

CHAPTER 1

“Stay human. Stay human. Stay human.”

Parker Berenson, alpha of Seattle’s werewolf pack, slammed the door to his aging brown Chevrolet Caprice. “Stay human. Stay human.” Hands clenched into fists, his feet pounded the icy pavement leading from the driveway to his blue-gray stucco house. Though the February fourth night was unusually bitter and he wore neither overcoat nor jacket, he didn’t feel cold. Sweat streamed down his face and neck. His white dress shirt was soaked, as were his trousers. Tiny tendrils of steam rising from his muscular shoulders made him look as if he were smoldering.

His wolf’s hard push against the mental bonds that held it inside their shared body and mind made him stumble. <<*Fuck staying human. I want out!*>> it roared.

Regaining his balance, Parker ignored his beast as best he could and kept walking. “Stay human. Just stay human.”

<<*I’m—*>>

“At least wait until we get inside,” he said through his teeth.

The porch light was out again, but Parker could see by the streetlamps’ ambient glow. He shoved his key into the front door lock and gave it a savage twist. The bolt didn’t move. Using more pressure, Parker tried again and nearly snapped the key in two. “Open, you sonofa...” he muttered, jiggling the key in its slot.

<<*That’s it,*>> his wolf snarled and gave another hard mental shove. <<*Tear the sucker off—*>>

“No!”

Just then the key turned. Parker threw the door open, stormed over the threshold, then banged the door shut.

<<One day, I swear-to-God, I'm gonna kill that—>>

Parker leaned against the door, panting. “You and me both. Now calm down, will you? Calm—”

<<Calm down? After what he did to us tonight? Again? Calm down my—>>

“Shut up. We need a drink.”

<<I don't need a drink. I need—>>

“Shut up, I said.”

His wolf didn't reply. That was a good sign.

Parker strode away from the small patch of faux-slate tiles that served as a tiny foyer. The room he marched across comprised nearly all of the main level. White walls supported glass and metal sculptures with jagged edges sharp enough to carve a holiday roast. These stood in stark contrast to the rest of the sparse furnishings—the clean, straight lines and ninety-degree angles formed by industrial-grade steel pipe. The black leather cushions on the sofa and chairs did little to soften the interior's threatening appearance.

The decor wasn't pretty, but it had its uses. The lack of furniture allowed enough space for all of his wolves to sit when the pack met at his place. And in case his neighbors discovered what he was and decided to do something about it, the wall hangings and furniture could be broken into makeshift but lethal weapons.

Parker headed for the freestanding bar about twenty feet away. He grabbed the

jumbo-sized Jack Daniel's bottle from the counter and then snatched a double shot glass from a nearby rack. Pouring the glass full, he drank it in one gulp, ignoring the liquid fire searing his throat. He tossed down two more shots.

After his fourth drink, Parker felt at least some of the tension leave his shoulders. Holding the glass in two large, strong, and trembling—but very human—hands, he set it down on the upper counter. Leaning against the marble, he closed his eyes. “Okay. We’re okay now. Right?”

His wolf remained silent. Another good sign. The last thing Parker wanted was to morph into his other, a gargantuan man-wolf eight feet tall. A forced morph was triggered in werewolves by the full moon and sometimes, like now, by powerful emotions. And the greater the size differences between the human and *were* selves, the more agonizing the change. Parker-the-human stood six feet, six inches tall in his stocking feet. Morphing into his eight-foot *were* hurt like a knife-wielding bitch.

Parker had been just about to let out a sigh of relief when he caught a whiff of cologne clinging to his shirt. It wasn't his. He ripped the still-wet shirt off and threw it across the room. His broad, hairy chest heaving with anger, he watched the discarded garment land in a crumpled heap about ten feet away.

<<*No, we're not okay,*>> his wolf growled. <<*Human, when are you going to wake up and smell the blood? That bastard is driving us insane.*>>

“That bastard” was Kurt, the vampire Master. Old and extremely formidable, Kurt extended preternatural protection from Seattle's human horde to just about every exotic—zot—that lived there. The smell Parker had picked up was the vampire's favorite scent.

Parker poured a fifth shot of whiskey into the glass. “Quit calling me human.

Besides, what do you suggest we do about it?” he said. “We’re Kurt’s servant. Bound to him by blood. Day or night, he calls, we come, and then we do whatever he wants.” He downed his drink and grimaced. “Like we’re his damned dog or something.”

Parker felt his wolf’s anger surge. <<*Guess you like it, huh? Like this, maybe?*>> A mental picture flashed in their shared mind’s eye, one Parker would rather not have seen. Kurt’s grinning face was poised above him. He heard the seductive whispering in his ear and felt the sweet ecstasy of fangs piercing his flesh.

Parker’s face reddened. “You think I wanted to go down to Kurt’s nightclub tonight?” he shouted. “You think I wanted his hands on me? No. You know what he does. Takes over my mind and twists my head around until I’m practically begging for it.” He tossed down a sixth shot. “And while he’s doing it I sure don’t feel you trying to stop him.”

<<*That’s bull and you know it.*>>

“Shut up.” Parker poured himself an seventh shot and drained it, which was followed by an eighth. But Jack wasn’t doing the job. The humiliating images of what had happened to him and his wolf in Kurt’s office beneath the vampire’s Last Chance nightclub refused to fade.

He gripped the shot glass harder. His blood pressure skyrocketed. Rivers of sweat burst from his pores and ran down his face and chest. His wolf’s snarling inside their shared mind swelled into a howl. Parker started grinding his teeth, a sure sign he was going into a forced morph.

“Oh, shrrit!”

