



*Decisions will
be forced.*

ALLY
PARKER
PRIMAL
CAPTIVE

PROWLERS

PRIMAL CAPTIVE

A PROWLER PREQUEL

ALLY PARKER

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Like your taste of Prowlers?

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* This book contains swearing and sexual content and is best suited for mature readers. *

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Possibilities are endless and with enough grit, determination and consistency you make your own destiny.

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Croco Designs, just wow. Primal Captive's cover is hawt. I just love it.

And last but not least, thank you, to you, the readers. Without you I wouldn't be able to share my dreams.

Lucas Bishop felt the life drain out of him in a steady stream. Warm blood pulsed down his neck and splatted to the ground like a leaking tap.

Death rattled in his throat.

Hands slid down his sides, patting his pockets, and all he could do was lay there and take it like a victim, too weak to defend himself.

If he possessed enough strength, he would have laughed knowing there was only a Hamilton in his pocket. How ironic that he would lose his life for the same ten dollars he'd fought over with Leila.

The jackass digging through his jeans yanked out the note.

"Where's the rest of the money, asshole?"

Living pay check to pay check, that one bill had been the last until he got paid. Firm fingers shook his shoulders, as if shaking him like a rag doll could somehow get his mouth working.

"Fuck! That's not enough."

The mugger released his body, and Lucas's head thudded on the asphalt. His assailant hooked it out of the alley, leaving him on his back, to bleed out in the dark, surrounded by the all-consuming stench of piss.

He coughed and struggled to move. Damn it, he had to get help or he would die. Using his remaining strength, he gritted his teeth and summoned enough energy to lift his arm. The glass jutting out of

his neck hurt like a bitch and he needed to stop the pain, even for a second.

So tired.

His arm gave out and flopped back on to the pavement. If he could rest for a moment, he might be able to fight longer. His lashes fluttered closed. A favorite memory of his wife, Leila, and daughter, Milly, played like a motion picture behind his eyes.

They rolled around on a picnic rug, laughing and tickling each other. Their blonde hair mingled, fanning out in a giant web of gold. His daughter abruptly stopped, leaned forward and whispered in Leila's ear. They looked at him with wicked grins and attacked him with tickles.

"Shit! Lucas, what the hell happened?"

Jaxx Reynolds's deep voice tore the image from his mind. Jaxx shook his shoulders hard enough to rattle his brain.

"Open your eyes! You hear me? Open them, damn it!"

With great effort, he peeled back his lids. Jaxx's nostrils flared and his eyes glowed a vibrant green, reminding him of downtown traffic lights. His eerie gaze trailed over him and darted around the alleyway.

The cold blade of the reaper's scythe hovered over his skin like a pendulum. *I need to tell Laila and Milly I love them, and I'm sorry.* A single tear traveled down his cheek, laced with all the regret consuming him. He had been such an ass to Leila. Now, there was no way in hell he could make it up to her.

He'd give anything just to wrap his arms around his wife's tiny waist, pull her close and kiss her, whispering in her ear she was all that mattered. He'd be leaving both his girls unprotected with nothing but debt. Opening his mouth, he tried to speak.

"No talking," Jaxx barked. "Save your energy."

Damn it! Life wasn't meant to end like this. His shoulders shook, and Lucas opened eyes he didn't remember closing.

"Stay with me, Lucas."

Jaxx's face hovered in front of him, and he looked wild.

"I can fix this. You hear me? You will no longer be human, but you'll be alive. Do you accept my offer?"

His heartbeat thundered in his ears. What the hell was Jaxx going on about? Maybe with all the blood loss he misheard him? But if there was a way Jaxx could help, he would do anything for one more chance to be with his family.

No matter the cost.

His body jerked, and the tang of blood coated his tongue. Jaxx's form wavered.

"Fuck it! I'm taking that as a yes."

Lids too heavy to move, he watched Jaxx's eyes glow brighter. His angular jaw changed to something more prominent, and teeth, too sharp to be human, filled his mouth. Fear pumped through what little blood he had left.

Monster.

Jaxx's fingers curled around the glass protruding from his skin. A deep snarl rattled through the alleyway and Jaxx yanked the bottle shard from his neck. The pain should have been excruciating.

It wasn't.

In fact; he barely felt a thing.

Blood pulsed down his back. Jaxx growled like a savage animal about to attack. His boss shoved his face to the side, forcing him to stare at the dumpster. Lucas shivered, and his muscles spasmed. Teeth pierced his flesh. If Jaxx believed he could save him with a bite, then all hope was lost.

Too weak to fight, Lucas's vision dimmed, and the world went dark.

"COME ON, DAMN IT!" Jaxx shoved his wadded up shirt hard against the wound on Lucas's neck. He made sure he kept the pressure constant, and bit along his friend's shoulder, and each arm. A shit ton of shifter venom needed to be coursing through Lucas's body for a chance of survival. As long as his heart still pumped, he could save him. For a human, Lucas was a thick and solid male. That had to count for something.

Jaxx had no idea if this would work. Lucas hadn't reacted when he'd bitten him. It emphasized how up, close, and personal Lucas was with death. After the tenth bite, Jaxx leaned back onto his haunches, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He needed to get Lucas to a more private environment before any human saw something they shouldn't.

Keeping pressure on the wound, Jaxx did his best to maneuver Lucas without causing further injury. It was awkward and took precious extra seconds. Headlights from vehicles driving along the First Avenue shone down the side street. He heard a gasp, and his head shot up. At the mouth of the alley, stood a human female. She clasped her hands around her handbag as though it was a shield that would protect her from him.

Shit!

He'd been so consumed with saving Lucas, all the blood had masked the scent of anything else nearby. Who knew how much she'd seen, but knowing his wolf features were on full display, it was too much.

Fanfuckingtastic.

Now, he would not only be bringing in an unsanctioned charge back to the Shadow Moon pack, but a human witness too. Saint would kick his ass when he found out about this.

He placed Lucas back on the ground. Behind him, the air moved, indicating the female prepared to flee. Predictably she took off running. Sighing, he stood and bolted down the alley. Jaxx clung to the shadows and peeked his head around the corner in time to see the human throw herself into a cab.

"Great! Just fucking great!"

Could tonight get any better? Scrap the ass kicking, Saint would slaughter him. For a moment, he contemplated pursuing the female. His gaze honed in on Lucas. He couldn't leave him exposed in the alley. If someone found him, it would only make the situation worse, and increase the risk of exposing their kind. By the time he got Lucas away from prying eyes, she'd be long gone.

If the human was stupid enough to report what she'd seen to the authorities, they'd think her a lunatic off her meds. He snorted. What sane human would believe a person could change into an animal?

He'd memorized the taxi's identification number, and when he got back to Shadow Moon, he'd hit Seb up to help track the human down.

His wolf still close to the surface, Jaxx took one last attempt to scent the bastard who had injured Lucas. Drawing air into his lungs, all he could make out was the stench of urine and Lucas's blood. Maybe if the change took hold and Lucas survived, he might provide more information about his attacker.

"One thing at a time."

Returning to Lucas, Jaxx hefted him up and headed towards the club's back entrance. He glanced down the alley, and although he couldn't see anyone, his keen hearing told him a group of humans were close by. Picking up the pace, he swiped his security card against the lock. The latch released, and he shoved the door open. The self-locking mechanism clicked, and he cut across the empty dance floor, gunning down the hall to his office.

Nudging the door with his foot, he shouldered past the entrance and took Lucas straight to the leather sofa. He peeled the ruddy shirt away, and could see the blood flow easing. With his enhanced hearing, Jaxx listened as the sluggish beat of Lucas's heart steadied. The tightness constricting around Jaxx's chest, eased. Since Lucas was still alive, it was a good indication he would survive. Maybe. If he hadn't been expecting Lucas to meet him in his office after closing, Jaxx might have missed finding him when he did. He made a mental note to get someone in to see about security cameras for the alley.

The glyph along the left side of Jaxx's body itched. He glanced down as another black mark blended with the other swirls and accents along his torso. Great. Just one step closer to turning rogue. Lately, whenever he called upon his wolf, his tattoo-like markings grew. If he didn't find his true mate before the glyph completed, he would put to shame the savage monsters told in fairy tales.

Lucky for Lucas, only shifters faced that curse. There were always exceptions, but it was almost unheard of for a *were* to go rogue.

From his office, he heard the back door banging shut. Jaxx tensed, then remembered he was catching a ride back to the

compound.

“Jaxx, what have I told ye ‘bout eaten’ the locals? It’s bad for business,” Flynn McKnight’s Scottish brogue echoed from out in the bar.

“Not the time for jokes, Flynn. Some asshole shanked Lucas. He nearly died, still might. I had no choice. I had to bite him.”

Flynn came around the corner and took in the scene, his dark brows jacked up. “Saint’s going to hang your ass, lad. An unsanctioned bite.”

It was true. The repercussions would hurt. Shifter law stated *were* applications must be approved prior to the change. Reverting his attention to Lucas, he applied pressure to the large gash at Lucas’s throat. “It’s fine. I’ll work something out.”

He always did.

Flynn stepped closer and inspected Lucas’s wounds. He gave a low whistle. “Did ye see who attacked the lad?”

“No,” Jaxx growled. “I couldn’t pick up a scent either.” He straightened and walked over to his desk, opened the drawer, and pulled out a bottle of bourbon. Not bothering with a glass, he cracked the lid and took a healthy swallow.

Rubbing the day-old stubble on his chin, Flynn walked across the office space, and leaned against the marvelled top. “Do ye think he’ll make it?”

He looked over Lucas again and held out the bottle to Flynn. Maybe it was nothing more than his brain trying to soothe the damn twist in his gut, but under the phoenix tattoo, Jaxx could see some of the smaller teeth marks were healing. He smiled and glanced back to Flynn. “Yeah, I do. He’s got a female and a kid to fight for.”

After taking his fill, Flynn pushed off the desk. “All right, I’ll bring the SUV around the side. We better get him back to Shadow Moon and get all this mess cleaned up before it draws attention.”

Jaxx nodded. Then he’d have to tell Saint about his mess and the human who had witnessed everything.

Saint Malone's balls slapped on the back of one round and mighty fine ass. The woman's sounds of pleasure filled the room with each deep stroke.

His cell vibrated.

He ignored it.

Sweat trickled down his temple and dropped into the crevasse just above the female's ass. He wrapped a hand around the woman's ribcage and palmed a surgically enhanced breast, letting his fingers brush against the tight little bud of her nipple. She gasped, the scent of her arousal flooded his senses.

His other hand dipped low, and his finger slipped into her wet folds, searching for the center of her pleasure. Her sheath tightened around him and pulsed with each swirl and flick of her clit. She sighed his name on a breathy whisper and her fingers tightened on the headboard. He quickened the pace and her body seized a moment before she moaned her release.

His cell vibrated again, and he cursed. Next time he would leave the fucking thing in the car. His wolf was riding him harder than usual. Damn it, he needed this release. He clenched his teeth, his strokes quickening. He thrust his hips deep and slammed into the female harder, and faster. His balls tightened, and seconds later, he exploded into a moment of bliss. He experienced one tiny instant of peace. No animal clawing at his insides, no anger eating him from the inside out.

Nothing.

It was the best he'd felt since his last orgasm. Breathing heavily, he withdrew and backed off the bed. Cindy or was it Suzi—didn't matter—giggled and rolled over to rub her thighs together while she caressed her breast.

"I really needed that."

That made two of them. Sex seemed to be the only thing these days keeping his raging monster at bay and lately, even that didn't seem to work. He walked to the bathroom and tossed the condom. Even though he was a shifter, and the female was human, he could still sire children, and he'd never curse a child with his corruptive DNA. Walking back into the room, he yanked his jeans from the back of a chair.

"Come back to bed," she said.

The female curled a finger towards him, and with the other hand, ran one down her torso to dip into her folds.

He toyed with the idea, but his cell vibrated again. The damn thing wouldn't quit. Sighing, he buttoned up his jeans and pulled his cell from his pocket. "No can do." He held up his phone. "They work me like an animal." Ha, if she only knew the half of it.

The woman pouted, and her hand fell away. Her legs swung over the bed's edge and she pulled the sheets up to cover her breasts. "Your loss, lover."

He didn't mind the female. As far as humans went, she seemed decent enough. That didn't mean he wanted to snuggle with her. No, he liked their business arrangement as it was; carnal pleasures with no emotions. Everyone won. Reaching over, he put on his black tee and shirked on his leather jacket. He yanked out a few hundred dollars from his pocket and tossed the notes onto a wooden desk. Saint walked to the door and threw a glance over his shoulder. "I'll be in touch."

Thumbing his cell, he saw he missed three calls and a text. He brought up the messages and froze. On the screen was a picture of his beta, Jaxx, the male's face trapped between man and wolf. For an instant, Saint's heart pounded, and his breath caught before he scanned Jaxx's face. His beta's eyes glowed green and looked feral, but not rogue red.

Stretching his neck, he studied the picture. Jaxx was in an alley outside Prowlers and blood coated the back street. Jaxx was poised over a possibly dead human. Bite wounds littered the male's arm and Jaxx's position exposed his elongated teeth, which glinted in the light. Worse, at the neck of the alley, a human stood watching the whole scene as if it were cheap Tuesday at the movies.

What the fuck!

Saint bit back a growl. He scrolled to the top of the message and the number showed unavailable. He didn't doubt it was someone he knew. How else would the anonymous informant have access to his number?

'Who the fuck is this?' he typed and pressed send. A moment later his cell vibrated. 'Your message could not be delivered.'

"Shit!"

Drawing in a deep breath, he held it, visualizing all of his pissed off aggression forming a ball. The air whooshed out of him and along with it, the ball he had pictured. Still, he fought the urge to rip into something.

He needed answers. Having a nice little chat with his beta seemed a great place to start. The last thing he needed was the council catching wind of his pack breaking shifter law. Then he could plan a game of attack and fix shit before it got ugly.

JAXX SETTLED Lucas into the spare bedroom of his underground quarters when his cell beeped from the kitchen. The message tone told him it was a text, so he ignored it. He blew out a breath and ran a hand along his scalp. Lucas would be in for a rough ride with the transformation, and the adjustment to his new life would be difficult.

His cell rang. Cursing, he stood back from the bed. Casting one last look at his unconscious friend, he eased out the room. He strode across the stone floor, made his way into the alcove near his kitchen, and reached over the wooden counter, answering his cell.

Saint's voice ran through the line. "What the hell is going on, Jaxx?"

Damn. That was fast. Breaking the rules came with repercussions, but he thought he'd have more time before his ass whooping. He cleared his throat. "I have a situation. Someone attacked Lucas outside Prowlers and I had no choice but to watch him die, or change him. Apparently, watching him die wasn't an option I could live with."

Silence bled through the line.

Jaxx raked a hand through his hair and hesitated for a second. He may as well get the rest of the bad news out. "A human female may have seen more of me than I would have liked."

A whimper trailed up from the hall. Jaxx paused and walked back down the corridor and peered into the room. Lucas still laid unmoving, covered in blood. His chest regularly rose and fell and Jaxx breathed out a sigh of relief. He would never have guessed how fond of Lucas he had become until it came down to a choice of life or death.

One thing played on his mind, how did Saint know there was a problem? "Has someone contacted you?"

It was the only logical explanation. Unless Saint's alpha power had grown, which was a possibility. The male possessed a strength that rivaled most alphas.

"You could say that. I got a nice little memento of you caught in the moment. You can even see the shadowed outline of the human in the alley. It'll be a photo for your portfolio, I'd say."

His muscles solidified, holding him in place. He was being watched? Someone had proof of his shifter heritage. If that picture went viral, their whole kind would be in danger. How the hell could this have happened? Since the development of cameras, occasionally humans caught a snippet of their life. It was one of those situations shifters and weres alike didn't believe would ever happen to them.

His sperm donor had always taunted him with stories of what happened to anyone who exposed their kind. His grip tightened on the wood door jamb. Damn technology with its camera phones. The doorframe crunched under his grip. "How? Who sent it?"

His throat felt tight and all of a sudden, the churning in his gut reached up and wrapped around his chest.

“I don’t know, but we have to find out, pronto. The only people who have my private cell are other alphas and pack. The fact they were in Shadow Moon territory tells me this wasn’t a friendly heads-up. Council can’t find out about this. Not until we have answers.”

The Council. Jesus! If they found out, they’d want his wolf pelt for a floor rug. He needed to track that human witness down and fast.

Jaxx pinched his eyes closed dreading his next words. “The human fled. She tailed it to a taxi before I could get to her.” He envisioned the vehicle and the identification number flashed in his mind. “I can track down the witness. I’ll visit the cab company and see where they dropped her off.” If he did damage control before any incriminating pictures got out, everything would be okay.

“Why?” Saint sighed. “Tell me why this human is so important that you’d risk the Council’s wrath?”

“He saved me. He saved me and didn’t even know it. Years ago, right after I fled my father, I was in my wolf form roaming Yellowstone. I was weak, injured, and had a group of hunters stalking me. Lucas bailed them up long enough I could get away unseen. I owed him.”

“Okay,” Saint said. “I get it. It doesn’t mean I like it, or that there won’t be consequences, but let’s deal with one thing at a time. Keep me posted on this, Jaxx. We can’t afford fuck ups. The council won’t be forgiving if they get wind of this.”

He didn’t need the heads-up. It was a personal blow to his ego the female had escaped. Not to mention some peeping tom had been keeping tabs on him. It was a declaration of war if there ever was one, not only against his kind, and his pack, but to him. He just needed to figure out who he was fighting against.

Voices woke Lucas. He groaned and something thick and warm slipped against his mouth.

“Damn it Lucas, drink.”

With all the strength he possessed, he willed his eyes open and failed. His heart galloped wildly, and he thrashed. Rage billowed through him like a winter wind—strong, cold, and cut straight to your core. Vice like strength held him in place. The thick copper liquid pooled into his mouth. His stomach rolled. The taste was horrendous, the texture worse. More liquid than he would have liked slipped down his throat and he gagged. What was real? What wasn't?

Straining, he jerked his head, and fingers dug into his cheek.

“Where are those damn chains?”

There wasn't a single inch of his body that didn't ache. Each time he fought against his bindings, his body protested. What the hell had happened? Every instinct he possessed wanted him to bleed something. Anything. The bed dipped, and he realized someone pinned him down.

Yanking his arms up, they wouldn't budge. A burst of strength lit like a fire, scorching along his veins and filling his body like a volcano about to explode.

The voice snarled, “Flynn, Hunter! Sometime today.”

Lucas bucked under the pressure pinning him down. Escape became his only goal. To survive. Something dark whispered that

together they would.

“Lucas, can you hear me? I don’t want to hurt you, but I will. Yield willingly, or I will make you.”

The strength of the words weighed down on him like a promise. The darkness didn’t like the threat—not one bit. Vibrations rattled up his throat. A thousand knives exploded in his mouth and fire lit across his fingers. He cried out, no, a growl rumbled in his chest. Power, hot and heady coursed through him. Agony morphed to background noise. Instincts urged him to attack. To survive. It was kill or be killed. All his life he’d had to fight. If you gave up, the world ate you whole, and he was damn sure he wasn’t on the menu today.

“Fuck! Last chance, Lucas. Yield!”

The pounding of footsteps grew closer. The shadows draped over his mind thinned. *What the hell is going on? Where am I?* As the shadows cleared something else awakened too, something dark, and that darkness wanted blood.

“Got ‘em.”

The grip on his arms tightened and the most savage noise filled the air. A deep, gravelly, growl tapered to a commanding howl. It vibrated through Lucas’s body and demanded nothing but obedience and submission.

The instinct urging he fight disappeared on his next breath. A deep yearning filled his center heating his belly from the inside out. He wanted to obey. Deep notes carried through his body and lifted the weight of the world from his shoulders. He sucked in a breath.

“That’s more like it. Lucas, you with me?”

Jaxx? Lucas blinked and a blurry outline of Jaxx formed. *What the hell happened?* He blinked until his vision cleared. Jaxx straddled his stomach, his thighs pinned his arms in place.

“You with me now?”

Jaxx sounded worried. For a man that never worried, it must have meant something horrible had happened. Did someone slip him something? Did he fall and hit his head? He nodded and Jaxx climbed off his body. Lucas groaned and rolled over. Two guys blocked the doorway with their massive shoulders and held up a chain.

Jaxx inclined his head to the men, “Killer timing. I doubt we’ll need it. It seems Lucas is more himself. For now, stay alert.”

Jaxx spoke the words like *he* was a threat. Lucas looked down and frowned. Maybe he was? Blood, a sharp contrast against the white sheets, covered most of his torso and the top half of the double bed seemed to be doused in it. Struggling, he propped himself up onto his elbow and the room fell into silence.

“Wha... ” He cleared his throat. “What happened?”

Jaxx sighed. All three men stared at him. He met their gazes. Satisfied with what they saw, the two men in the doorway nodded to Jaxx.

“We’ll be waiting in the other room if you need us.”

The men closed the door and Jaxx grabbed a black chair from behind a desk in the corner of the room. Carrying it closer, he spun it around, hitched his jeans up and straddled the chair.

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

Lucas propped himself against the wall. He grabbed a clean corner of sheet and wiped his face and chest. What did he remember? His fight with Leila. Things were tight. He was working two jobs to keep them afloat. It had been over six months since he’d had any down time. All he wanted was ten measly bucks to grab one drink with the boys after work.

He rubbed his eyes. Fire lanced along the side of his neck. He hissed out a breath and lowered his arm. Tentatively, his fingers inched up and inspected the area. The skin tender bunched in a puckered, jagged line and he winced. *Damn, that is sore.*

Visions bombarded him. He sucked in a breath. Some bastard stabbed him with a piece of glass. He had been dying. Bleeding out in the alley.

And Jaxx.

His gaze shot to his boss. He cocked his head to the side, studying the man. Had Jaxx’s face changed? Become inhuman? He swore the guy’s eyes had glowed a bright green. That his face elongated and his mouth filled with sharp animal teeth. Was Lucas deluded? He stared at him. Jaxx looked no different. Buff—like a guy that spent way too much time at the gym. Edges as sharp as a

blade. He looked normal. Nothing like the weirdness Lucas thought he'd seen.

"I, ah... Remember a mugger stabbing me. I thought I was dying. Then nothing."

"Did you catch a look at the guy?"

Trying to draw up the images from that night, the man had worn a black mask. "No."

His boss nodded, his lips pulling into a grim line. "Damn."

Jaxx's nostrils flared in a way that reminded him of the creature he'd thought Jaxx had changed into back in the alley.

"Is that all you remember?"

Their gazes locked together and Lucas fought the urge to look away. Jaxx sighed and reached down picking up a glass that looked like it contained blood and sat it on the bedside table. Lucas looked down to the drying blood trailing his torso and to the crimson sheets, and back to the glass. Horrified, Lucas stood, the puzzle pieces clicking together. Jaxx, the sick bastard, had been trying to get him to drink blood. "What the fuck! You were trying to get me to drink that."

Thanks to Jaxx, who knew what diseases were riffling through his system?

Holding up his hand in a stop gesture, Jaxx looked unfazed. "A lot has changed in the four days you've been out. Once you make the change, your palate will crave this flavor. Plus, it's not like I could have fed you a steak. Blood was the next logical step."

"Four days!" He straightened and went to move off the bed, the room spun at a slow click. Leila would be furious and then worried, right after she kicked his ass for not contacting her.

Jaxx got up too. He walked over to a steamy bowl on the desk. "I admit the change doesn't normally take this long. It's different for everyone." He shrugged. "And you were close to death."

Was Jaxx off his meds? What the hell was he on about? Change? Who cared? Not him. Right then he needed to contact his family. "I need to call Leila. She'll kill me for just disappearing without a word."

Shaking his head, Jaxx said, "Leila thinks you are assisting me with an urgent work issue that required immediate attention. I had

Cadence call her and explain we had to leave straight away and to let her know there would be no telephone lines or cell reception.” Picking up a cloth, Jaxx dipped it in the bowl and wrung it out. “And you would be well compensated for the inconvenience.”

“Why?” Lucas shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

With the bowl of water and a damp cloth, Jaxx padded back to the bed and passed it to him. He took the cloth and wiped his face.

“Like I said, things have changed. You’re right, you were dying.” Jaxx straddled the chair again, his fingers gripping the black plastic.

He had been dying. Lucas stilled and stone cold fear dug its claws into his chest.

“I had no other choice. You were bleeding out. You would have died. It was that or...”

“Or?” The saliva in Lucas’s mouth vanished, and he held his breath.

“Change you.” Jaxx exhaled a gust of breath. “I’m sorry Lucas, you’re no longer human.”

Lucas paused from scrubbing at his arm. “Good one Jaxx. You had me going for a minute.”

Jaxx cleared his throat. “Can I get a demonstration please?”

Screwing up his face, Lucas frowned. Was Jaxx talking to him? Demonstration? For what? A bang rattled the door in its hinges. Lucas’s gaze shot to paneled timber. As if a lumberjack swung an axe, the wood split in the middle and fell to the floor.

In the darkened doorway stood a huge ass black and white wolf. Adrenaline poured through Lucas’s body, his lips curled back in a snarl. The glowing green eyes were a dead giveaway this wasn’t your average kind of animal. *Jesus*. Standing at least three feet tall the creature had the sleek body of a wolf, with the height of a black bear. “What the fuck!”

Lucas sprang from the bed. He landed on his haunches, the creamy carpet padding his landing. His fingertips pricked with pain and something sharp dug into his lips. A growl rattled in his chest.

Faster than he could blink, the creature morphed into a man. Black and white fur melted into black wavy hair and pale skin. Embers burned in his eyes. Lucas sucked in a breath in recognition. The bouncer from Prowlers—Hunter. Disbelief dried his mouth and he had to work to swallow. Hunter wore danger like a pimp wore gold—a shit ton of it on display for all to see. He’d always avoided the man. He seemed to like the violence of his job a little too much.

A Celtic tattoo ran the length of his left side, from the base of his foot to the curve of his neck. Lucas frowned. Jaxx had something similar. A brand perhaps? Is that what Jaxx wanted? To feed him LSD and brainwash him into joining a cult? *It explained the hallucinations.*

Hunter looked mean with the way his chin tucked into his chest and his gaze trained on his every movement. A smile spread across his face that did nothing to alleviate his growing concerns. All the man's features were harsh and Lucas got the distinct impression that if given the opportunity Hunter would love nothing more than to bleed him.

Every muscle tensed along Lucas's body. The guy may have been a helluva lot bigger than him, but Lucas hadn't survived the streets his whole damn life to die now. Hunter rose and walked down the hall as though what happened was nothing out of the ordinary. His chest heaved and the adrenaline pumping through his veins fizzled. Confused at the whole thing and off balance, Lucas braced his palms against the bed. His gaze caught onto his hand and he froze. "Motherfucker!"

Black, sharp claws protruded from his nail beds, looking nothing remotely human. Like lightning, his other hand shot up and the pads of his fingers brushed against his mouth. Pain sliced across his lip and he quickly pulled his hand away. Not before he felt the undeniable fact he had fangs.

Not a hallucination.

Jaxx's voice cut through the air. "Like I said, I'm sorry. It was this, or death."

Lucas licked his lips, the tang of copper hit his tongue and he shuddered. "What am I? A... a... vampire?"

Jaxx shook his head and reached out a hand. For a moment Lucas hesitated. But he needed answers, and he needed them now. Gripping his outstretched hand, Jaxx pulled him up and helped him sit back on the bed. Tingles fizzled around his fingers and mouth. He looked at his hands and blew out a sigh of relief seeing normal run-of-the-mill tips. Wiping his palms on the jeans he still wore, he focused on Jaxx.

Jaxx rubbed the back of his neck and cut him a wary glance. “Not a vampire. A *were*.”

Sweet Jesus! This can't be happening. But, it was as real as the claws that had sprung out of his finger tips. Lucas's heart seized, then beat double time. “A *werewolf*? Like howl at the moon, going to eat your children sort of *were*?”

Was he going to be a monster? Not able to contain his thirst for blood? Would it mean he'd have to sacrifice being with family?

Jaxx's smile cut off. “Not exactly.” He paced across the room. “Yes, the moon will control you. You will feel its pull, and the urge to run as a wolf will be undeniable.”

Was this really happening? Maybe in a minute he'd wake up and realize it was all a weird dream. His eyes trailed over to the broken door. It wasn't a dream.

“You'll have more primal instincts. Higher emotions. When you feel threatened, it'll trigger a partial shift, like your response to Hunter. If you feel angry, your wolf will answer the call. Your claws and canines will rise to protect and defend you. With time, training and effort, you will learn to gain control over your nature, even when emotions overwhelm you.”

Lucas shook his head, struggling to accept what he'd seen and heard. “So we're werewolves?”

Jaxx paused his pacing and glanced at him.

“You are a *were*. I am a shifter.”

His facial expression must have reflected his confusion.

Flicking his head to the side, a clump of sandy hair cleared from Jaxx's gaze. “There are shifters, like me, who are born. All shifters bear the mark of their wolf along the left side of their body. Shifters can change at will; we have superior senses and healing capabilities compared to *weres*.”

Lucas frowned, not too sure how to take that bit of news. *Great.* So he was no longer human and also the runner-up version of a monster.

“But... we also possess the biggest weakness. If we haven't found our true mate by the time our wolf glyph completes, we lose ourselves to the beast and become rogue. The very thing from myth and legend.”

Maybe being a *were* wasn't so bad after all?

Pausing, Jaxx's head dipped. "We are the only force standing between humans and rogues. You've joined a war you never knew existed, but will star left, right and center."

Other than your garden variety bar fights, Lucas knew nothing about war, combat, or contingency planning. "Well, that sounds just peachy. You must know, I have no training. I don't know how you figure I'll be joining any war." Or buy into any of the other things Jaxx was trying to sell.

Jaxx turned and walked to the far side of the room and leaned against the wall. "You won't have a choice, my friend. As for the rest. We'll train you."

Dark swirls of Jaxx's tattoo peek out the top of his shirt, drawing his attention. "Will I develop a tatt—glyph?"

"No. Thankfully, you won't suffer the same curse as shifters." Jaxx scratched at the marking on his neck. "As I've mentioned, you will change into your wolf at the full moon. Other than that, you'll only experience short bursts of claws and fangs. You'll have an urge to claim a mate, but the need won't be tethered to your humanity."

Lucas didn't need a glyph or a curse to tell him who his 'mate' was; he knew Leila was it for him. Always had been. The need to see her, to touch her, became palpable. The animal hovering under his skin wanted an introduction too. *Needed to bite her. Mark her. Claim her.* Lucas shook his head to clear the dark whispers in his mind. The scent of iron filled his nose. He stared at hands that had minutes ago been claws. Ripples of unease washed over the calm holding him in place. *This is really happening.* He had just seen an animal shift into a human. Dropping the cloth, Lucas leaned forward and rubbed the heel of his palms into his eyes. Then he ran a hand through his hair. "I can't believe this is happening."

He felt the air shift and Jaxx's hand rested on his shoulder. It never occurred how silently the male moved until now.

"Give it time. It's a lot to take in."

Meeting Jaxx's gaze he said, "I need to talk to Leila."

Jaxx grimaced, giving his shoulder a squeeze before releasing his hold.

"As much as I'd love to let you, I'm afraid that's not possible."

Lucas growled. He needed to hear her voice, to know she was okay.

“Relax. She’s fine,” Jaxx continued. “I have males keeping an eye on her.”

Muscles along his body tensed. Other men were near his woman. Something stirred within him. What if one of Jaxx’s men thought his Leila was theirs? Vibrations rippled up his chest.

“Something wrong?”

He shook his head and tried to suppress the emotions—there were so many. His family was safe. Tightness banding his chest eased. But, men were around his woman? Men who were searching for their miracle. Tingles prickled his eyes and his breathing labored. What if one of the shifters thought his Leila was theirs? “Who? Who is watching her?”

Jaxx kicked his head back an inch. “You’re concerned about the males? I can assure you, if she was anyone’s mate, they’d have staked their claim and notified me.”

Curling his lip, Lucas sneered. No one would claim what belonged to him. There was finality in Jaxx’s words and it pissed him off. Jaxx implied if Leila was a mate to a shifter, their claim would surpass his. He sucked in some deep breaths and calmed himself. She wasn’t their mate. Leila was his. *Reign it in. You need to find out what the heck is going on.* He swallowed hard. “Fine. Tell me what I need to do so I can see my family.”

Jaxx watched him, probably judging the truth of his words. Family meant everything to Lucas. It was the only thing he had and for that he would box up any emotion to get back to them.

Jaxx nodded. “You need to understand. Our most sacred law prohibits humans knowing about our kind.” He hesitated. “There are no second chances, Lucas. It’s punishable by death. Initially, you will have trouble controlling your animalistic side. It’s why the thought of other men around your Leila brings your wolf forward. You have the urge to claim her. To your wolf, she is yours and no one else’s. We can’t have you around humans and anytime you get pissed off, or turned on having your eyes blaze or claws showcased for viewing. You need to gain control before you even think about having contact with Leila or Milly.”

Damn. He could imagine what would happen if people saw his claws. There would be panic. Hell, he was still fighting off panic with the knowledge. Not to mention the danger it would bring. Shifters would want to kill his ass, and the government would want to experiment on him. Lucas blew out a breath and his shoulders slumped. “So I’ll have to keep this from them forever?”

“Or, you put in an application to have her converted.”

“Application?”

“Politics.” Jaxx rolled his eyes. “Each *were* needs Council approval. It’s a way to keep track of our kind. Ensuring secrecy and balance and so on and so forth. Council only allows a shifter to have one *were* under their care. It is our responsibility to integrate you in to your new world and make sure there are no risks to our kind.”

The big question was; would Leila want this—would she want him after she knew the truth?

Leila Bishop's sneakers squeaked on the linoleum floor as she raced to the nurses' station of the Oncology Unit at Riverton Memorial Hospital. Her juggling skills sucked and she was late for her night shift. Between caring for Milly while Lucas was away and her work schedule, she felt like she was drowning. It made her appreciate everything Lucas did that she took for granted.

Cadence from Jaxx's club had phoned and told her they'd sent Lucas on urgent business. No television, phone, internet, or cell reception. She chuckled to herself. No technology would kill her man. Her smile withered. The last time they'd seen each other had ended with him storming out the front door. It was eating her up knowing it would be another couple of weeks before she could see Lucas again. Normally, they had a couple days notice prior to any work trips. It was annoying, but she was dealing with it, mostly.

"You're late. I had to cover for you. Again." Emma glanced up from behind the computer.

Leila cringed. "I know, I know. I'm sorry. Lucas is still working away, and the sitter was late. I promise things should be back to normal soon. I owe you."

She hoped things would be back to normal soon. Cadence had told her it would be only a couple of weeks until Lucas returned. Leila grabbed her stethoscope and charts, making her way into the first room on her rounds. Walking into the dimly lit bay, Kira's tiny body drowned in the crisp white bedding.

Doctor Marie LeRoy, her mother, perched on the side of the bed, softly stroked Kira's sleeping face. The ten-year-old girl looked more like a china pixie doll; her normal olive complexion washed to a pale white. Thanks to the effects of Leukemia, Kira's chubby cheeks had sunken into gaunt valleys.

Leila's heart clenched at the sight. No mother should watch their child wither and slowly die. It wasn't right. She had grown close with Marie over the months caring for Kira and it had become increasingly difficult to maintain her clinical composure. Reluctant to interrupt, she was about to turn and check her fluids when Marie's whispered voice stopped her. Her focus still on Kira, Marie asked, "Is it time for her observations already?"

Leila cleared her throat. "It is. I'm sorry to intrude. I won't be long."

"It's fine." Marie nodded. "Do what you need to do."

Leila walked closer and sat her charts next to the colorful basket of balloons on Kira's side table. She put the pulse oximeter on Kira's finger and let the machine work its magic gauging Kira's oxygen levels and pulse. The photo of both Kira and Marie stared at her from behind the bed. The wall decorated with pictures of better days. She supposed it gave them both strength and something positive to focus on other than the cold, harsh truth of reality.

It was a shame that so far Kira's body had resisted treatment. Leila just didn't know how Marie found the strength to keep going. The machine beeped and Leila scribbled the results in her folder. Her gaze fluttered to Marie as she wrote in the chart. "How are you holding up?"

Kira murmured in her sleep and Marie rose, the bed whining in protest. "As good as I can be, I guess. I can't shake the thought there's nothing I can do. I'm a doctor. After attending the best schools and working at the best hospitals, it doesn't matter. I can't help her. I would do anything to save her. Anything! She's my world and..." Her voice hitched. "To contemplate my life without her, I... it robs me of breath."

Emotion clogged Leila's throat. If Milly was sick... She didn't even want to entertain the thought. She swallowed the emotion down and placed a hand on Marie's shoulder, at a loss for words. For a

moment they stayed that way; Marie's eyes consuming every inch of her daughter. Abruptly, Marie straightened and shook her head. "I have to leave. My shift started twenty minutes ago."

"I'll keep an eye on her for you."

Marie smiled and the sound of her high heels clipped as she walked out the door and down the hall. Leila gathered her equipment and turned to leave. In the doorway's shadow, something moved. Startled, she jumped, her files falling to the floor. She blinked as the silhouette of a large man peeled away from the wall. The only thing she could see clearly was the way his eyes glowed a golden hue. She blinked again, and it was as though she'd imagined it.

LUCAS WATCHED as a woman rush out of the room, tears staining her cheeks. Her gait stuttered. Her breath hitched, and she did a double take at him before rushing down the hall. Lucas checked he hadn't gone all wolf like, then shrugged figuring he was paranoid since it was his first time in civilization, alone, and contacting Leila.

Re-focusing his attention back to his woman, he watched Leila's round ass as she bent and gathered her files. Despite the unflattering blue scrubs, she filled the hollow feeling in his gut. His wife paused and pulled her light brown hair into a messy bun. He loved it when she wore her hair like that. It gave him something to hang onto when he poured all of his need into their kiss. A moment before Leila turned to face him, he felt his eyes tingle, a tell they would be glowing. Fast as a hood rat getting up to no good, he snapped them shut, took a cleansing breath, and focused on his human side, just like Jaxx showed him.

He watched Leila's eyes widen and blink three times. He edged further into the light and she shook her head and whispered, "Lucas."

She rushed forward, wrapping her arms around his neck. Damn, he'd missed the feel of her in his arms. He spun her around, dipping his head and inhaling her luscious scent, berries with a hint of spice. With Leila held tight, he stole her from the room and nestled them in a supply closet just outside the door. It wasn't the most romantic

atmosphere but gave them a moment of privacy, and with what was on his mind, privacy was a key ingredient.

Instantly, blood pulsed to his cock. He wrapped his arm around her and kissed her jaw, moving along the soft curve of her neck. For weeks he'd been thinking of this moment. His mouth watered. What he wouldn't give to bite down on the soft tender flesh and mark her as his. Again, his eyes tingled, and he felt his teeth elongate.

Damn, he wanted to bite her. Badly. Claim her right there. It took some control, but he moved away from temptation, heading to safer waters and claiming her lips. His tongue plunged deep, and she met him stroke for stroke. She sucked in his bottom lip and a small moan he normally wouldn't have been able to hear rang in his ears.

Pushing her against the door, his cock swelled with each step. It took all his strength not to rip her clothes off where she stood. He pressed her against his aching erection and his hand snaked up and dove into her hair, holding her just where he wanted her. The scent of her spice intensified, and he knew if he dipped his fingers into her folds, she would be wet for him.

He growled low, and to his surprise, the smell of her arousal deepened. He bit back a smile, more than happy with the fact she liked his new wild side. Hopefully that would make her more accepting when he told her about his changes.

Outside the door, murmured voices grew louder, breaking his lust-induced haze. He forced himself to tone down the kiss, his lips lingering on hers. It was harder than he anticipated pulling away from her. He drew strength from the knowledge he'd soon make her his. As though she'd forgotten where they were too, she shook her head and smoothed down her uniform.

She glanced around the room. "What are you doing here?"

He squeezed her again and closed his eyes, savoring her body pressed against his. Damn, he had missed her.

"Lucas!" Leila whimpered.

At once he loosened his hold and his gaze raked down her body. No damage done. She looked so beautiful. Burying his head in the crook of her neck he mumbled, "Sorry. I missed you so much. I got a weekend pass and had to see you and make sure you were okay."

For a moment she nuzzled into his chest, then glanced at the door, and leaned back. “I missed you too. I wish we had more time, but I can’t sneak away. Emma has already had to cover for me tonight.”

“Why?” His brows dipped. “Is Milly okay?”

She patted his chest. “She’s fine. The sitter was late again is all.”

Guilt filled him. It should have been him looking after his baby. Now, thanks to all that had happened, he was putting extra stress on their little family. “Leila, I...”

“I know, Lucas,” she cut in. “You don’t have to worry. I spoke with Cadence, and she explained everything.”

He searched her eyes, twin petals that sparkled like dew in the morning sun. “How the hell did I get so lucky?”

“Who knows? Just be thankful.” She winked.

He laughed and for the first time since the change; he thought things might be okay.

“Leila, about the night before I left... I wanted to say, I’m sorry.”

She smiled and reached up to tuck some hair behind his ear. “I think we’re both guilty of being too hot headed. I’m sorry too.”

Luck didn’t even begin to describe how much he’d scored with her. Leila had supported him no matter the demons he wore. If it wasn’t from debts he’d racked up, there wouldn’t have been half the financial burden on them.

“I better get back to work.” She pushed out of his embrace and as much as he wanted to keep her locked in his arms forever, he knew she was right.

“I’ll be seeing you soon,” he promised.

Tugging her back into his arms, he kissed her deeply, tantalizing her with a taste of what was to come. He watched her leave the room and took a few minutes to compose himself. Not only would it be inappropriate to walk around with a boner, but it would be a sure way to draw attention to himself. The whole purpose of his field trip was to test his ability to control himself and remain unnoticed.

Once his blood redistributed to more important organs, he opened the door, and avoiding any potential onlookers, he headed towards the exit.

The scent of pine saturated the air as he shoved the door open. Lucas ground his teeth. “I thought this was a solo mission.”

Jaxx’s shoulder lifted in an I-couldn’t-care-less gesture. “What sort of mentor would I be if I didn’t make sure you were coping okay?”

Lucas rolled his eyes. That line was getting old. He was a thirty-five-year-old man, nearly a month into his change. He didn’t need a babysitter. Since the big transformation, he’d adjusted well. His days were busy with meditation, fighting techniques and more fucking meditation. If anything, he was tempted to start some shit just to break the boredom.

Keeping true to the techniques he’d been learning, he jogged silently down the stairs. “So, did I pass?”

He strained his senses and heard nothing until Jaxx spoke.

“You did. In fact, I’m taking you on a little recon.”

He glanced back. “Serious?”

About time he got some action.

Jaxx dug into his pocket of his jeans and pulled out his cell. “That cabby finally got back from vacation. The bastard won’t be doing jobs off the clock for a while. Who knows what damage the human could have done in that time?” Jaxx shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. Tonight, we’ll make it right.”

Adrenalin pumped through Lucas. That was what he needed—something to get the edginess out of his system. Once Jaxx filled

him in on the situation the night in the alley, he felt somewhat responsible for the dilemma his mentor found himself in.

It seemed only right he would be a part of whatever panned out next. They made their way to the exit and across to the pack's SUV. Sliding across the suede seat covers, Lucas got comfortable. "What's the plan?"

He couldn't help but wonder why the woman hadn't taken her knowledge to the authorities? Why wasn't the fact men who could change into wolves all over the news? Maybe she was scared? Or maybe she reported the incident, and they'd laughed her out of the precinct?

Jaxx shoved the key into the ignition and merged into the traffic. "We'll scope out the female's place. If she's there, let me handle it. We need to bring her in."

Lucas frowned and looked at Jaxx. "What will you do with her?"

Clearing his throat, Jaxx swerved through the lanes. He reached into a paper bag in the center console and pulled out a burger. The smell of roast meat filled the car and Lucas's mouth salivated. Jaxx kicked his chin towards the bag. "There's one in there for you too. As for what will happen to our witness, that'll depend."

Not wasting time, he peeled back the paper and took a bite. Around a mouthful of food, Lucas asked, "Depend on what?"

"I wasn't joking about the Council."

Jaxx briefly met his gaze.

"They take this shit seriously. The fact is, the human saw too much. She will have a choice; relocate to Wolfden, or the Council will order a cleanup."

Lucas's eyes widened. A clean up sounded... final. *Wolfden*. What a weird name. "Is Wolfden some kind of prison?"

Jaxx shook his head. "It's a recluse shifter-run town out in the middle of nowhere. Humans who have seen too much get invited to live there and remain protected."

Invited. Sure they were. "In other words, some kind of prison." Lucas finished chewing the last of his burger and snorted. "It doesn't sound like much of a choice."

Shrugging, Jaxx replied, "Maybe not, but it's a choice nevertheless."

Wolfden's existence hit home the harsh reality of his new world. His imagination could throw together some vivid scenarios of what would happen if the human populous learned creatures of the night really existed. In each situation, it involved mobs, scientists, soldiers and death.

He shuddered and reluctantly acknowledged the need for a place like Wolfden. What would happen to Leila or Milly if they didn't accept him, or refused to live in some shifter run town? Would the Council want his family cleaned up? A snarl snaked its way out of his chest. Over his dead body.

Jaxx pierced him with his gaze. "Lucas?"

Swallowing his fears, Lucas inhaled. Maybe it was safer for Leila and Milly if he just up and left. The selfish bastard he was, knew he could never let them go. He just had to make sure Leila and Milly entered their new world gently. She would then see there is nothing to be afraid of and she wouldn't be able to refuse the *were* he'd become.

"Lucas?" Jaxx prodded.

Focusing onto that small voice inside of him that said everything would be okay, Lucas composed himself. "I'm good. It's just..."

"You're thinking of the future. About Leila and Milly?"

He nodded once.

"You're still the man she fell in love with. Only with a few upgrades."

Lucas laughed. "You make it sound like I'm a car."

Smiling, Jaxx revealed a dimple the chicks seemed to dig. He turned the car down a side street.

"Seriously, if there is one benefit of all this, it is you've got the whole pack behind you. We'll all help Leila see we're nothing but harmless puppies. Things will work out."

Lucas shook his head. Somehow he doubted any of the pack would come across as puppies, harmless or otherwise. The SUV came to a halt outside an overgrown empty lot. He appreciated Jaxx's reassurance, but he'd have to bench his concerns to address later. Jaxx threw the SUV into park and faced him.

"You good?"

Jaxx was really asking; can he keep his shit together? To get back to Leila and Milly, Lucas would do anything. “You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

Jaxx assessed him for a moment more and nodded. “See that beat up cottage across the street?”

Lucas’s vision honed a few hundred yards ahead of them and looked at the dark cap-cod styled home.

“You take the back and I’ll take the front. Remember, don’t touch, but don’t let her out of your sight. We can’t let her get away.”

“Understood.” Lucas unfastened his seatbelt and followed Jaxx across the street as silent as a whisper. Wiping his sweaty palms, he peered into a small window down the side of the brick cottage. The room appeared empty. Scenting the air, he detected none of the usual homely smells he recognized. Odd.

“The place is empty, damn it.”

Lucas barely suppressed his jolt of surprise as Jaxx separated from the shadow of the back porch. Now all the black Jaxx wore made sense. All the better to meld to the dark.

“There isn’t one bloody china plate left behind.”

Jaxx started toward the SUV and Lucas fell into step noticing how his white shirt stood out against the night. “Do you think she had help?”

“Who knows? She certainly had enough time to do this solo.”

“Should we come back at daylight and make some discreet enquiries to the neighbors?”

Jaxx unlocked the SUV. “Sounds like a plan. In the meantime, I’ll get Seb to run a search for any forwarding address.” Jaxx braced his elbows on the roof of the car. “I have a surprise for all the hard effort you’ve put into controlling your new skills.”

Was he saying? Lucas held his breath.

“You’re getting a pass to go home.”

Lucas bit back a holler. “Thank you.” Damn, he was excited.

Jaxx held up a hand. “I’ll be sending Ethan, one of the pack enforcers to hang around close by—just this once.”

Lucas could barely control the surge of lust that hit him at the mere thought of spending the night with Leila. Though, somewhere

in his chest a kernel of worry sat heavy. Would he be able to control himself and keep his secret?

Saint stared at the same picture for the hundredth time since he'd received the blasted thing. Damn Jaxx, damn technology, and damn incriminating picture messages sent by anonymous sources. He leaned back into his office chair and stared at multiple large televisions which displayed Shadow Moon's pack land above their secret den.

His mind turned over all the facts. Jaxx had performed an unsanctioned change, a human had witnessed it and either a vamp or shifter had seen all of it go down. What did this unidentified player want? He knew it was only a matter of time before he got that answer. Scrubbing a hand across his mouth and along his jaw, he muttered, "How the hell am I going to fix this?"

The human witness was a real concern. It wasn't so much the threat humans would believe her. What made his heart kick up a gear was the risk that shifter hunters would be lured to his territory with the claims of humans changing into monsters. He needed to secure the witness and obtain the evidence for the safety of his pack.

"Damn it!" He sighed and realized he would have to call in a favor to cover for Jaxx. There was no way he would lose Jaxx. He had come from an abusive pack, with an abusing alpha, and father. Despite his past, Jaxx had proven that, or maybe because of his history, it wouldn't control his future. Something Saint could relate to on a personal level.

Jaxx played a defining role in many missions. Rescuing Hayden, a she-wolf, now a part of his pack, who they all loved. And he'd put his life at risk to protect Saint and other pack members against hunters, rogues or even their own kind during territory battles. He worked hard and with honor, loyalty, and dedication. He'd earned his position as beta. A mistake shouldn't steal that away.

Next time he was at Council headquarters he'd detour into the *were* admissions and see if he could manage a little administration work. If he made it look like a backdated application, it would be one issue off his hands. What kept him up at night was the unknown witness. He had to find the original picture and destroy all copies before anyone suspected anything. He'd already had his tech expert see if they could source any information. So far, Seb had come up empty.

His cell buzzed in his hands and he couldn't help the sneer spread across his face. *Ryker*. The thought of his half-brother made fur spring from his pores. Not needing another headache, he rejected the call, only for it to ring again.

Nothing changed. Ryker had always been and always would be relentless in anything he pursued, and now he'd set his eyes on Saint. Resigned to the inevitable, he accepted the call and snapped, "What do you want?"

"Now, is that anyway to greet your brother?"

Saint craned his neck. The smugness in his brother's voice set him on edge. "Where are my manners? What I meant was, what the fuck do you want?"

Ryker snorted. "You've always had a way with words, *brother*."

It never surprised Saint how Ryker could make what would normally be an endearment sound like a curse. Though he'd had centuries to get used to it. "I don't have time for this. Tell me what you want or don't, but you have ten seconds before I hang up."

Seconds ticked by and Saint's thumb hovered over the button to end the call. He could hear Ryker slosh what he knew would be whiskey into a tumbler. "I hear you've been having trouble controlling your beta."

Saint frowned, digesting the words. The worn leather chair creaked as he leaned forward. Ryker had specifically mentioned

Jaxx, no other pack member. A gnawing sensation ground in the pit of his stomach. He pinched his eyes closed and stole a deep breath. Through clenched teeth, he spat, "What are you implying?"

Even though deep down he knew the situation would nose dive at any moment, he couldn't risk giving Ryker unnecessary information.

"You and me both know Jaxx has landed himself in some deep shit." Ryker laughed. "An unsanctioned change, in front of a human no less, that's gotta hurt." He paused, and it pissed Saint off knowing it was for dramatic effect. "Tell me, brother, should I take a career in photography?"

His grip tightened around the phone and he heard the plastic strain. Holding back a growl, he said, "No more games, Ryker. Like I said, what do you want?"

"Hasn't anyone ever told you, you need to loosen up?" Ryker chuckled.

At the consuming silence that filled the line, Ryker sighed. "Fine. For the original and all copies of Jaxx's night of fun, the cost will be the females of your pack."

Silence bled from the room and left nothing but the crescendo of his heart rate. Of all the outrageous, most despicable things for his brother to propose. Shifter trafficking was a new kind of low, even for Ryker. Saint sprang from his seat. The chair skidded across the room. He slammed his hand on the desk. "Listen well, Ryker. The females of my pack aren't cattle to be bought or bribed. Do you hear me?"

"No, brother, it is you who doesn't hear me. I have the evidence. I hold the cards. Give up the females, or I will go forward to the Council to report my findings. You have until the next full moon to get me what I want."

The razor edge to Ryker's tone told Saint his brother meant business. The line went dead. Of all the low devious things Ryker could ask for, his request even surprised Saint. Women of their kind were rare—each a savior for male. It seemed odd he was interested in any other female except his own.

Saint stared down at his phone in disbelief before he pegged it across the room. It smashed against the wall and shattered into tiny fragments. "Damn you, Ryker!"

His body shook. Blood blazed through his veins. His wolf clawed to the surface. He gave in to the beast's demand for freedom. Material split. The change washed over him. He needed to run, to think of some way to save his pack without sacrifices. He had one week to formulate a plan and execute it. Padding outside, he released one long, angry howl before sprinting into the woods.

Naked as the day he was born, Lucas gently peeled back the covers and crawled into bed. Lately, he'd been noticing more and more perks to becoming a *were*. For example, his increased vision. It gave him the ability to take in and appreciate the beauty of Leila in the dark. Thick curls fanned out around her head and no lines of stress marked her pretty features. Her lips pouted and pressed together as if sensing his nearness and preparing for the kiss he wanted to give her. His gaze strolled down to the swell of her breast peeking out of one of his shirts.

Saliva pooled in his mouth. He didn't bother restraining himself. It had been too long since he'd been close with his wife. He had to have her. Dipping his head, his tongue dragged delicately against her soft milky skin. Blood rushed to his cock. His balls ached. Anticipation filled him. His hands shook as he eased her shirt up. She stirred but didn't wake.

Now exposed to his pleasure, he looked his fill of her plump breasts, noticed how her nipples pebbled, calling out for his attention. One hand slid along silky skin and cupped her mound. His finger strummed against her flesh while his mouth drew in the other puckered nub. She moaned and whispered, "Lucas, is it really you, or am I dreaming again?"

Reluctantly, he lifted his head and looked down at her sleepy gaze. "In the flesh, sweetheart."

Smiling, her hand reached up and dug into the back of his hair guiding him back towards her breast. He latched on and sucked harder; his tongue lapped back and forth, drawing another moan from her lips. It was like sex for his ears. Her sweet gasps of pleasure mingled with the scent of her arousal and made him hard as a rock. His hand dipped towards the apex of her thighs. She lifted her hips, silently begging for his touch. Pulling her panties down, she wiggled out of them and spread her legs. He smiled, appreciating her enthusiasm. He only hoped he was strong enough to deny the instincts demanding he bite her, mark her as his.

LEILA THROBBED WITH NEED. Her body was the stage and Lucas's fingers danced around the places she wanted them most. She thrust her hips. His finger grazed along her clit. A zing of pleasure shot through her. She tightened her hold in his hair. He growled against her breast; the vibration making her hotter. His fingers dipped into her wetness, stroking the center of her pleasure. God, she'd missed him. She trailed a hand down his body, her fingers feeling every contour and valley of ridged muscle. Bypassing his erection, she ran her hands up his thighs and cupped his balls.

He groaned and his fingers jerked inside of her. Sliding her hand up, she wrapped her digits around the girth of his cock and slide her hand along his shaft in long, firm strokes. He growled. Need pooled in her gut. Pleasure coursed from her breasts down to her center, each pulsing wave increasing in strength and shooting through her veins. Her body begged for release; the sensation almost painful. She rocked her hips faster. "Don't stop!"

Suddenly, his touch was gone. Before she could say a word, she found herself on all fours with the heat of Lucas pressing against her back. In one smooth motion, he entered her. Gasping for breath, she loved how his width stretched her in the way she liked. He wrapped a hand around her breast, his thumb rolling over her nipples, sending shots of pleasure arcing along her body. Another deep rumble rolled

out of him and she loved that she was bringing out a new savage side.

How could she ever live without his touch, without him? Lucas's arms wrapped around her, his length filled her, his scent and his touch was everywhere. She couldn't escape him, didn't want to. Wave after wave of bliss consumed her, and she thought she might drown hanging on the precipice. His hand reached down and tweaked her clit sending her over the edge.

She screamed his name, and the walls of her vagina pulsed and gripped his cock. Abruptly, his hands left her body and dug into the sheets. He continued to pump into her in short and rough strokes. Fabric ripped where his fingers dug into the cotton. His hot breath fanned against her neck and his teeth scraped her skin with the barest of pressure. She shivered, the sensation heightening her desire.

Lucas growled; his cock pulsing his release. He rolled, taking her with him and tucking her into his embrace. He held her tight, brushing her hair back from her face. She heard him draw in a breath so deep; it was as though he was savoring the very essence of her.

"I missed you," he whispered.

His deep voice sent a tingle skating down her spine. She laughed. "I guess it's true. Distance does make the heart grow fonder. You were an animal."

His hand stilled mid motion. "Did I hurt you?"

Turning her head to face him, he looked as serious as his tone had been. "I loved every single second you had your wicked way with me."

Slowly, a grin curved his lips. "Well, I can tell you; I've got more where that came from."

Still inside of her, he thrust into her again. Her eyes widened. He was still hard. Soft as a feather, he trailed kisses along the nape of her neck simultaneously as he rubbed her extra sensitive bundle of nerves. Not knowing if she'd survive the pleasure, she gave in and enjoyed the ride.

Lucas didn't know what woke him. Exhaustion should have had him sleeping for a month after the meticulous attention he'd paid his wife—at much restraint to himself. Several times he had to tear his mouth away from her tender neck, the slight curve of flesh a mouthwatering temptation to his animal.

He lay in bed with Leila's head nestled on his chest, and staring at the flaking ceiling paint. He was glad he'd asked Jaxx to put a request in to have her changed. Who knew what the future held, but he'd be ready. No matter the cost to him, he was determined to ease her into his new world. Whatever it took, he'd do it to ensure she remained by his side.

A click from the front door made him tense. His senses flared and the haze of sleep evaporated in an instant. Footfalls sounded from the entrance of his home. Milly! His daughter's room was the first door the intruder would come across. Scenting the air, gun oil clogged his nose. He moved swiftly, sliding out from his wife's slight weight. He needed to secure his family and take out the danger. The full moon wasn't for another week, however that didn't prevent his claws and teeth springing to the forefront.

Moving to the door, he turned the knob and winced as the door groaned in protest. From down the hall, all movement ceased. The element of surprise ruined, he shoved the door the rest of the way and ran towards the threat.

A curse sounded from his living room that lay adjacent to the front door.

“Code red! I repeat, code red!”

Processing what he heard, he realised this was no run-of-the-mill home invasion. He barrelled forward, heart hammering in his chest, his only thought to protect what was his. A lone man dressed in black Special Ops gear stood braced with a gun aimed at his chest. Lucas dropped into a roll. Compressed air whooshed where he’d stood. *Silencer*. Obviously, they’d come prepared to kill.

Bouncing back up, Lucas raced forward and batted the gun out of the agent’s hand. “You’ve picked the wrong house, asshole.”

Special Ops fumbled for another weapon. Lucas didn’t give him the chance. Dropping the gun, he wrapped both hands around his head and twisted. Special Ops crumpled to the floor. A crash sounded from the back of his home and a second later, his front door slammed open banging against the wall.

“Daddy, is that you?”

Milly’s soft voice drew his attention. Hovering in the hall’s darkness, her little arms squeezed around her favorite teddy bear. Fear lodged in his throat. He had to protect his family.

“Milly, I need you to run to Mommy and lock the door.”

Three men, dressed in the same garb as Special Ops, burst through the door. Milly screamed; her terror filling the air. It had been weeks since he’d seen his baby girl and it killed him that this was how their reunion would go down. “Now, Milly. Run!”

She bolted down the hall to their bedroom. Now he just had to keep the danger contained. *Where is that damn enforcer?* As long as he held the intruders off until Ethan arrived, his family would be okay.

The leader of the ops team smiled, all teeth. “You’re coming with us.”

Lucas didn’t bother to respond. He’d show them how wrong they were. As a unit they flew at him. The force pushed him back, and they stumbled over the couch, crashing into a small coffee table.

“Don’t make this any harder than it has to be,” the leader snarled.

Lucas’s claws lengthened and saliva pooled in his mouth. He would die before going anywhere with these people. With all his strength, he lashed out, slicing any flesh within reach. The stench of

blood filled his nose and yowls of pain rent the air. No matter how much he attacked their weapons remained holstered. In the background he heard his bedroom door crash open.

“Daddy!” Milly’s drawn out plea sent panic through him.

He clawed his way out from the men, turned and ran toward the men dragging Leila and Milly down the hallway. A burst of pain exploded in his neck. His vision wobbled. Blinking rapidly, he reached up and pulled out a syringe. Remnants of green fluid lined the canister. He threw it to the floor and laughed. Jaxx had told him human medication wouldn’t affect him. So why did his knees felt weak? Why did it feel like lead filled his body? Staggering, his arms outstretched towards his girls, fear knotting in his throat. If he wasn’t there to protect them, who would?

“Jesus! That was enough to down an elephant. Hit him again.”

Two more pinches hit his back and then there was nothing.

“LUCAS, damn it! I said to meet me at the compound at eight am sharp. It’s now ten. Where the hell are you?” Jaxx slammed the door to his SUV, started the engine and drove off.

Yes, the past few weeks were hard on Lucas. Being away from his family would be tough, but Jaxx needed to know Lucas wouldn’t expose their kind when something pissed him off and emotions took over. That he’d demonstrated iron clad control was the sole reason he allowed the pass for Lucas to visit his family. He wished he’d given Lucas more time with his females, but the situation was dire. Ethan wasn’t answering his phone either. Maybe Lucas had taken them somewhere special, and they were caught in traffic. Ethan was a reliable shifter; he would report back if there were any issues.

Jaxx had gone back to the tiny home of the mysterious woman and canvassed the area himself. It had taken longer than expected to garner any tidbit of information on the human he now knew as Marie LeRoy. His cell rang and Jaxx answered it without looking.

“Lucas, where the hell have you been?”

“Trouble in paradise, Jaxx?” Seb cooed down the line.

Not yet. But if he didn't get in contact with Lucas or Ethan soon, they'd both have their asses handed to them. "Do you need something, Seb? Or did you just call to talk about feelings?"

"Doubt it," he chuckled. "Saint wanted an update on the witness situation."

Jaxx blew out a breath and headed towards Lucas's place. "There isn't much to tell. All I could get is a name—Marie LeRoy, and that she'd moved into the area six months ago. The neighbors say she hasn't been home for a while. From what I can gather, she packed up and moved right after that night in the alley."

"It's a start. I'll pass the intel to Saint."

Pulling up at a set of lights, he asked, "Has anyone heard from Ethan?"

Cell reception was spotty in a lot of areas human families liked to visit. It wouldn't surprise him if Lucas had wanted to do something nice like that.

"I haven't. I'll ask around and keep you posted."

The line went dead as Jaxx pulled up in front of Lucas's place. No smells permeated the air at the front of the house. No one was home. He'd look around and see what he could find. He drew out his lock picking tools from his jacket pocket. His cell buzzed. He dug into his jacket pocket and answered, glancing around to make sure the noise hadn't drawn attention. "Yeah, I'm kinda busy."

"This takes precedent," Seb said. "I did some preliminary checks on the human witness of yours and I have a hit for a doctor with that name who works at the local hospital."

Seb's information spiked his interest, and he made quick work of packing up his tools. He'd check out the hospital and then, when he had more time, come and investigate Lucas's home.

"I'm on my way."

Lucas pulled at the bars of his cage. Frustrated, he growled. He spun and paced the four by four cage set in the middle of a large white room. Where was his family? A vision of Leila screaming and clawing at the Special Op henchmen, and her look of undiluted panic as they pried Milly from her grasp floated in his mind. Worse, were Milly's cries as his baby screamed for his help. Something he wouldn't forget anytime soon.

Lucas pinched his eyes shut and slammed his palm against the thick bands of steel, vowing to rip the arms off the men who brought that fear to his family. He tipped his head back, his hands gripping the bars, and roared like the crazy man he felt like. If they hurt his family, he would show them all what a monster he could be.

"Let me out of here!"

What the hell did these people want?

Damn it! It was days until the full moon. If he could wait it out, when he was in his wolf form, he could contact Jaxx through their mental connection. Maybe. If their mental link stretched that far. What he wouldn't do to be a shifter and change into his wolf with a thought. Then he'd have been able to save his family.

The moon binding the essence of his power drove him mad. Yes, his heightened senses were with him at all times and he could call upon his claws and teeth for short bursts of time. But that was nothing compared to his animal's trapped power. Still new to his

gifts, he held his breath and listened as the faint clip of shoes neared.

They paused outside his room and slowed down to what must have been the room next door. The beep of buttons told him the place was sporting some high-tech security. Faint foot falls stilled on the other side of the walled mirror. A moment later the door to his cage opened, giving him access to the stark white room. His body tensed and all senses jumped into overdrive.

“Don’t be shy now. Step forward, Mr. Bishop. You’re amongst friends here.”

The voice was all business and to his surprise, feminine. The tone was familiar, but last night he had been so drugged, he could barely tell what really took place. Lucas toed the tiles and peered into the larger area.

His gaze bounced across the surroundings; the stark white space was bare except for the large television on the wall. Lifting his nose, he scented the room. A faint trace of blood lingered under the smell of harsh cleaning chemicals. He searched for the owner of the voice.

It didn’t take him long to notice four speakers set up in each corner. A television flickered on and a lady in her mid-thirties, average looking woman wearing a lab coat came into view. He felt his eyes widen, vaguely remembering the female from the hospital. A scientist or doctor, he summarized.

She tucked loose black hair behind her ear. Her hand fell to grip a pendent on her necklace, running it back and forth along the chain. “Surely you didn’t think I was stupid enough to come into the room while you’re not restrained, did you?”

No, he hadn’t. But he was hoping. Tightening his fists, Lucas attempted to control his breathing. Through clenched teeth he demanded, “Where is my family? What do you want? If you hurt them...”

“Your family is fine,” she cut in. “Whether they remain that way is entirely up to you.” She sighed and picked up a clipboard, writing something on it. Lucas’s eyes narrowed, and he struggled to keep his claws retracted. He needed to remember to save all of his strength to strike when he stood the best chance of escape.

After a moment she shoved the pen into her hair and placed the clipboard down. "As for what I want." She stepped closer. "That is not your concern. However, your abilities are a means to an end. Help me out and I'll give you your family back. Everyone walks away a winner."

"My abilities," he murmured. His heart beat faster. *She knows.* His mind tried to piece together how she could have found out. The only places he had been since being turned were at Jaxx's club, Leila's work and their home.

He had been so careful not to show the creature beneath the man. His palms sweated. Jaxx had told him, under no circumstances was he to let their secret slip. The consequences would be fatal. Leila being the exception, and only then, if he had intentions of turning her. "I... I don't know what you're talking about."

The woman stared at him for a minute, gave an imperceptible nod. A gap opened in the wall and the barrel of a gun poked through. Before he could react his body spasmed. Pain like he'd never felt shot through him. Muscles contorted. His back arched before he fell to the floor like a lead weight.

Each muscle tensed and shuddered to the point he thought they would pop. His claws burst from his nail beds and his canines lengthened. The copper tang of blood coated his tongue, but his jaw locked. He couldn't even damn well swallow.

After what felt like an eternity, his muscles stopped convulsing and the pain cleared. Two electrodes dug into him. *Taser.* Groaning, he rolled over and yanked them out. He sprang into a crouch and growled low, his instincts pushing him to take out the threat.

"Yes, that's it Mr. Bishop." The crazy-assed bitch closed the gap, and only her face filled the television, her eyes wide and lit with excitement. "There is no need for secrets here."

His claws scraped along the tiles and he snarled.

She walked back to a desk and picked up the clipboard. "Now everything is out in the open, we can get down to business. I will send a human into the room, and all I want you to do is bite them and make them one of you."

Lucas didn't even know if *weres* could turn humans, but he would never do as she asked. He spat a wad of blood onto the floor. "No!"

She tsked and waddled her finger at him like he was a damn child. “Don’t be so hasty, Lucas Bishop.”

“I don’t even know if it’s possible.” He crossed his arms over his chest. Just the thought of biting someone sickened him. The one message underlining all of his training, was to protect their secret against humans.

In a singsong voice, she said, “We can only try.”

“Even if I could.” He ground his molars together. “I’d never help you.”

“I see.” She shook her head. “That’s too bad.”

Lucas turned towards his cage.

“That’s too bad for Leila.”

He spun on a dime and roared at the screen, prepared to rip through the wall to reach the female. Only the woman was no longer on the screen. He froze and his heart felt like it was trying to claw out of his chest.

“Wh... what are you do—.” Leila’s voice shuddered to a stop.

Lucas watched, horrified, as she fell to the floor and convulsed. The bastards had shot her with the taser. He’d kill them. Kill them all!

“Enough!” Like a coward, he closed his eyes, no longer able to watch them hurt the only woman he ever loved. “I’ll do whatever you want.”

The scientist’s voice buzzed through the air. His eyes snapped open. Not for a second did he want to be caught unaware around her. “I thought you’d see it my way. Now remember, your family’s safety is based on your cooperation. Do as I say, and everything will be fine.”

Somehow, he doubted that. His thoughts bounced from Milly to Leila. He knew if he agreed to be the doctor’s puppet, he’d be considered a rogue and be signing his death warrant. But his family came first. There really was no decision. A door creaked from behind him. He turned, still crouched low, to see a door hidden from view by a small alcove. In stepped a petite woman who looked barely twenty years old.

She wore torn jeans and a tight black shirt. By the looks of the woman, she’d been recently beaten or had been in some kind of

accident. Bruises messed up her face and a healing split ran across her lip. *Jesus. What the hell happened to her?*

The door shut. She wrapped her arms around her body, hugging herself, looking around the room until her gaze landed on him. Doing a double take, she froze. Internally he cringed, knowing his claws were out and his canines dug into his lower lip. He knew his eyes glowed a vibrant gold.

Slowly, he rose and watched her eyes widened. Her breath hitched and he could smell the fear pouring off her.

“Oh God,” she whispered, backpedaling until she hit the wall. She turned and slammed her fists against the door. “No. Don’t do this!” Her arms were like pistons banging relentlessly against the solid surface. “Let me outta here.”

No help would be coming. Not for either of them.

He growled. It felt like a vice wrapped around his chest. He had no choice. Bite this scared slip of a woman, or his family would suffer. He steeled himself, preparing to do what was necessary. She audibly swallowed. A sob slipped out of her. Fresh tears streamed down her cheeks and ran down to her pointed chin. “Please, please don’t hurt me.”

“I’m sorry.” He took a step toward her. “I have no choice.”

Another sob echoed around them and she shook her head. “There’s always a choice.”

Not when it involved his family’s safety. Swallowing his guilt, his voice dropped low. “I’ve made mine.”

Lucas pounced at the same time her scream pierced the air. The noise was like a dagger that cut deep. Ignoring his emotions, he focused on his task. Within seconds he had the woman pinned against the wall. He did his best not to hurt her more than he had to. Extending her arm, he lowered his head. She thrashed wildly but his strength held her in place.

“No!” She kicked him and for a moment he thought she would escape. He forced her to stand still against the wall and sunk his teeth into her. Her blood gathered in his mouth and he swallowed. Not lingering, he withdrew his teeth and stepped back. The female cries tore at his insides and he wondered if she would survive, if his family would survive, if his soul would survive.

“I’m sorry, please forgive me,” he whispered and turned away.

His claws and teeth became human, a clear sign he’d spent his energy. Air whooshed from behind him. He whipped his head as someone shoved Leila into the room.

“Leila!” He rushed forward and wrapped his arms around his wife, blocking her view of the atrocity he’d just committed. Gently cupping her face, he willed her attention to focus on him. “Are you okay?”

Brows pinching together, she searched his face. “What have they done to you? You’re bleeding.”

Right, the woman’s blood. It was a small mercy she assumed the blood was his. It wasn’t the time or place to explain his actions. He wiped the blood with his hand, cleaning it the best he could. His

senses told him the door behind him opened, people entered and removed the sobbing woman. He blocked everything except his Leila. "Don't worry about me. Are you okay? Where's Milly?"

"I'm okay." She squeezed his arms and peered around him. "Who is that woman? Why is she crying?"

"What about Milly? Have they hurt her?" Quickly, her attention reverted to him.

"She's scared, but thankfully no one has touched her." Leila swallowed hard and her eyes searched his gaze. "What does Doctor LeRoy want with you?"

The familiarity with which Leila spoke the words gave him pause. "Doctor LeRoy? Do you know her, Leila?"

Lucas's hands ran down to her shoulders and Leila nodded. "She works in another department at the hospital. But I care for her daughter, Kira."

Knowing Leila worked in the Children's Oncology Unit all Lucas could do was murmur in response. He closed his eyes and tilted his head back. Puzzle pieces he'd been straining to put together fell into place.

That explained things. When Lucas had been dying, glassed by some drunken SOB and left for dead in an alley, Jaxx had bitten him, saving his life. This Doctor LeRoy must be looking for an 'alternative' treatment for her daughter's cancer.

He heard the air swirl and his focus snapped to attention. He pushed Leila behind him a moment before his body yet again contorted uncontrollably. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Leila being dragged away.

"Son of a..." He pulled the electrodes out and looked around the room to find it empty.

"Well done, Lucas."

Dragging in a breath, Lucas rolled and propped himself up on his arms. He stared at the television while the last tremors shook his body and watched the doctor clap. He pushed himself onto his elbow and dragged his hand over his face. "I've done as you've asked. Now let us go."

"All in good time. I'm not finished with you yet."

His muscles tensed but he wasn't surprised with her response. One puzzle piece remained missing. How had the doctor known he was a *were* or where to find him? "How did you know?"

Doctor LeRoy smiled. "I saw you that night in the alley, bleeding out on the pavement. As a doctor, I was compelled to offer assistance. But before I had a chance, something not human bit you." She paused and tilted her head to the side, her gaze as clinical as if studying a fungus.

"My searches for you came up empty, so imagine my surprise when I saw the same man fully recovered picking up the lovely nurse that cares for my daughter." She laughed and grasped her pendent. "I knew then, my prayers had been answered."

To be continued...

AFTERWORD

I hope you enjoyed tasting your first sample of the Prowler world. Thank you for sharing this journey with me, and I look forward to experiencing many adventures with you all. Rest assured Lucas, his family, and Jaxx's fate will be revealed in Primal Instinct.

Connect with me [here](#). I'd love to hear from you!

Keep reading for a sneak peek into the next Prowler instalment...

SNEAK PEEK

Everyone was destined to die. Only the cursed were burdened to lose their humanity one day at a time. Jaxx Reynolds was one of those creatures, a shifter cursed with an evolving glyph, each stroke representing a sliver of humanity lost, and Jaxx's marking was pretty damned detailed. He clenched his teeth and stared out the window above the kitchen sink, his gaze scouring the bank of trees surrounding Shadow Moon territory.

"Where the fuck are you, Lucas?" Maybe letting his *were* out in the wild had been a bad idea. *He's with Ethan. It's fine.* If the enforcer was tailing Lucas, there would be nothing to worry about. Nothing got past the male.

Jaxx glanced back at the microwave clock. Noon. So, why weren't they back? It had been nearly twenty-four hours since they had been meant to pull in. *Stop worrying like you're his damn mommy.* Lucas's control was solid. The were was probably struggling to leave his family again. It hadn't been long since Jaxx had broken shifter law to save the guy. Now, Lucas was saddled with a wolf that would burst from his body every full moon. But at least he was alive, a feat considering he'd been stabbed and had been bleeding to death. And at least he wouldn't lose his humanity. That privilege was reserved for shifters alone.

The butter in the pan sizzled, and Jaxx threw on one of the twenty cuts of meat. It wouldn't be long until the rest of the pack moseyed on up to the pack house for lunch. After he'd finished his assigned duties he could swing by Lucas's place and kick him up the ass for making him worry. Then they knuckle down and start hunting for the female that had witnessed him wolfing out and biting Lucas in the alley beside his club, Prowlers. It would make him feel a helluva lot better if he could start extinguishing the trouble he'd caused the pack. If all went well, maybe they could focus on discrediting the snapshot that some no-good, blackmailing mutt from the Dark Falls pack had taken of the whole thing.

The back door slammed open, and the subtle undertone of rogue hit Jaxx's senses. He froze, lifting his chin and scenting the air. He'd know that sour stench anywhere. He swallowed down sorrow, and the muscles around his spine tightened. The frayed thread of life was about to snap for one of his pack brothers. Thuds banged down the hall as the male's shoulders bounced off the walls. Currents tingled around him, a telltale sign someone approached. The scent grew stronger; Jaxx could make out the original smell swirling with decay. "Shit!"

His chest constricted. *Xavier*. One of Shadow Moon's finest enforcers.

"Help! I need Saint now!"

Jaxx shut his eyes, swallowing hard. His muscles tensed, and the grip on the knife tightened at Xavier's command. Besides the animalistic tone to his voice, Jaxx could smell Xavier's scent warping to a pungent tang, overwhelming the male's usual odor.

Slowly, he placed the knife on the counter, abandoning the steak to sizzle on low heat. Not even the mouthwatering aroma of the pack's lunch could drown out the smell radiating from the male. Opening his eyes, Jaxx looked out the window at the large forest that was the Shadow Moon territory, wondering why this happened to their kind. His own glyph itched, reminding him, he could be next. Unless he could find the one woman strong enough to keep his wolf at bay, it would eventually be him, submitting to the monster lurking beneath the surface.

Xavier growled, and Jaxx spun to face him. Naked as the day he was born, hunched over the counter. His chest heaved with exaggerated breaths, and the tips of his human fingers had morphed into wolf claws, digging into the dark marble bench top. Like all shifters, the left side of his body was covered in the glyph of his wolf. Almost lifelike with the amount of intricate detail, it looked as fierce and deadly as Jaxx knew the animal to be. Tribal swirls and accents started from the outer edge of his foot, up his leg, into his torso, straight up his neck into his hairline, framing the creature. Each brushstroke represented a measure of humanity lost.

Jaxx drew in a sharp breath. Damn it to hell! Xavier's glyph was seconds from completing, the moment all shifters dreaded. All of

their kind prayed to be mated before the last stroke formed on their ever-developing markings. No one wanted to turn into a wild, savage beast, killing without conviction or attacking the people they cherished most prior to their rogue transformation. A fate Jaxx had witnessed many times in his two hundred years.

Claws scratching along the marble top jerked his attention back to Xavier. The male's ginger hair stood on end, as if he had dragged his hands through the strands repeatedly. Jaxx's gut twisted. It had only been last week that they had both been out for a drink at Prowlers, planning tactics for their next mate hunt—something Xavier would never get the opportunity to do now. This was the end for his friend, and it cut Jaxx to his core.

How could the possibilities have seemed endless yesterday, and now, hopeless? All the men in the Shadow Moon pack were worthy of happiness, but lately they were losing more of the males to their animal within.

"Xavier... I'm sorry." Xavier would never know the loving touch of his mate. The only measure of peace Jaxx could offer would be deliverance of mercy, allowing Xavier's honor and integrity to remain intact. He had upheld pack law and sought out their alpha before succumbing to his rogue urges.

Jaxx gritted his teeth, knowing their alpha, Saint, was in an alpha council meeting. It was days like this when his position as beta sucked ass. He resigned himself to the fact Xavier would die by his hands. Jaxx took a step closer, but Xavier's growl held him in place.

"Can you fight it?"

Xavier laughed. "Fight it?" Sweat trickled from his temple. When he continued, it was through clenched teeth. "I've been fighting it since the get-go."

At puberty their bodies made the first shift and the first sign of their markings appeared, a unique glyph that sizzled across their skin for no rhyme or reason. Sometimes a shifter got lucky and worked out triggers, delaying the inevitable, but sometimes they didn't. From that day forward, their fate was sealed, tethered to finding a true mate.

Xavier's eyes took on a reddish glow around the edges. "Save it... I need... Saint." He paused, panting some breaths before

shouting, "Now!"

Shit! Jaxx wasn't a stranger to death or killing; however, *releasing* a warrior never got easier. He kept his muscles relaxed and craned his neck to each side. Xavier watched him, his eyes narrowed. "Saint's not here. I accept the responsibility. The pack will know your honor was intact."

For a brief moment, relief flashed across Xavier's features before he grunted and doubled over. Within seconds, the last of the ink connected. Xavier's head shot up and glared at Jaxx. The amber color of his eyes receded, morphing into red lasers.

Xavier lunged simultaneously, shifting midair. A motley wolf barreled toward Jaxx, his claws outstretched, ready to rip him to shreds. Jaxx jumped back, and Xavier's claws missed his stomach, tearing down his left arm. He grunted, embraced the pain, and used the burn to feed his anger. Anger he could use to make his task bearable.

Slamming a right hook into Xavier, Jaxx sent the male skidding across the floor, where he smashed into the fridge. Jaxx sank to his knees and his body fell forward, muscles and bones contorting and reforming to the shape of his wolf's body. Skin maneuvered and stretched over his muzzle, and black-tipped gray fur shot out of his pores. Sharp teeth exploded in his mouth; his own razor claws pierced his fingertips.

Shaking his body, Jaxx let his tattered clothes fall to the tiles, along with most of his human tendencies. Teeth pierced his shoulder. Jaxx snarled, spinning around and knocking Xavier into the cupboard. Xavier yelped at the same time as the whitewashed cupboard door splintered. Taking the opportunity, Jaxx attacked, ramming him into the cupboard again. Xavier staggered back, and Jaxx leapt onto the male, dragging his claws across his flank. Jaxx's teeth sunk deep into Xavier's skin, blood pooled in his mouth, and his beast basked in the glory of it. A dark and ugly part of him urged him to tear the flesh from his opponent's bones.

Their bodies slammed against the counter and dishes sitting on the edge of the bench crashed to the floor, shards of porcelain scattering onto the tiles. Xavier snarled, bucking him off. The other members of the pack would be joining them soon, and Jaxx wanted

Xavier neutralized before anyone else was put in danger. Leaping, he met Xavier in the air. They both stood on their hind legs, their teeth clashing, spittle and blood dampening their fur. He dug his claws deeper into Xavier's shoulders; his teeth tore into flesh. Xavier howled and sank his canines into Jaxx's shoulder.

Jaxx gnashed his teeth against the burning pain, shaking his head. Xavier ripped free and dodged his attack. *Son of a bitch*. Jaxx inched forward, his lip quivering in warning. Faster than he'd have liked, Xavier shot forward, his mouth wide, razor teeth gunning for the kill. At the last second, Jaxx darted left, narrowly missing his date with the Reaper. For a moment, his vision turned red and his mouth watered for the kill. Body quivering, anticipating the last moments of battle before he ended it for Xavier. Jaxx spun and attacked, not holding anything back. He tore chunks of fur and flesh from Xavier, enjoying each yowl of pain.

Xavier's blood tasted like whiskey slipping down his throat a little too easily—hot and comforting. Pleasure hummed in his body. He felt powerful. Strength coursed through his veins with each drop of Xavier's blood. For a few moments, no thought filtered through his mind other than the kill. The decision carried a monumental weight. He knew if he could end the male, he would be unstoppable.

In some small recess of the wolf's mind, Jaxx's human side panicked. He understood kill or be killed—in most cases it was pack motto—but only rogues enjoyed death. Trapped in the quicksand of his curse, his thoughts were slow and sluggish. With every ounce of his being, he fought for his humanity.

He envisioned his true mate.

The same vision he always conjured during his darkest struggles. It didn't matter that he could never see what she looked like; the thought of someone solely for him brought him a measure of peace. He pictured his arms wrapped around her, her voice almost lyrical in quality, urging him to dig deep, use his strength to hold on, and fight for her. She would find him soon. All he needed to do was hold on a little longer.

As if hit with a sledgehammer, Jaxx took control of his mind, thrusting the wolf back, allowing more of his humanity to pour into

the void of death and destruction. Cold to his bones, fear wasn't something he felt often. He felt it then.

"What the hell..." a woman screamed, then reached for skillet in the middle of the island counter.

Shit!

That's all he needed. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Quinn's very human mate, Sasha, standing in the middle of their battle. Jaxx repositioned himself, keeping the female and Xavier in his sight. He wanted to kick his own ass for falling so deeply into his wolf's frenzied mind.

Xavier and Jaxx froze. Quinn's mate was completely in the dark about their kind. Saint had agreed she could visit the compound as long as she was guarded at all times by Quinn during the courting process. That plan had obviously turned to shit.

Sasha was in trouble. Hell, if anything happened to her, Quinn may as well bend over and kiss his ass good-bye. The loss would send him over the edge, and Jaxx would have to deal with not only one but two rogues.

Xavier growled, saliva dripping from his long, sharp teeth. With no further warning he launched himself toward Quinn's salvation.

Mackenzie Sutton glanced around the darkening, deserted parking lot, searching the shadows for danger. Cool air billowed through her hoodie and she shivered, shoving her hands into her jean pockets. She didn't have a good feeling about this. A laugh slipped out, although it lacked humor. Did she ever have a good feeling about a rendezvous under the cover of dusk?

Air fluttered behind her, and she spun to face the ominous-looking building. In a smooth motion, her hand tightened on her pocketknife and pulled it out of her jeans, the blade extended and ready to do damage. Pigeons flew from the ledge of a broken window to land on the rooftop rail. She blew out a breath. *It's just the birds. Get a grip on yourself, Kenzie.*

Scanning the area, her vision swept across the abandoned building. The windows were broken, and tags in thick black paint were scrawled across the front of the complex. Nothing like the slums to reassure her safety. Once she was satisfied the area was clear, her shoulders slowly relaxed and she shoved the knife back into her pocket. Putting her back to the building, she watched for the person who'd be sent to give her orders.

Weariness settle upon her. How could one mistake have screwed up not only her life, but her sister's as well? She gritted her teeth against the consuming guilt she drowned in daily whenever she thought of her sister. Was Ava hurt? Would Kenzie ever be able to free either of them? Just thinking of her sister trapped in a cell sent her rage skyrocketing, and an overwhelming sense of helplessness coursed through her veins like a disease.

Frustrated, she kicked a loose rock, watching as it flew through the air and bounced off some crates. Life had been hard after their mom abandoned them. Kenzie rolled her eyes; life had been hard before their mom up and left. Her dad was probably a dealer. It wouldn't have been the first time her mom paid for drugs with her body—did she even know what it was like to be sober? For as long as she was able, it had always been Kenzie's job to provide and protect.

She had failed.

Life had molded her into a fighter—she didn't know how to be anything else, and it fueled her to never stop reaching for their freedom. Straightening, she shook her head. Of course she would save her sister. She'd always gotten them out of trouble in the past, and this time was no different. It was taking a little longer than she'd hoped. But... Everything was going to work out. One more job and she would have earned their freedom. *Just one more.*

Her Delmac-issued cell rang, and she pulled it out of her pocket. Doctor LeRoy's name flashed on the screen, and she sneered, hating the doctor for blackmailing her, hating herself for making the worst mistake of her life. Snapping the lid closed to her emotions, she accepted the call. "Yeah?"

"Pleasant as always, Kenzie."

The sweet, condescending tone set her on edge. She hated how the woman referred to her in such a familiar way. Kenzie balled her hand into a fist, her nails digging into her palm. “My name is Mackenzie.”

The doctor clicked her tongue. “Careful. I’m in a rather pleasant mood. I’d hate for that to change.”

Not wanting her sister to pay for her outburst, she reined in her temper and remained silent. For the last two years William—some military GI Joe—had controlled her every move. All because she and her sister had broken into the wrong warehouse for shelter. At first, William wanted to kill them both. Fear had made her stupid. She’d sold herself to the devil and had been paying for it ever since. Then, a couple of months ago, William ordered her to work for Doctor Marie LeRoy. Kenzie used the term doctor loosely. As far as she knew, doctors were meant to save people, not hurt them like she had hurt Ava on more than one occasion when Kenzie made the mistake of refusing orders.

The doctor continued as if Kenzie’s silence pleased her. “Are you at the location?”

Taking another sweep of the desolated area she frowned, wondering why the doctor was checking in on this particular job. “Of course.”

“Good. Your contact will be there promptly. Plans have changed, and you will report directly to the handler for this particular job. I suggest you follow all orders correctly for a change.”

Kenzie ground her molars. Being used as a pawn felt about as good as having each layer of skin being removed, one at a time. Only no one would ever see her scars. At the end of the day, what did it matter who controlled her? This was the last job before they were free. “Got it. Best behavior.” She scraped her teeth along her lip before taking a deep breath. “I want to talk to her.”

The doctor hummed a disappointed sound. “You know the rules, my dear. Contact only after each job is finished. Even if that weren’t the case, she isn’t here at the moment.”

Frowning, Kenzie gripped her cell tighter. “What? Where the hell is she?”

It wasn't like the doctor let them out on day trips. Kenzie swore when nothing but a dial tone met her ear. Lord help her, she was going to make that woman pay as soon as she got Ava the hell out of there. Why would they move her? And where? Kenzie had no clue where to find Ava. Whenever she had seen her sister, Kenzie had always been blindfolded on the way.

Headlights beamed in the distance, and since this was the only destination along the road, she hazarded a guess that her handler had arrived. She shoved her cell in her pocket and leaned against the side of her sedan, her hand still clamped around her pocketknife. Kenzie wished the streetlights in the area hadn't been smashed out, the shadows eating up more light while she waited.

A dark, glossy car rolled into the area and stopped in front of the wooden pallets, blocking the exit. She swallowed as her heartbeat pounded so hard it could have been classified as a separate entity. The car lights thankfully lit up the area. The driver's door opened, and black pumps toed the ground. She frowned as a beautiful woman emerged from the car.

The stranger's red dress hugged every inch of her like a lover's embrace. A small black belt accentuated her small waist. Not quite what she was expecting. Normally, the people Kenzie dealt with were more like henchmen—rough, missing teeth, and smelling bad. The woman had dark hair, but Kenzie couldn't make out the color with the dim light. It struck her as odd the woman wore sunglasses when she could barely make out her facial features.

"Mackenzie Sutton, I take it." The woman spoke with a calm confidence and closed the distance.

Kenzie couldn't tear her eyes off the woman. There was something different about her that sent shivers skating down Kenzie's spine. She couldn't place her finger on what bothered her, but her gut said to remain alert, and she'd learned long ago not to fight her instincts. Internally, she might be caught off guard, but dealing in the slums taught her not to show weakness. She arched a brow. "And you are?"

The woman cocked her head to the side and smiled. "Call me Kali, your new business partner. I have high hopes for our

arrangement, but, I have to warn you, any betrayal will be your last. I don't give second chances. For all intents and purposes, I own you."

Kenzie's body tensed like a bolt of electricity shot from the heavens and fused her to the ground. "No one owns me."

The woman arched a brow. "Wrong. Freedom is an illusion. We all have an author writing us into their own narrative, for their own gains. You'd do well to remember that. "

Kenzie struggled to keep her temper under control. How dare these people imply she was some sort of cattle to be bought and sold. She was a living, breathing human, damn it! "I only owe one more job until my debt is paid."

Smiling, the woman murmured, "Perhaps."

"Perhaps?" There would be no perhaps. She had one job until freedom. Period.

"Perhaps, if your performance is satisfactory, this will be your last job."

Kenzie's eyes narrowed. This would be the last job! For the past five years she had been hanging onto this moment. William had wanted enough crimes linked to her that would guarantee her silence. She'd sacrificed everything. Nothing and nobody would come between her and her sister's freedom. She stared at the woman sent to control her, assessing her, trying to work out what kind of person she was dealing with. It was obvious she meant business. The threat to her freedom made Kenzie's palms sweat. "Do you have my sister?"

Kali didn't move. "Of course. I know all about your moral dilemmas, and how in the past you've needed the extra persuasion. Thing is, this world is brutal. In order to survive you need to do what's required. "

Unbelievable. "You say that as if I were being picky over what to have for breakfast. I've been forced to ruin people's lives! That matters to me." Her stomach churned, knowing innocent people had been convicted for crimes they didn't commit, all because of the handy evidence she'd planted. They'd all been criminals in some way, but that didn't seem to make what she had done easier.

The way Kali had spoken about surviving made it sound like she'd had some experience with life's brutality. Not that it mattered.

She was the enemy.

Kali tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. “Well, there will be no such complications with this job.”

She pulled down her glasses until they sat at the tip of her nose, and Kenzie saw a faint glow burning in her eyes.

“Understand?”

Kenzie tightened her grip on her knife. Faster than she would have thought possible, the woman’s arm shot out and latched around Kenzie’s wrist.

Kali tsked. “Let’s not get off to a bad start. It’d be nice if we could get along. Who knows, in time we could even look out for one another?”

Doubtful. Like she’d trust anyone that worked for the doctor. No thanks.

The woman stepped close, invading Kenzie’s space. “I’ll say this once. If you want to see your sister alive, you’ll do as I say. You don’t know it, but I’m trying to help you.”

Her grip tightened painfully, and Kenzie swore Kali’s nails pierced through her hoodie and into her skin.

“You won’t tell a soul about me, and if you screw up, it won’t be you that pays the price.”

With a surprising strength, the woman dragged her to the back of the car. Kenzie dug in her heels and tried to free herself. “Let me go!”

The trunk popped open and the woman shoved her toward the opening. Stumbling, Kenzie’s hands gripped onto the lip of the trunk. She gasped and shook her head with disbelief. Her eyes skimmed over a beaten woman, her face so swollen and bruised no one would be able to recognize her. If it wasn’t for a glint of light reflecting off her sister’s chain, she would never have guessed it was Ava. With a trembling hand, she *tentatively* reached out and ran a finger down Ava’s face, careful to miss any wounds.

“Ava?” she croaked out.

Bound and bloodied, her sister lay huddled on her side, curled into herself, unresponsive. Her eyes were swollen shut, her nose crooked, and scratches raked down her face. The bitch had tied her wrists with wire, and Kenzie saw the cuts from where Ava had struggled against the restraints.

“She’s alive... for now.”

A sob strangled Kenzie. “Why? Why would you do this to her? She’s done nothing wrong.”

Kali stepped closer to her sister, and Kenzie froze. “Me? You think I did this? The human was handed to me in this condition to make sure you do as I say. As you can see, your sister has already been punished. For hell’s sake, she doesn’t need to pay for any more of your disobedience.”

Panting, Kenzie struggled to think clearly. It sounded like something the doctor would do. She watched Kali fan out her fingers, the glint of the light reflecting off sharp claws growing from her nail beds.

“I have no issue with you or your sister. Let’s keep it that way. I don’t want your sister paying for your mistakes. But force my hand, and I will do whatever is necessary for me to reach my goals.”

Fear crawled up Kenzie’s throat and tightened her vocal cords.

Oh God! What is this... this monster? Humans couldn’t grow claws. Each logical part of her brain wanted to blame it on a trick of the light. But she knew better; while Kali may have looked normal, she was absolutely not human.

Kenzie wiped unshed tears from her eyes. “What do you want me to do?”

Kali reached over, rummaged in the trunk, and grabbed a folder. With a flick of her wrist, she slammed the trunk shut. Turning, she smiled at Kenzie and thrust out a file.

“Open it.”

Silently, Kenzie peeled open the file, and tilted the paper towards the car’s taillights to reveal a pixelated photo of a man. She frowned, examining the picture. The man held something that had been cut from the image. His sandy hair was slightly shaggy, his face appearing warped. Maybe he was deformed? Through the grainy picture you could see his face caught in a sneer, revealing large, pointy-looking teeth. It seemed like someone had done a bad Photoshop job to make his eyes glow a brilliant shade of emerald-green. *What the hell is this?*

“In the file you’ll find an address of a location he’s been associated with. Your job is to gain access to the location and report

back with what you find and the layout of the structure. Use any means necessary. A word of caution—if you get caught and you let our arrangement slip, your life, not to mention your sister's, will be forfeit.”

Kenzie's frown deepened. “You want me to get floor plans for you?” Surely that sort of information could be tracked down by much simpler means, like with the local county.

As if sensing her thoughts, Kali warned. “Gaining access won't be easy. There are no plans available to source. If they find out you're working for me, they'll kill you, no questions asked. Understand?”

Kenzie swallowed and nodded. “How will I contact you?”

She gestured to the folder. “All information is in there. I'll be in touch.”

Without another word, her new handler turned, got into the car, and drove off, leaving Kenzie gaping. She had no idea how she was going to pull this off. One thing she knew for sure; that creature meant business. It would mean both her sister's and her own life if she failed.

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