I’d say I handled her fine, pup. Now shut up before she decides to take a bite out of you. I won’t stand in her way for that part, but you better believe you won’t get a taste of her after she’s done tasting you.”

I didn’t like how this conversation was shaping up for several reasons. I gave the two shifters angry eyes as I said, “Why don’t you both settle down? I’m not territory to be marked.”

Levi took a good look at me, this time keeping his gaze above neck level. For an instant his gold eyes glowed. The shine faded and he nodded to Gerald in grudging respect. “Don’t provoke. Check.” He drew a deep breath and addressed me again, his tone a good deal more polite. “Dan relayed his message through that psychic who hears the dead. Lana?”

That didn’t help my temper one bit. What was Dan thinking, sending Levi here to see me? He knew how badly things went when I worked on flying. He knew what situation Levi might stumble on.

My irritation wasn’t helped as the temporary warmth of life drained from my body. I was going back to cold, undead vampire. I snapped words like whips at Levi. “What. Do. You. Want?”

He rolled his gaze to the deadly darkness known as Gerald. “Private matter. Government matter.”

Gerald folded his massive arms over his massive chest and frowned. “Don’t even think about it. Do you know how fast a new vampire moves and how uncontrollable it can be?”

I stomped my foot. “I am not a vampire! I’m just trapped in one.”

Gerald sighed. “Sorry, Brandilynn. I don’t want anything bad to happen because I wasn’t close by to stop it. I could care less for Agent Wolfie here, but you’d never forgive yourself.”

He was right, as usual. I swallowed a lump in my throat, brought on by the knowledge that when I lost my temper I couldn’t be trusted.

I took criticism from Gerald with no problem. He’d been amazing about sticking close by and helping me while I navigated my new existence.

Levi held his hands up in a peace gesture. “I promise to be polite. I will say and do nothing offensive. I’m sorry, Mr. Clark, but I really do need to talk to her alone.”

I nodded to Gerald. “Leave me plenty of Blood Potion. I’ll keep a lid on my temper. I won’t try to fly,” I added, attempting to joke. All’s well here, folks.

I could tell Gerald was unsure. I put all my best glamour on, trying to look as human and unruffled as possible. I could never hide the paper-white skin or hungry look that was part and parcel of a vampire’s appearance, but I managed to look only semi-deadly.

Bless his soul, he acquiesced. “I’ll get some more Blood Potion and your change of clothes.”

He did so. As he set a six pack of bottled blood on the ground and handed me another outfit, he warned Levi. “She means a lot to me. She means a lot to people who mean a lot to me. You on the other hand mean nothing, Deputy Dog. She loses her grip and kills you, I’ll see to it that your body will never be found. Got me?”

I had to give Levi credit. He didn’t even raise an eyebrow at the threat. He nodded. “Understood.”

Gerald stalked off. I heard him growling softly as he went. I motioned to Levi to turn his back while I put on clothes that would restore my modesty. Quirking a wry smile that hinted at the deviltry I knew existed in spades, Levi put his back to me.

Vampire hearing is sensitive. I heard when Gerald got into his car half a mile away. The door slammed, letting me know the werepanther’s temper. He treated his fully restored ’67 Mercury Cougar with kid gloves most of the time.

“I’m dressed,” I told Levi. The pink silk blouse was perhaps a bit flouncy for Patricia’s body, but it gave her bluish-white skin some life. Cream-colored slacks toned down the frivolous top.

Levi turned and grinned at me. I knew his smile meant trouble. I huffed with impatience. “What?”

“The irresistible Brandilynn Payson scores another sweetheart.”

“Don’t be stupid. Gerald was in love with this body’s previous occupant.”

He snickered. “Which is why he was so quick to open his fly when you lost your shit. And why he’d threaten a federal agent with covering up a murder if you decide to kill me.”

At my glare, he raised his hands in surrender. “Okay, okay. I’m sorry for the innuendo and the language. I promised not to make you mad. I apologize. Truce?”

I wasn’t mollified in the least. “You’re such a jerk. Tell me what you want so I can get on with my afterlife.”

Before he got into that, I wanted to know something more important to me personally. “First things first. Why did Dan send you to talk to me? And why did you approach him?”

Levi shrugged. “I can’t get to Tristan Keith. Every time I try to talk to him, his secretary puts me off. I’m not sure she’s passing along my messages.”

Tristan’s secretary Wendy was too efficient to not tell Tristan a fed was trying to reach him. My bet was that Tristan snubbed Levi on purpose.

Tristan and I were history. Big time. I found it interesting that Tristan still held a grudge over the brief encounter I’d had with Levi. Especially since Tristan had been banging blood groupies left and right at the time.

Levi continued. “I thought talking to someone who has his lordship’s ear might get things moving. So I approached the clairvoyant and asked her if she could help me talk to Dan. She did so, and he said you might have more luck talking to Tristan Keith than he would.” The shifter gave me a curious look. “I’m running in rings trying to get to Keith, and no one will help me. Instead, you’re all passing me around like a hot potato. Is there trouble in the land of our new state legislator?”

I snorted, a most unladylike sound. “Tristan’s not elected yet. Dan knows he’s less likely to talk to me than him anyway.” My tone ended in a snarl.

“What has got your panties in a bunch, girl? Or are those vampire urges making you cranky?”

I opened a bottle of BP9 and took a healthy swallow. “It makes me wonder if my boyfriend sent you here to interrupt anything that might be happening with Gerald. Like what you found.”

Levi’s golden brown eyes widened. “Your boyfriend – so the ghost Dan Saling is the guy that keeps me from having a decent chance at you?”

“Don’t flatter yourself. You do perfectly fine on your own convincing me to keep my distance.”

I drained the bottle, gathering my thoughts. I made myself go calm. I could deal with Dan later ... and Tristan MUCH later, if at all.

I made myself businesslike. “What do you want Tristan to know?”

“A number of shifters have gone missing in the last four months. Gone without a trace.”

“No sign of hide nor hair?” My quip fell flat judging from Levi’s grim expression. I sighed. “Levi, you of all people know how marginalized the weres are. You live it every day. All it takes is a scratch and some human gets Zoo Flu. Then they’re dead or furry. The majority of the time, they get ostracized. Since when is it anything new for shifters to drop out of society?”

He folded big, mouth-watering arms over his chest. “When they’re family people with steady jobs. I’m not talking about new shifters. I’m not telling you about the poor bastards who end up homeless and dumpster diving for their meals. Hell, two of my best instructors at the academy have vanished. Missing persons reports have been filed by wives and parents.”

Okay, this was serious. “How many shifters are we talking about?”



“Eight total, which I know doesn’t sound like many—”

My mouth dropped open. “But in four months’ time, it’s a lot. I see what you mean. Tristan won’t talk to you?”

Tristan employed a ton of people, all paras. If shifters were going missing, he would know. He had to know.

Levi rubbed the back of his neck, his expression frustrated. “When I’ve tried to set up appointments with him, his aide reminds me that he’s the head of a vampire clutch, not the alpha of a pack. She won’t give me the time of day.”

I’d had my own run-ins with Wendy and could vouch for her ability to keep people away from Tristan. “Go on.”

“I showed up at the King George tonight, hoping to catch our would-be state senator and force him to talk to me. He may not be a shifter, but he’s a para and he keeps up with everything in this town. He claims to be about all paras’ rights. Surely he’s noticed something by now.”

“If he has, I’m probably the last person he’d discuss it with.”

“I guess seeing his sister’s body roaming around with someone else in it isn’t a welcome sight?”

A spark of anger came and went, leaving depression in its wake. “Tristan tried to deal with it. He really did, but he and Patricia were too close. He can’t even tolerate being in the same room with me these days.”

Once upon a time, Tristan and I had been in love. We’d been in an uncomfortable triangle, he, Dan, and me. I’d been ready to give up Dan for Tristan when I’d been pulled into this weird half-time life in Patricia Keith’s body.

Levi pulled me out of my morose musings. “I need some help here, Brandilynn. Even the smallest tidbit of information might be worth something. The cops have nothing. As much as I hate to admit it, Tristan’s my only hope.”

I sighed. I didn’t want to talk to my ex. But eight shifters in four months ... this was a big deal. If Fulton Falls’ champion of para rights didn’t know what was going on, he needed to.

“I’ll try. I’ll talk to Tristan and the others.”

“Great. Here are pictures of my instructors.” Levi handed me some shots, obviously the agents’ federal identification photos. I looked them over. A werigator and werhog, both men, both late thirties, early forties. Strong and proud. They sure didn’t look like people who would up and leave with no warning.

I shook my head, knowing what I was up against when it came to Tristan. “I can’t promise anything. Most of the paras are as freaked out by what happened to me and Patricia as Tristan is. I hadn’t made many friends among their kind before I got sucked into this body.”

“No pun intended?” Levi teased. “I’m not surprised you weren’t popular with the shifters. I remember how you had a few bad habits when it came to political correctness.”

I squirmed at the reminder. When Levi and I first met, I had bad manners. Okay, I’ll be frank. I was bigoted. I had been that way in life when it came to paras, and becoming one myself as a ghost had not cured me of some unfortunate habits. I’d referred to shifters as ‘varmints’. Nowadays I would never say such a thing, especially to someone like Gerald.

I acknowledged that I hadn’t endeared myself to my supernatural fellows before I’d ended up in Patricia’s body. “Gerald is one of the few that will still talk to me.”

“He thinks enough of you to play protector.”

Again I had to admit, at least to myself, that Gerald's kindnesses probably had more to do with the form I currently took than with me myself. But that doesn't change the fact he's been a rock. I owed that man a lot, no matter the reason.

Levi eyed the distant mint green car shining in the moonlight with a wry smile. "I guess I won't chase the big cat up a tree." Forever the smarty pants, the agent gave me an overt ogling. "At least he's getting something out of his kindness. You know, I've never had a vampire before. As far as possessions go, this is one of your better ones."

I released enough of my glamour to flash him fangs. "No, Levi. No and always no."

With that, I turned on my heel and stalked away, grabbing up my BP9 as I went. But I didn't open a new bottle, even though Levi's laugh made my temper spike yet again.

Stupid werewolf.