
RUBY AND THE BEAST

By Ditter Kellen

www.ditterkellen.com

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Chapter One

Ruby Atwood stepped off the plane at the Louis Armstrong International Airport in Kenner Louisiana a little before noon.

She glanced around at the familiar scenery with a heavy heart. Though Louisiana would always be her home, it would never be the same after today.

Trailing off toward baggage claim, Ruby fought the tears that had been threatening since landing. She'd been notified by the New Orleans Criminal Investigative Division that a man resembling Charles Atwood had arrived in the morgue after a shooting at Barone's Gentlemen's Club the night before.

As her father's only living relative besides her nine-year-old brother, Cameron, it was left up to Ruby to identify the body. And she had little doubt that it was her father lying in that morgue. She'd been frantically calling him all night and morning to no avail.

Poor Cam, Ruby thought, grabbing her bag and heading toward the front to hail a cab. *He must be terrified.*

Cameron's mother, Lucy Peters, a known prostitute and heroin addict, had left only days after Cameron's birth, leaving Ruby and her father alone to raise him.

The fact that Cameron hadn't suffered any obvious adverse effects from the drugs his mother had taken during her pregnancy was a miracle in itself.

"Excuse me," a woman murmured, pulling Ruby out of her reflecting. "Do you have change for a dollar?"

Ruby shook her head. Growing up in New Orleans, she knew just about every scam that could be run. And this woman was definitely a con. "I'm sorry, but I don't carry cash."

Without bothering with a thank you, the woman scurried off in search of her next victim.

The hot Louisiana sun baked the sidewalk with its scorching rays as Ruby made her way outside in search of a cab.

Keeping her fingers wrapped tightly around the handle of her bag, she brought her hand up and flagged a taxi that sat along the curb.

The cab driver quickly pulled forward and rolled down the window. "Where to?"

"Southside Medical Center on Canal Street," Ruby returned, climbing into the backseat.

The cab took off with a jolt, darting in and out of the airport traffic like a seasoned

NASCAR driver. "Here for a visit or heading home?"

Ruby met the cabbie's gaze in the rearview mirror. "That all depends on what I find when I arrive."

But she knew. Somewhere deep in her heart, she knew that her father would be lying on a cold slab in the basement of that hospital.

Obviously sensing that she didn't feel up to chatting, the cabbie shifted his attention back to the road and the manic drivers in his path.

Ruby turned to stare out the window, a feeling of dread settling in her gut. What was she supposed to do without her father? Moreover, what would Cameron do?

Twenty minutes later, the cab slowed to a stop in front of Southside Medical Center. "That'll be forty-five dollars."

Ruby dug two twenties and a ten out of the pocket of her jeans and handed it over the seat.

"Would you like for me to wait?" the driver murmured, looking over his shoulder.

Hesitating, she glanced at the hospital's entrance before gripping the door handle, grabbing her bag, and stepping out. "No, thank you. I don't know how long I'll be." She closed the door behind her.

The hospital loomed in front of her, an overwhelming presence of death and gloom. Though most would see it as a beacon of hope, Ruby only saw finality and despair.

A homeless man sat propped against the wall, unwashed and obviously hungry, if the size of his wrists were any indication.

Ruby wondered if he had family somewhere who missed him, or if he was alone in the world with nowhere to go and no one who cared.

She fished out another twenty-dollar bill from her pocket and handed it to him. "Get yourself a hot meal."

His faded brown gaze lifted to meet her own. "God bless you."

Ruby managed a weak smile, activated the sliding doors, and stepped inside.

"May I help you?" an elderly woman asked from behind a small brown desk.

Ruby noticed she wore a volunteer's vest. "I'm looking for the morgue."

The older woman's eyes flickered with compassion. She stood and half turned her frail body toward the hall. "Do you see the elevators?"

At Ruby's nod, she continued, "They will take you to the basement. Once you get off the

elevator, take a left, and the morgue will be down on your right.”

“Thank you,” Ruby murmured, trailing off in the direction of the elevators.

She pressed the Down arrow, waited for the doors to open, and then stepped inside, switching her bag to the other hand.

The elevator lurched downward with a quickness that rolled Ruby’s stomach before jerking to a stop in the basement.

Ruby steadied herself while waiting for the doors to open, then stepped into the hall and took a left.

Passing several doors along the way, she finally came to the one that read *Morgue*.

Her hand shook as she lifted it to knock.

It opened a few moments later, and a balding man wearing a white coat stood in the entrance. “What can I do for you?”

Ruby stared at the mask hanging askew around his neck. “I’m Ruby Atwood. I’m here to identify my – One of your...”

“Yes, of course, Miss Atwood,” he interjected, saving her from speaking the words aloud. “Right this way.”

Stepping inside, Ruby waited for the door to close before allowing her gaze to scan her surroundings.

Two stainless steel tables sat in the center of the room. A set of matching sinks was perched nearby, and large shiny drawers lined the opposite wall.

"I'm Doctor Crowder," the man announced, waving a hand toward the rows of drawers. "You will be doing this alone, then?"

Ruby pinched the bridge of her nose. "There is no one else."

"Very well."

Following him across the room, Ruby stood back as he gripped the handle to one of the drawers and slowly tugged it open. "Are you sure you're ready?"

At Ruby's nod, he gently pulled the sheet down to the man's chest and took a step back.

Fear of what she would see damn near took Ruby to her knees. She inched forward until the dead man's face came into view.

"Oh God," she moaned, her hand going to her mouth. Tears sprang to her eyes, instantly spilling over to track down her cheeks. "Daddy..."

Chapter Two

The Beast prowled the halls of his riverside mansion, inconsolable and furious beyond comprehension.

He knew his staff huddled downstairs in fear, but he didn't care. Charles Atwood was dead. The only man alive that could break the curse the Beast had lived with for nearly thirty years.

Born Lincoln Barone, the Beast had been cursed for the sins of his father, Stanford Barone, by Agatha Atwood, Charles's mother.

According to Agatha, Stanford had seduced her only daughter, Charlotte. After learning that she carried his child, Charlotte had approached Stanford with the news, only to be turned away and told never to contact him again.

Unable to bear the pain of losing him, Charlotte threatened to go to Stanford's equally pregnant wife. Needless to say, Charlotte disappeared that night, and her body was never recovered.

Agatha had gone into a rage, ranting about revenge and voodoo curses. A week later, a card arrived on the doorstep addressed to Stanford's unsuspecting pregnant bride. It read, *maledictus*. Latin for *cursed*.

Stanford had chalked it up as the ramblings of a grieving mother, until the day his hideous son screamed his way into the world, and his beautiful young bride closed her eyes forever.

“Stiles!” the Beast roared, spinning toward his darkened bedroom. He could hear the butler’s footsteps rushing up the stairs.

“Sir?” Stiles breathed, obviously nervous and out of breath.

Satan, the one hundred-forty-five-pound gray wolf lying near the foot of the bed, growled low in his throat as Stiles came barreling into the room.

Keeping his back to the butler, Lincoln pulled the hood of his cloak over his head, unclenched his teeth, and spoke in a voice more beast than man. “Are you sure Atwood is dead?”

“I-I spoke with the coroner,” Stiles stammered. “The daughter has identified him.”

The Beast stilled, every muscle in his body taut with tension. “Ruby is here?”

“Y-yes sir. She arrived in town around noon today.”

Letting that piece of information sink in, Lincoln moved to the window to stare out at

the river beyond. "Call Templeton. I want him here within the hour."

"Right away, sir."

The Beast waited for the door to close behind Stiles before turning to peer down at what was left of the rose encased in glass, resting on his nightstand.

Four more weeks, Lincoln thought, lightly touching the fragile glass, and the hell he'd been born into would forever be his fate.

Stalking across the room to sit on the side of his bed, Lincoln lifted his gaze to the covered mirror in the corner, and a growl similar to Satan's rumbled in his chest. He wouldn't look. He refused to.

The mirror continued to mock him the longer he sat here, calling to him and taunting him with its inhumanity.

With a snarl of surrender, the Beast jumped to his feet, strode across the room, and ripped the covering away from the mirror.

A howl rose up, but he swallowed it back as he stared into the eyes of the man he would never be.

He lifted an unsteady hand to his face, afraid to touch it yet unable to stop himself. The feel of the skin beneath his fingers told a different story from the man he saw in the mirror.

But he wasn't a man, he acknowledged, feeling the dusting of hair on his cheeks and nose, the slants to the corners of his eyes, his larger than normal forehead. And his teeth. He didn't even want to think about his teeth. He'd seen less frightening teeth on Satan.

Yet the man staring back at him from the reflection of the mirror had a square jaw, full lips, electric blue eyes, and straight white teeth.

"Damn you, witch!" the Beast cursed, batting the mirror away from him. "Damn you to hell!"

The sound of glass breaking did little to soothe his rage. Even if he never looked into that damnable mirror again, the image of his true form would forever be burned into his brain.

A soft knock on his bedroom door brought Lincoln's head up. "Come."

"I brought you some dinner," Mrs. Tuff announced, opening the door and stepping into the room. She held a large covered tray in her hands.

The Beast barely spared her a glance. "I'm not hungry."

"I'll just leave it right here for you in case you change your mind."

Feeling slightly annoyed that he'd allowed his temper to surface, Lincoln waved the housekeeper forward. "I'll take it."

She hesitated.

"I said, I'll take it!" he snapped, holding out his hand.

Mrs. Tuff scrambled forward, her eyes wide with uncertainty, and handed him the tray.

Lincoln noticed that she wore makeup and her hair appeared different. "Are you going out?"

Clearing her throat, she stared at a place beyond his shoulder, an obvious attempt to avoid looking upon his hideous face. Not that he blamed her.

"Stiles and I are having dinner together in the dining room," she whispered while wringing her hands. "Would you care to join us?"

It was no secret that Stiles and Mrs. Tuff were sleeping together, and had been for years. A normal person wouldn't have heard the soft sounds they made in the middle of the night, but the Beast wasn't normal. Far from it in fact. His beastly ears could hear as well as his wolf, Satan. If not more so.

"I prefer to eat in my room," was all Lincoln could manage.

Mrs. Tuff continued to stand there, staring over his shoulder. He assumed she was waiting for him to dismiss her. "Go eat. And be sure to send Templeton to me the moment he arrives."

With a quick nod, the housekeeper scampered from the room as if Satan had suddenly bounded to his feet and came after her.

The Beast glanced over at Satan in envy. The wolf had not a care in the world other than his next meal and finding a tree to hike his leg on.

The giant wolf lifted his head and pawed at the floor in front of him. He didn't care about Lincoln's looks or the raspy growl of his voice. The wolf loved the Beast unconditionally. And Lincoln was more than aware that it would be the only love he would ever have.

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ABOUT DITTER

Ditter Kellen has been in love with romance for over thirty years. Her eBook reader is an extension of her and holds many of her fantasies and secrets. It's filled with dragons, shifters, vampires, ghosts and many more jaw-dropping characters who keep her entertained on a daily basis.

Ditter's love of paranormal and outrageous imagination have conspired to bring her where she is today...sitting in front of her computer allowing them free rein. I hope you will enjoy reading her stories as much as she loves spinning them.

Ditter resides in Florida with her husband and many unique farm animals. She adores French fries and her phone is permanently attached to her ear. You can contact Ditter by email: ditterkellen@outlook.com

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