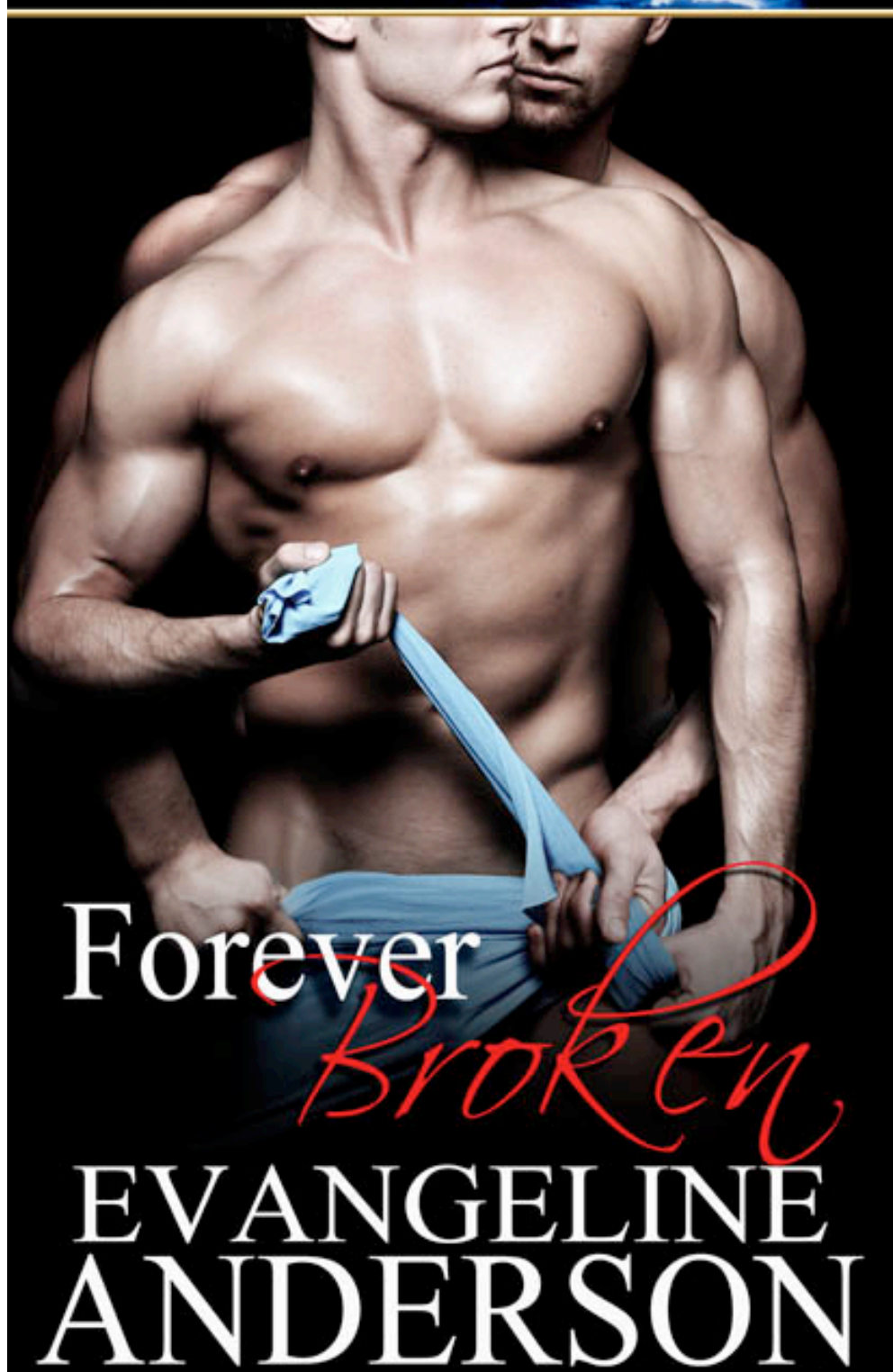


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



Forever

*Broken*

EVANGELINE  
ANDERSON

## **Forever Broken**

*Evangeline Anderson*

As second wolf in the *Lunas Locas* pack, Paul Kraskowski has power and prestige. He also has a dark secret, one he hides and won't admit even to himself – until the night he meets Laurent.

Born to one of the oldest families of his kind, Laurent Montcrieve is vampire royalty. He stands to inherit massive wealth and the title Viscount of the Blood. But he would give it all up to find the one man who can complete him – his *Coeur de Sang*, or Heart's Blood.

Two worlds collide when Laurent and Paul meet and form an accidental blood bond. But the instant spark between them ignites a raging bonfire of conflict. Their people are enemies who would rather see them dead than together and Paul refuses to admit his attraction to another man. Now the clock is ticking as they agree to explore what lies between them. Their search may end in true love or death. But they must be careful...for if they sever the tie that binds them, the bond they share will be forever broken.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



[www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com)

Forever Broken

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# ***FOREVER BROKEN***

**Evangeline Anderson**

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## Chapter One

It was a night like any other in South Florida—muggy, damp, just beginning to be really hot—and the *Lunas Locas* pack was going vamp bashing. The moon was nearly full and the wolves were assembling around the Biscayne Boulevard edge of Bicentennial Park. You couldn't really get out of the city—the urban sprawl of Miami stretched on and on until you hit the Gulf or the Everglades. But there were a few open places a pack could run under the moon and this was one of them.

Paul Kraskowski, aka Krackskullsi, aka Skulls to the rest of the wolves, sighed and shrugged out of his damp T-shirt, revealing the pack tats he'd had inked back when he'd been jumped-in on his fifteenth birthday. A wolf howling at a crazy-faced moon decorated his muscular left shoulder and a blazing sun pierced by a stake covered most of his right pec. The tats sent a clear message to anyone who knew how to read them but by the time they did it was usually too late. He sighed irritably as he dropped the shirt carelessly on the seat of his custom-built motorcycle. He was already in a shit mood and the fucking humidity wasn't helping one goddamn bit.

"What the fuck?" he snarled as someone covered his eyes from behind. The fingers were small and cold and the scent on them was bitter lime. "Hands off, Mercedes," he snapped, impatiently turning to face her. "What do you want, anyway?"

She pouted prettily, tossing her long black hair over one slim shoulder. "Don't be such a fucking killjoy, Skulls. Angel sent me—he said to tell you you're leading the pack tonight."

"What? Why?" Angel Chavez was packleader by blood and birth—he could trace his heritage all the way back to Cuba, which was something Paul, with his purely Polish ancestry by way of Chicago, couldn't claim. He would never be packleader himself but he was second in command and closer to Angel than anyone else.

"Like I fucking know." Mercedes shrugged. "He's busy—family business. Not that you'd know anything about *that*."

He'd taken enough shit for being the only blond-haired, blue-eyed non-Cubano in the *Locas* often enough for that not to bother him. But he didn't like the fact that Angel was sending Mercedes to tell him the plan for the night had changed instead of telling Paul himself. He gave the girl a hard look. "So why's he sending a little wanna-be like you to tell me his business, huh?"

She flushed. "I'm not a wanna-be now. I was sexed-in two months ago, remember?"

"Like I could forget." As one of the pack's *veteranos* he'd had to take part. He'd made it as fast as he could but he couldn't make himself finish inside her. What if she'd gotten pregnant? He didn't want any kid of his to have Mercedes for a mother.

"Well, I haven't forgotten." She reached between his legs and palmed his cock through the baggy jeans he wore. "What happened that night, anyway—you didn't want to share me? Tonight you can have me all to yourself. You can even take me in wolf form if you want—I like to fur fuck under the full moon."

Paul pushed her hand away, repulsed. "No thanks. I'll take a fucking pass on that one."

"What's the matter with you, anyway, you don't like girls?" Her delicate features were a mask of fury.

"No, I just don't like *pinche putas*."

"*Cabron!*" She spat on the ground, obviously pissed that he'd refused her again. Leaving his cum on her belly instead of inside her cunt was the ultimate sign of disrespect. It had damaged her status in the pack right from the start and Mercedes wasn't likely to forgive him for it anytime soon—especially since he kept resisting her advances. Not that he cared.

"Fuck off." He didn't bother to keep the contempt out of his voice. There were other human girls who ran with the pack—it was a necessity since the were gene was hardly ever dominant in females. But none of them annoyed him as much as Mercedes who was constantly trying to sleep her way to the top. Paul wasn't willing to be another rung in her ladder, even if he'd wanted her—which he fucking well didn't.

Mercedes stuck a finger in his face. "You better grow some fucking manners soon, Skulls. Look at my eyes—they're green—witch green. I'm a *bruja*, you know. You mess with me I'll make your *pinga* fall off."

"Yeah, right. I'm shaking in my shoes." He turned to go but she grabbed his arm.

"I know why you don't want me—it's the same reason you don't want any girl. You're a *maricon*."

Paul looked down at her hand on his arm and then back to her face. "Get your fucking hand off me if you don't want to lose it."

"Yeah, right, I'm so scared."

Paul growled deep in his throat, letting his eyes go from dark blue to wolf gold to add to the threat.

"You wouldn't. You don't hurt girls." But the look in her poison-green eyes was uneasy and she finally removed her hand.

*I don't fuck them either.* Of course, that wasn't because he didn't like females. He was just...picky. Very damn picky. "Run find Chulo to play with," he told her. "I hear he doesn't mind fucking you. Must have lower standards than me." Chulo Chavez was under him in the pack structure—a beta who wanted to be alpha but couldn't quite manage it. Still, he was Angel's first cousin, which made his status higher than it would have been otherwise.

Mercedes made an angry hissing noise almost like a cat. "Go ask Angel yourself why you're leading the pack tonight. While you're at it, ask him why he let a fucking faggot into the *Locas* in the first place."

He should have slapped her for such an insult but she was right—he didn't hit females no matter how much they deserved it. His stepmother, Lucia, had raised him with too much respect. "Go fuck yourself, Mercedes. Or have Chulo do it, if he's not afraid you'll chew off his *pinga* with your fucking pussy."

Her eyes glowed in the moonlight. "*Chinga tu madre, puto!*"

"Yeah, I'd rather fuck my mom than you." Paul gave her a snarl of disgust and some of the other wolves who had wandered over laughed. Mercedes looked like she was about to say something else but Paul had had enough of her shit for one night. He went looking for Angel himself.

After ten minutes of searching he found the leader of the *Locas* taking a piss against a palm tree. "Yo, *mi hermano*." He clapped the other man on the back. Angel's arms and chest bulged with muscle just like Paul's but his skin was much darker, making it harder to see the pack tats.

"Paul the Skull." Angel took his time shaking off before tucking his uncut cock back into the baggy denim shorts he wore. If he noticed Paul's eyes lingering on his crotch, he didn't show it. When he finished he turned to bump chests and gave Paul a one-armed hug.

"What's doing? That little bitch Mercedes came and told me you want me to take point tonight."

"Yeah, sorry about that." Angel shrugged apologetically. Keeping one arm around Paul's shoulders, he dug in his pocket and pulled out a joint. "Want some?"

"Sure." Paul let himself lean into the one-armed embrace just a little. Angel's skin was warm against his side and he smelled of smoke and clean sweat. "So what are you doing that's so fucking important you can't run with the pack?"

The packleader stuck the joint between his lips and flipped open a heavy gold lighter. He fired it up and took a long drag before answering. "Family business—you know. My uncle Rafael is in town and wants to do a sit-down with me and my dad. So I have to run with the old farts tonight." He made a face, the sweet-smelling smoke curling from his nostrils.

"Bad luck, man. You sure you don't want me there to get your back? Could be trouble." Angel's uncle was the most powerful wolf in Cuba, which meant he trumped any were in South Florida status-wise as well.

"Nah, no trouble. Just the older generation trying to keep us crazy young *lobos* in line. But thanks anyway, man." Angel gave his shoulder an affectionate squeeze and offered him the joint.

"As long as you're sure." Paul took a drag, feeling the warmth of the drug creep over him. Regular cannabis didn't do much for weres but Angel had a supplier who



had crossed it with some other plants to make a much stronger smoke. The hybrid would have been lethal to humans but it only gave wolves a pleasant buzz.

"Hey." Angel looked at him seriously. "You know I'd tell you if there was trouble in the wind. How long have we been together, huh?"

Paul grinned. "Since fifth grade when Jimmy Rodriguez tried to take you down in gym class and I helped you kick his ass."

Fifth grade had been the year when his father had decided his motorcycle business, the Chop Shop, would do better in Miami than Chicago. He'd moved them right into the middle of Little Havana where even the street signs were in Spanish and it had been sink or swim for Paul.

Back then he'd just been plain old Paul Kraskowski and he'd been drowning before he met Angel—before he helped him win the fight against the class bully. After that, Angel had taken him under his wing, taught him Spanish, helped him adjust. When they both came of age, he'd even wanted to sponsor Paul into the *Locas*. The other wolves wouldn't stand for that though—not with Paul's lack of Hispanic heritage. He'd been jumped-in instead—six of the toughest wolves beating the shit out of him until he was bloody and bruised and it had been worth it. Every cracked rib and black eye—he would have done it all again if he had to. For the *Locas*. For Angel.

"Since fifth grade and you still got my back." Angel grinned down at him. He was six foot to Paul's five-nine but Paul didn't mind the height difference. He was used to being on the short side and having people underestimate him because of it. They were always sorry after they made that mistake, but of course by then it was too late.

"Always got your back, *hermano*." He nudged the other man affectionately, meeting Angel's eyes in the moonlight. They were as black as his hair and hard to read but right now they looked calm and relaxed, at least to Paul.

"Lean back against the tree." Angel nodded to a palm opposite the one he'd been pissing on. "I'll give you blow-backs."

"Sure." Heart thumping, Paul did as his best friend and packleader ordered. The spines of the palm tree dug into his bare back but he didn't care. What mattered to him was the look in Angel's eyes as he took a long drag on the joint, holding the sweet smoke deep in his lungs. Then he leaned forward, his mouth hovering over Paul's, and exhaled.

Paul breathed in hungrily, inhaling the smoke-laced breath with his eyes closed tight. He could feel Angel's lips so close to his, just a hairsbreadth away. The heat of the other man's chest, the scent of his skin, even the beat of his heart all flooded Paul's senses. Unbidden, an image came to his mind. A picture of himself leaning forward just a little to close the distance between them. A fraction of an inch—that was all it would take to seal their mouths together. He wondered if Angel would taste as good as he smelled.

He wondered if the other man would kill him right away or let the rest of the pack in on the action.

*Stop thinking like that.* He tried to stamp on the emotions hard, to keep his feelings in check. It was wrong, feeling that way about another guy. Very fucking wrong. So why couldn't he seem to stop?

After what seemed like an eternity Angel drew back a few inches. "Hey."

Paul opened his eyes to see his friend studying him intently. "Yeah?"

"Just checking to see if you're still with me. Your eyes get this glazed look sometimes, like you're all far away and shit." Angel traced a line under Paul's right eye with his thumb as if to illustrate his point.

"Yeah, well..." Paul tried not to shiver under the light touch. God, Angel was always doing this kind of shit! He wondered if the other man knew how he affected him and hoped to hell not.

"You cold, Pauly?" There was an amused glint in the black eyes that seemed to say Angel knew exactly what he was doing and wasn't going to stop anytime soon. Paul had seen him treat girls who were trying to get into the *Locas* the same way. That teasing way he had of talking, the light touches that seemed to promise so much. He had them panting after him like dogs. *The way he does me.* But Paul couldn't help it. At least Angel never treated him like this in front of the other wolves. He kept it strictly between the two of them, which made it worse in a way.

"I'm warm enough." Paul shifted uneasily as Angel took a last drag off the joint and crushed it beneath his heel.

"I'm more than warm—I'm hot. Fucking horny." Angel pulled back and leaned against the palm tree beside Paul's. "I'd almost fuck that *pinche puta* Mercedes."

Paul tried to laugh. "Yeah, right. She's got fucking teeth where her *concha* should be."

Angel grinned. "That's why I said *almost*. Hey, remember how we used to jerk off together when we were kids?"

"Yeah, I guess. Maybe." Paul didn't see how he could forget it. Those secret jerk-off sessions with his best friend had provided him with fantasy material for years.

"Let's do it now—let's rub one out." Angel already had his cock out, gripping it loosely in his fist, his eyes trained on Paul to see his reaction.

"I don't know..." Paul frowned.

"C'mon, I don't want to have to sit in on this family *mierta* with a hard-on." *You can't refuse me,* said the look in his black eyes. *Can't tell me no—you never tell me no.*

But Paul wanted to this time. He didn't want to do this now. Didn't want his friend to see how hard he was—how much being close to another man affected him. How could he explain his raging erection? How could he keep the hunger inside him, the fire that was threatening to burn out of control, in check with so much temptation so close at hand?

He was saved by a shout from one of the other wolves. "Vamps! There's a coven in the woods. I fucking saw 'em!"

Paul and Angel were both immediately on high alert. Besides some drug running and protection, fucking up vampires was the pack's main calling. Vamps were bloodsucking scum—unnatural, undead sons of bitches who didn't deserve to walk the face of the Earth—even if they only did it during the night. But the worst thing about them was that they didn't care who they fucked. Every last one of them was what Angel called "try-sexual"—they'd try anything with anyone, anytime.

The vamp's fluid sexuality, more than anything else, was deeply offensive to the weres. The worst thing you could do to another wolf was to make him suck your cock. It was the ultimate shame—the most degrading insult reserved for outcasts from the pack.

Paul had seen Angel punish a few of the lower wolves that way before stripping them of their status. The packleader seemed to enjoy it, taking his time thrusting between the fallen wolf's lips before filling his mouth with cum. Of course, if the wolf in question didn't swallow every drop he was beaten. Paul had watched and wondered what it must be like to feel another man's hard shaft pushing between his lips, wondered if it would be worth losing his status and becoming a lone wolf in order to taste another male just once like that.

"C'mon, let's go see what's doing." Angel tucked his cock back in his shorts casually and loped off in the direction of the shout. Paul followed, not sure if he was relieved or disappointed to have been interrupted.

When they got to the center of the commotion, Chulo was trying and failing to get the other wolves to settle down and pay attention. "Come on, guys. Come on," he kept saying but his reedy voice was drowned out by the excited clamor of the other wolves.

Angel had stopped a few feet away from the pack and none of them had noticed him or Paul yet. He gave Paul a look and then cut his eyes at his first cousin who was trying and failing to get the pack members in order. "Fucking weak blood in that one, man." He shook his head. "Get their attention, will you, *hermano*?"

Paul nodded and strode directly into the heart of the pack. The wolves and their females made way for him at once though most of them topped him by more than a few inches. Ignoring Chulo who was standing right beside him, he waited for a moment until all eyes were on him and then raised his voice slightly. "Listen up. Your packleader has something to say."

"Thanks, Skulls." Angel came forward and the wolves parted before him. *Like Moses and the fucking Red Sea*, Paul thought, with a mixture of admiration and resentment. "Okay, who saw the vamps?"

Chulo stepped toward Angel eagerly. "Gordo did. He came and said —"

"Yeah, I heard him yelling." Angel's eyes passed over his cousin like he wasn't there. "Gordo, where are you, *hermano*?"

"Here, packleader." A rail-thin wolf pushed in from the back of the pack. His name didn't exactly fit him since he was one of those guys who could never gain weight, his

lean frame all stringy muscle and bones. "I was out scenting for prey and I saw them right near the center of the park."

"Good." Angel looked bored. "Tell Skulls the details. He's taking point tonight."

"Why Skulls?" Chulo stepped forward, his dark eyes angry. He had some of Angel's looks but none of his charisma—he would never be packleader and everyone knew it. Everyone but him.

Angel gave him a withering look. "Why do you think, numbnuts? Skulls is second wolf. If I'm not here, he leads. Simple as that."

"But Gordo reported to me first." Chulo's chin jutted angrily.

"He reported to the whole damn park—Skulls and I heard him from half a mile away. We'll be lucky if the entire coven isn't gone by the time you fucking *pendejos* get going." Angel looked at Paul. "You ready to go?"

"Always ready, packleader." Paul took his cue from Angel and ignored the smoldering stare of hatred Chulo was directing at his head. He knew what Angel's cousin was thinking. By virtue of his blood he should have been second wolf and would have been too, if Paul hadn't been in his way. *But since I have no intention of getting out of his fucking way any time soon, he better learn to deal.*

"That's *mi nino*." Angel gave him a chest bump and then threw back his head to deliver a long, liquid howl to the night sky. The pack returned the cry, a hair-raising sound meant to strike fear in the cold dead heart of any bloodsucker stupid enough to be out after dark in *Lunas Locas* territory.

Paul howled with the rest, feeling at one with the pack and yet apart from them, as always. No matter how long he'd been in Miami or how close he was to Angel there was always the sense that he didn't quite belong, that he wasn't quite right. And it wasn't just because he wasn't Latino. As always, when the pack ran he vowed to change that about himself, to fix it. Because it wasn't the pack that was broken—it was him. If he could just be normal...

"Go kill some fucking vamps!" Angel roared, shattering his resolutions. He clapped Paul on the shoulder and nodded. "*Buena suerte, 'mano*. Go kick some vampire ass."

"You got it." Surging to the head of the pack, Paul took point and headed out to do his duty.

## Chapter Two

"Really, Laurent, *must* you go out?" Laurent's mother, an elegant older vampire of five hundred and some odd years—although she wouldn't admit to more than three hundred—took another puff of her slim cigarillo and blew out a stream of smoke.

Laurent sighed and ran a hand through his short, dark hair. It wanted to curl and would have if he'd let it grow at all. But he preferred it neat. "Yes, Mother, I must go out," he said shortly. *If I don't I'm going to go mad.* He didn't say it aloud but it was true—ever since they'd made the move from Paris to Miami he'd been utterly miserable.

"Well, do be careful." Celeste, his mother's best friend who was visiting them in "the great American wasteland", cautioned. "I've heard some dreadful things about the wolf packs around here. Some say they're quite violent toward our kind."

"I'm old enough to take care of myself." He had just turned one hundred the other week, which made it perfectly ridiculous for him to still be living with his parents. If they had stayed in Paris he would be gone by now, living with his lover Jean Pierre. But of course, Jean Pierre was the reason his parents had insisted on moving their family half the world away in the first place.

*"I don't know where you got your deplorable taste for rough trade,"* his father had lectured when he'd found out Jean Pierre's low-class background. *"But a future Viscount of the Blood must not be seen consorting with one so below him. You are free to take a human lover if you wish, but be sure he or she has the right family and background. Your mother can provide you with a list of approved sycophants who would be eager for your bite if you so desire."*

Laurent had refused the offer. He wasn't interested in the toadying humans who came sidling up to him at court balls, offering their necks and simpering over his hand. Jean Pierre might have been only a common laborer, but he had been honest. He had liked Laurent for himself—not for the massive wealth and the title he would someday inherit. He hadn't known Laurent's background when they first met—in fact, he hadn't even known that vampires really existed outside of romance novels and horror films. Laurent had taught him differently and the education had been mutually pleasurable. The things Jean Pierre could do with his tongue and the warm, rich taste of his blood...

"Mind your manners, Laurent!" His mother's sharp voice drew him out of the pleasant fantasy of his old lover and landed him back in his present dismal reality with a thud. "Apologize to Celeste for using that tone," she insisted, taking another dainty puff of her cigarillo.

"My apologies, Madam," Laurent said coldly. "I was only referring to my recent coming of age to remind you and my mother that I am, in fact, old enough to make my own decisions. But if the tone I used was less than genteel, I heartily regret it."

"You are, of course, forgiven." Celeste inclined her head and he saw that a few streaks of gray were making their way into her auburn hair. It was to be expected that she would begin to age after so many centuries. She was, after all, only a made vampire, not a full-blooded one who had been born to the Blood like Laurent and his parents. In fact, it was his mother who had turned Celeste in the first place. She had started out as a human woman—a sycophant in fact—and had become his mother's regular *boisson aux sang*, which translated literally to drink of blood. Laurent suspected they had been lovers as well but of course, his mother would never admit to such a thing. She had tied Celeste to her with a blood bond for as long as she could but after a hundred years or so when the bond wore thin, she'd had no choice but to turn her or lose her.

Thus Celeste remained in his mother's life but as a friend only. Vampires did not drink from one another and since drinking and sex were tied so closely together, having one without the other was considered highly unsatisfying. Generally it was only done in order to conceive, which Laurent was certain had been the case in his own birth. Both of his parents had been born to the Blood and it was obvious they had no great physical attraction between them.

Laurent's mother had been fortunate to find a lover who could also be a friend when the time came. Laurent wanted more, though. He dreamed of finding a mortal lover he would never have to change, of a love so true and enduring the blood bond would never weaken and their love could continue forever. His old blood nurse had told him legends of such a one—a *Coeur de Sang* or Heart's Blood. If Laurent was honest with himself, he would admit that was who he had been searching for when he began his relationship with Jean Pierre in the first place.

Of course he hadn't found it—all the legends spoke of the instant intense attraction, the certainty that you were meant to be with the other person the moment you touched them. Laurent hadn't felt any of that with Jean Pierre but he'd still enjoyed the other man's company and missed him sadly, though he knew Jean Pierre was doubtless entertaining other men in the bed they had shared right now.

"Where are you going anyway?" his mother asked, watching as Laurent straightened his cuffs, making sure they were immaculate. He wore the collar of his white button-down Charles Tyrwhitt shirt open. The light fawn Prada pants and Berluti shoes that went with it were also casual but expensive.

"There's a new gallery opening on Biscayne," Laurent lied. "I thought I'd see if I could find something new." In fact, he wasn't going anywhere in particular—just out to roam the city at night and get away from the stifling confines of the three-thousand-square-foot villa his parents had rented in Coconut Grove for this extended family "vacation." Even though he was currently occupying the carriage house, which had been converted into a luxury apartment, he still felt confined anywhere near his parents. And if he looked like he was going to a gallery opening, his mother was less likely to doubt his story.

It was a handy lie that he used frequently—Laurent had even begun a collection of modern art in order to back it up. He couldn't care less about most of the pieces he

bought but his mother had put them on display anyway, in one of the smaller salons. The “collection” made her and Laurent’s father feel he was finally getting a taste for the good things in life and kept peace in the household so he kept adding to it. And in the meantime it gave him an excuse to go out.

“Well do be careful,” Celeste said again. “And mind you stay out of the way of the weres.”

“Yes, do.” His mother shivered. “Nasty dog-like creatures. And tonight is nearly a full moon too.”

“Don’t worry, Mother.” Laurent headed for the door. “I’ll be sure to steer clear of them.”

Once outside he set out purposefully toward Biscayne Boulevard in case his mother and Celeste were watching from the lighted window of the villa. He could have called the family car or driven himself in the black Porsche Boxster Spyder his father had bought him as a consolation prize for losing Jean Pierre but Laurent preferred to walk. He could, of course, move with supernatural speed but he enjoyed taking his time, feeling the warm, humid wind ruffle his hair and smelling the scents of the city around him.

There were the usual urban smells of course, gasoline, car exhaust, trash, unwashed humans who lived on the streets—but there were other scents as well. The sweet, heavy perfume of honeysuckle and night-blooming jasmine, the more delicate aroma of wild orchids and the rich, almost rotten smell of the tropical vegetation all around him. It was like being in a jungle where a city had just happened to take root and grow.

As he walked, those tropical scents seemed to enfold him more and more. Laurent looked around and saw, to his surprise, that he’d ended up on Biscayne after all—albeit the unfashionable end. He was right at the edge of the huge park he’d driven by a hundred times and always meant to visit but never had.

*Well, no time like the present.* Normally he preferred to keep to the more urban parts of the city—he was more likely to find someone for a quick bite and a quick fuck at an all-night coffee bar than in a park that closed at sundown. But he’d fed just the night before so he wasn’t particularly thirsty. Besides, a walk in the wilderness—or as close to the wilderness as one could get in such a large city—sounded nice. The moon was nearly full and it cast a silvery radiance on the lush vegetation making a picturesque and inviting scene.

Without a second’s hesitation, Laurent stepped onto the grass and glided noiselessly into the darkened park.

He was deep in the park when he scented something else—the warm fur and spice scent of wolves. Despite Celeste’s warning it wasn’t a smell that automatically raised alarm. In Europe vampires and weres had long made peace. They even attended some of the same functions and worked together to keep humans ignorant of their existence. That was as close as they came to mixing, however, and they were never much more than uneasy acquaintances. Which was something of a pity, in Laurent’s estimation.

Weres tended to be hot tempered and not afraid to get their hands dirty, unlike his own people who were cool and subdued and always so above it all. He wondered idly what his father would say if he took a were for a lover – *quelle horror* – and smirked to himself. Now *that* would be the ultimate rough trade. He would probably be disinherited at once or more probably judged mad and forced to face the sun.

The scent kept getting stronger and he could tell there was more than one wolf in the park. Hmm, a full pack on the prowl? That was something even Laurent, with his supernatural speed and strength, didn't care to meet. He might be able to best one wolf alone, maybe even two if it came to a fight. But he had no wish to try himself against an entire pack.

Turning aside from the dense vegetation, where he'd been moving silently through the underbrush, he walked out into the open. The scent seemed fainter here. He stepped into a pool of moonlight, meaning to go another way, when suddenly he heard it – a long, liquid howl that wavered in the night air like a lonesome sob. His heart skipped a beat. Maybe it was time to make more of an effort to leave the park. Celeste might have been listening to silly rumors when she warned him off the wolves but then again, there is often a grain of truth in even the wildest tale.

"There's one! There, in that clearing!" The voice shouting the words was hoarse and savage and the one that answered it was worse.

"Get him. Fuck 'im up, the *muerto hijo de puta*."

*The dead son of a bitch – they're talking about me!* Heart pounding in his chest, Laurent turned again, heading back into the underbrush. He doubted it would do any good to explain to the angry pack that since he was a born vampire not a made one, he wasn't technically dead. His lungs still breathed air and his heart still pumped blood through his body – indeed, he could feel it pumping double time now as he prepared to flee.

But before he could take a single step they were all around him – most still in human form, though there were a few who had shed their skins and become the beast within. Those were down at his feet, snapping and growling angrily but the rest were eerily quiet, as though waiting for something to begin.

That something turned out to be a signal from what Laurent assumed was the pack leader. He was tall, six foot one to Laurent's own five foot eleven, with jet black hair and piercing black eyes that were set just a little too close together to be handsome. Not that Laurent thought he had a chance in hell of picking this particular male up.

"Hey, bloodsucker." The tall dark-haired one poked him in the chest hard. "Where's the rest of your coven, huh? You tell us and maybe we'll let you go. *Maybe*."

"I don't have a coven – I'm here by myself," Laurent said at once and then cursed himself for a fool. Now they would know he was alone with no one else of the Blood to back him up. How could he be so foolish?

But it was clear the tall black-haired wolf didn't believe him. "Yeah, right. Fucking liar." He poked Laurent in the chest again. "Look how he's dressed – all fancy and shit. Must be a whole bunch of them out here having some kinda fancy fucking party – like a



vamp version of a *quince*. One of them must have just turned a hundred and fifty or something."

This drew laughter from the rest of the pack and to Laurent's dismay, they drew even closer. He wanted to run but he was hemmed in on every side. And if he started a fight there was no doubt he would be ripped to pieces—there were fifteen wolves still human and five or ten more in beast form. His only chance was to talk his way out of the situation but his mouth was suddenly dry and his mind was blank.

"Maybe he's dressed like that because he's a faggot," one of the other wolves said. "Fucking *mariposa*." He made a dainty fluttering gesture with his hands like a butterfly's wings and the other wolves laughed again, a deep troll-like sound that turned Laurent's blood to ice. He couldn't help noticing that most of them were dressed in baggy denim shorts or jeans and nothing else. Their muscular chests and arms were covered with tattoos, the meanings of which weren't entirely clear—not that he was going to ask.

"Yeah, that must be it. He's a faggot and he's looking for some fresh blood. Isn't that right, you *maricon vampiro*?" demanded the leader.

*No fear. I mustn't show fear or they'll be on me in a heartbeat.* "I was simply out for a stroll in the park," he said, keeping his chin up and hoping his voice didn't waver. "I'm not even from this area—we moved here from Paris a month ago. So whatever quarrel you have with the local vampires, I take no part in it."

Unfortunately, his speech seemed to anger the pack even more. "Oh you'll take part in it, all right," snarled the leader. "C'mon, let's fuck 'im up."

But the rest of the pack hung back. "I don't know, Chulo," one very thin wolf said, looking at Laurent uncertainly. "Skulls said not to mess with him until he came back."

"Fuck what Skulls said! You gonna listen to him or me? I've got the Chavez blood in my veins, not that *hijo de puta* white boy."

"Yeah, but he's second wolf. And Angel said—"

"Angel said I was taking point tonight. Not you, Chulo, so back right the fuck down." The new voice belonged to another wolf—slightly shorter than the rest but much more muscular. He shouldered his way through the pack and Laurent saw that, unlike the rest of the pack, he had spiky dark blond hair and deep blue eyes. There was an air of menace about him but something else as well. Something Laurent couldn't quite put his finger on...

"Hey, I'm just doing what Angel said," the tall one snarled. "He said to fuck up some vampires so I'm gonna fuck this one up."

"Not 'til I say to you're not." The blond man crossed his arms over his heavily muscled chest. "Pack protocol, Chulo, you don't attack until I say so. Unless you want to challenge me right here and now, that is."

The tall wolf looked uneasy. "Chill, man. I didn't say nothing about no challenge. We were just trying to find out where this vamp's coven was. The way he's dressed we

figured they're having some kinda party or something. I mean, lookit 'im—fucking faggot."

"Is that true?" The blond wolf looked him up and down speculatively and Laurent did his best to meet the dark blue eyes. There was something in them—something more than the disgust and hatred he saw in the other wolves' eyes glowing gold in the moonlight.

"Is it true that I have been attending a party? No," he said, deciding to tell the truth for some reason he couldn't fathom. "But yes, I do enjoy the love of other men. Though I do not see what my style of dress has to do with my sexual preference."

"See? See?" His statement seemed to have positively enraged the taller wolf. "*Hijo de puta* fucking admits it! Fucking disgusting!" He spat on the ground as though to get a bad taste out of his mouth. "I'm gonna fuck 'im up just for that." Surging forward, he reached for Laurent's throat only to be knocked aside by the blond wolf.

"Stand down, Chulo! *No me jodas*—don't fuck with me. I mean it."

"No, I'm not fucking standing down. I'm going to kill this undead *cabron* right fucking now." He lunged forward again and this time the blond wolf put himself between the tall one and Laurent. Though the other wolf hit the blond one with amazing force—Laurent could hear the solid *thud* of impact—he didn't go down. In fact, all he did was stumble backward a few steps.

Not wanting to fall down with them if the two wolves started really brawling, Laurent put up a hand to shield himself. Quite by accident, his palm landed flush along the broad, bare curve of the blond wolf's back.

And then he felt it.

It started as a tingling buzz in his fingertips and made its way up his arm with lightning speed. From there it spread to the rest of his body, washing over him like a warm wave. His cock was instantly hard, throbbing angrily for release behind the fly of his Prada pants and his heart ached no less fiercely. *Finally!* whispered a voice from somewhere inside him. *This is the one—the one I've been searching for!*

The blond wolf must have felt it too—or at least he felt *something* because he went suddenly rigid as though he'd been electrocuted. Then he jumped away from Laurent's touch as though it burned him, knocking over the taller wolf in the process. He threw a look over his shoulder, his eyes wide with shock and then narrow with suspicion. Laurent was sure he would say something but he only shook his head and turned back to the one he'd called Chulo.

"Fucking asshole!" The taller wolf leapt to his feet, obviously spoiling for a fight. "You wanna go? You wanna go right now, Skulls?"

The blond wolf threw another glance over his shoulder at Laurent. "No I don't want to 'go'. Fucking get over yourself, Chulo."

"You asked me earlier if I wanted to challenge you. Well maybe I do."

"Great. And while you and I fight, the rest of this vamp's coven is getting away."

"We don't even know that he has a coven—you're just trying to get out of a fight," Chulo accused. The other wolves began to murmur among themselves and the blond wolf frowned.

"Fine, you want a challenge? Challenge me tomorrow. Right now we need to clean up the rest of that coven. Or are you afraid you can't handle more than one at a time?"

The tall wolf looked indecisive for a moment. "I'm not afraid of any fucking *maricon* vamps."

"Then prove it. Go after them." The blond wolf motioned east. "They went that way—ten of them at least. Go on, Chulo, I'm giving you point. Let's see what you have to show for it when the night is over."

Chulo narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "What are you gonna do while we're chasing the coven?"

"Gonna see if I can get some more information out of this one." The blond wolf cracked his knuckles menacingly and gave Laurent a meaningful look. "We need to find out their daytime resting place if we're going to wipe them all out. You get the rest of them and let me work on this one."

It was the skinny wolf that answered him. "What the fuck are we waiting for? There's ten more vamps out there—let's fucking get them!"

The pack erupted in a chorus of bone-chilling howls and several of the ones in human form seemed overcome with excitement and shifted quickly to wolves. It was a fascinating process, one Laurent had never seen before, and he would have paid closer attention if all of his interest hadn't been centered on the blond wolf. Now that the pack was in confusion it would have been the perfect moment to escape but he stood like he was rooted to the spot. He couldn't leave until he knew what had happened—until he was certain that what his heart told him was true.

The pack bounded away, Chulo in the lead. They were mere specks in the darkness in a matter of seconds. After watching them go, the blond wolf turned back to Laurent. Being careful to keep a safe distance between them, he leaned forward and stared Laurent in the eye. "What the fuck," he said distinctly, "was that?"

## Chapter Three

"I don't know." The vampire shook his head. "That is, I *think* I know but I can't be certain." He was taller than Paul but not by that much, with a slender, muscular swimmer's build and short, nearly curly dark hair. His eyes were a pale green, striking in their intensity, and his features were so delicate as to be almost pretty. Paul could see why Chulo would think this guy was gay even if he wasn't a vamp. There was something about him—not that he was girly or anything. It was more like... Paul didn't really know *what* it was, just like he didn't know what had happened when the vamp had touched him.

"You better give me some answers quick, *cabron*," he said, putting some menace into his tone. "I'm not known for my fucking patience."

The vamp spread his hands. "What is it you wish to know?" He had a slight accent that Paul couldn't place and his voice was melodious and soft.

"You *know* what I want to know," he said in frustration. But he couldn't make himself talk about what had happened when the vamp touched him. It had been so weird, so un-fucking-believable. All he could think about was grabbing the guy and kissing him senseless, which was crazy—he was a fucking bloodsucker! But his cock didn't seem to know that—it was still hard as a rock behind his baggy jeans.

"Why did you lie for me?" the vamp asked quietly. "There are no others of the Blood in this area—I would have felt it if there were."

Paul shifted uneasily. He didn't know himself why he had lied to the pack to save the vamp. Only that he had to have some time alone with him to figure out what the hell was happening. "Why did you admit to being queer?" he heard himself asking, answering the question with one of his own.

The vamp shrugged, a fluid gesture that was bizarrely graceful. "Because I am. Why deny it?"

"Because admitting it can get you killed, at least around here." Paul shook his head at the vamp's naiveté.

"Is that why you pretend not to be?" The vamp raised one slim black eyebrow at him.

Paul tightened up. "I'm not a fucking *mamon*."

The vamp frowned. "Forgive me but my Spanish is not the best and I am uncertain of your dialect. Did you just say you are not a sucker of cocks?"

"Close enough. The point is I'm not a fucking faggot and you'd better remember it."

The vamp took a step toward him. "All I can remember is the way I felt when I touched you."

Paul wanted to back up a step but it would look like giving ground. He held still, glaring at the vamp. "What the hell did you do to me?"

"So you felt it too?" The vamp looked at him hopefully.

"Hell yes, I felt it. It was like someone ran about a thousand volts right through my cock."

"It was like that for me too. But more so." The vamp took another step forward. "I'm Laurent. What is your name?"

"Why do you need to know my name?" Paul crossed his arms over his chest, still not giving any ground.

The vamp took another step forward. "Because I want to know the name of my future lover."

"What the fuck are you talking about? I just told you I'm not gay."

"I know what you said. But I don't believe you." Laurent put out his hand. "May I touch you again?"

Paul looked at the hand, it was slim and white, unlike his own calloused palm. He could never quite get all the grease off from working in his dad's shop but the vamp's hand looked like he'd never done a day of work in his life. *Probably hasn't. Dressed like that—he's probably had everything given to him on a fucking silver platter.* But try as he might to distract himself, none of it could erase the fact that he was trembling because he wanted contact with the other man so much.

"Why..." He cleared his throat. "Why do you want to touch me?"

"You know why." Laurent inched his hand forward. "Just shake with me—that should be safe enough. I need to see if I feel it again. Need to be sure it's real."

"If *what's* real?" Paul asked but he was already putting out his own hand, drawn as if by some invisible force, to shake with the vamp.

Laurent grasped his hand firmly and he felt it again—the shooting bolt of electrical current, the overwhelming need that threatened to drown him. "*Dios!*" It broke from his lips like a prayer or a curse and suddenly he was all over the vamp.

He had the presence of mind not to do it in the open, at least. Grabbing Laurent by the back of the neck, he maneuvered them both into the shadows cast by the thick vegetation. Then he pushed the other man up against a palm tree and slanted his lips over Laurent's full red ones for a kiss.

The vampire melted against him, returning the kiss as hungrily as Paul was giving it. He parted his lips and Paul took the invitation, pushing his tongue into the other man's mouth and lapping hungrily. He sucked Laurent's tongue until the vamp moaned, noting with the part of his brain that was still functioning, how delicious Laurent tasted. His mouth was warm and spicy with a slight coppery undertone. Paul didn't know what it was but it was good—damn good. And it felt so right to be kissing him—to be kissing another man. There was no sticky lip gloss to get in the way and the body against his was warm and hard and muscular, not soft and yielding. The

vampire's hands at his waist were firm and demanding, pulling Paul even closer so that their hard shafts rubbed together through the fabric of their pants until he felt like he was going to fucking explode.

*God, so good...so fucking good! Can't get enough. Need more...more...*

The thoughts were cut off abruptly when the vampire bit his tongue.

"Ouch!" Paul jerked back, the spell broken. "What the Hell?"

"Forgive me." Laurent gestured to his mouth. "My fangs come out when I am excited. It was an accident."

"Your fangs?" Paul stared at him stupidly, still feeling weirdly drunk from the intense encounter.

"As you see." Laurent opened his mouth, gesturing to where his two top canine teeth had lengthened and sharpened considerably. He ran the pointed pink tip of his tongue over them in a distractingly erotic gesture.

*His fangs – oh my God, his fangs. Not only have I been kissing another guy, I've been kissing a fucking vampire.* The thought jolted him back to reality and he took an unsteady step backward. Laurent moved forward and put out a hand to steady him but Paul jerked away from the touch just in time, lurching away like a drunk man.

"Please..." Laurent looked hurt. "I know this must be shocking to you – it is to me as well. But you must see that there is something between us – an attraction that supersedes our differences, no matter how great they may be."

"I don't see any such fucking thing." Paul was still backing away. "I don't understand what just happened – what you just did to me – but I know it's not going to happen again."

"Not unless you let it happen." The vampire's voice was soft...pleading. "Please, I've been searching for you all my life. You are my *Coeur de Sang*."

"I'm not your anything," Paul said, trying to sound more certain than he felt. "I...I don't even know you and I don't want to either. Get the fuck out of here." He gestured vaguely. "Go on and go before the rest of the pack gets back."

At the mention of the pack, a worried look flitted across the vampire's handsome face. "I do not wish to leave you. You seem...unsteady."

"I'm fine." Paul straightened up and took a deep breath. "Look, I mean it – get out of here. I might not be able to keep them off you again."

"I will go then. But...I do not even know your name." Laurent looked at him appealingly. "Please..."

"Skulls. The pack calls me Skulls."

"And is that your true name?" Those pale green eyes seemed to pierce right through him.

"Paul." He didn't know why he was saying it, why he was giving this bloodsucker any kind of personal information but he couldn't seem to stop himself. "Paul Kraskowski."

The vampire inclined his head gracefully. "Laurent Montcrieve. Aside from what has passed between us tonight, I want you to know how grateful I am for your intervention. They would have killed me."

"Yeah, they would've. And they still will if you don't fucking leave." Paul frowned, his shoulders hunched. Already he was itching to reach for Laurent again, despite knowing how wrong it was. *Please go. Go while I can still let you.*

Maybe the vampire heard his unspoken plea. At any rate, he took a step back as though preparing to leave. But then he turned his head, looking Paul in the eye. "If you have need of me, if there is anything I can do to repay your kindness, or if...if you just want to see me again as I am already longing to see you, please come and find me. I am staying in the carriage house of 1536 Bougainvillea Drive in Coconut Grove."

Paul stared at him. "You're giving me your daytime resting place? Do you know how stupid that is?"

Laurent gave him another piercing look. "If you come to kill me, at least I will see you again before I die. Farewell, Paul Kraskowski." He turned and became a blur of motion, the white shirt and tan pants and dark hair running together in the moonlight until suddenly, he was gone.

Paul shook his head, feeling dazed. It was like someone had hit him over the head with a fucking bat—only getting knocked in the head didn't usually give him a massive hard-on.

*What the fuck just happened?* He didn't know but he wasn't going to stick around here to try to find out. In the distance he heard a wolf's howl, full of disappointment and anger. Great. Chulo, that fucking idiot, had finally decided to give up the search for the imaginary coven. *I can't let them see me like this. Can't let them know.* Know what? Paul still wasn't sure himself. But he couldn't shake the feeling that if the other wolves saw him they would know what he had been doing. Hell, the smell of the damn vamp was probably all over him. That sharp, clean fragrance with a hint of warmth underneath. *He was warm in my arms,* Paul thought as he loped for the edge of the park. *Never thought a vamp would be warm. Aren't they supposed to be cold and dead?* But Laurent had felt alive in his arms—very much alive.

It was all very confusing.

The trip home didn't clear his head though Paul had hoped the wind rushing over his face as he rode his motorcycle home would help him. He only felt more troubled as he let himself into the side entrance of the Chop Shop's garage to park his bike. He'd moved out of his dad's house and into the apartment over the garage a couple years back after he'd started taking custom jobs of his own. It kept him close enough to the business to help out and far enough from home not to have a knock-down-drag-out with the old man every other day.

"You're home early." The voice startled him so much he jumped and almost dumped the cycle on the grease-stained concrete.

"Dios, Lucia, warn a guy before you fucking sneak up on him." He turned to face his stepmother who was frowning, one hand on her hip.

"Language, Paul. What have I told you?" She took a step toward him and her expression changed from irritation to worry. "Hey, are you all right, *Paulito*? You're as white as a sheet."

"Whiter than normal, you mean?" He tried to laugh and couldn't. It was an old joke with them—despite his tan Lucia had the dark golden Latina skin that managed to make him look pasty. *Laurent's skin was whiter than mine—he was pale enough to make me look dark.* Paul pushed the thought away hastily, worried that his stepmother would somehow see it in his face.

"What's wrong?" She came forward and cupped his cheek. "Tell me what happened. Did someone get hurt?"

Paul shrugged uneasily. "You know—nothing out of the ordinary. Angel had me take point tonight because he had family business and Chulo was giving me shit about it. Sorry—you know what I mean."

Lucia frowned. "Angel again, huh? Paul..." She paused, as though searching for the right words. "You know he's never going to feel for you what you feel for him, right? I've seen the way he acts when you two are together but that's what it is—an act. He's smart enough to know he's stronger with you than without you so he gives you just enough to keep you close—"

"What are you *talking* about?" Paul shook off her hand. "Where is this coming from?"

"It's coming from my heart, *mi hijo*." She looked at him sadly. "I've been thinking that I needed to say something to you for a long time and now you come in here looking like this—"

"Angel's not the problem, okay?" he burst out. *Not tonight, anyway.* "It's...someone else."

"Who then?" There was a maternal note in her voice Paul found hard to refuse. Lucia was one of those rare females who had a dominant were gene—meaning she could shift with the moon like male weres but was unable to bear children though she had always wanted them badly. Maybe that was the reason they'd gotten so close after his father had married her, just a year after moving them to Miami. God knew she meant more to him than his real mother, who had left the minute she found out her husband and son went furry every full moon. But for whatever reason Lucia always seemed to see into his heart—as she was right now.

"Mom, please..." He almost never called her that even though he felt it strongly. But the words were a plea... *Don't make me tell. I can't talk about it—not yet. Maybe not ever.*

"All right, Paul." She nodded, as though she'd heard his unspoken words. "But you should know that if you want to talk I'm here. And I won't judge you no matter what you tell me."



An overwhelming wave of relief swamped him. "Thanks. I'll remember that."

She pushed her black cloud of hair out of her eyes with one hand. "You do that. I'm going back to the books—I swear your father would run this place into the ground without me." It was a common complaint and it put them back in familiar territory.

Paul gave her a weak grin. "Yeah, he's lucky to have you busting his balls."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "*Language*, Paul."

"What? Balls isn't a swear word. Would you rather I said *cojones*?"

"A bad word is a bad word no matter what language you say it in," Lucia said primly. She gave him a penetrating look. "Are you going to bed now or are you going back out?"

"Going back out?" For a moment the idea of finding Laurent struck him so strongly he could barely move. He remembered the address perfectly—it was burned into his memory. Coconut Grove was across the city but that didn't matter. He could get back on his bike and be there in twenty minutes at this time of night. He'd knock on the carriage house door and Laurent would let him in. And then they could take up where they'd left off. *God, the taste of his mouth...his skin was so smooth, so warm... No, can't think like that. Can't ever do that again. It's wrong!*

"Yeah, going back out. You know, with your pack?" Lucia frowned at him. "You sure you don't want to talk, Paul? You don't seem like yourself at all tonight."

"Uh, no. No thanks." He shook his head, trying to get his mind right. "I'm just...I'll just spend a little time working in here, I think. I have that custom job that needs to be finished by next week and I've barely started it yet."

"All right, if you're sure." She gave him a worried look.

"Yeah, I'm sure. But thanks anyway...Mom." He grinned at her and something in his face must have reassured her because she finally let the matter drop.

"Okay, love you, Paul." Stepping forward, she gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. Her nose wrinkled slightly and she gave him a long look. "Have a good night."

"You too." He bent over his bike, pretending to adjust something, and when he raised his head she was gone.

Since he'd said he was going to, Paul went to the little alcove that had become his private workspace over the last few years and squatted down by the half-built cycle. Usually this was what calmed him down—the intricacies of the work never failed to clear his mind and help him focus. But tonight it didn't help. Nothing helped.

No matter how hard he concentrated on the bike he was building, every time Paul closed his eyes he saw the vampire. Saw Laurent. With his dark hair and red lips and those piercing pale green eyes. "*Come and find me,*" the image in his mind whispered. "*I need you. You are my Coeur de Sang.*" Whatever the hell that meant. Paul had no idea but somehow the words echoed in his head and wouldn't leave him alone.

## Chapter Four

*I can't believe I finally found him! Can't believe that Nana's old legends were true.* Laurent walked home in a daze feeling both elated and crushed. He had found his *Coeur de Sang* – he ought to be the happiest vampire alive. And yet, what good did it do to find his Heart's Blood if he was never going to see him again? *He wants nothing to do with me. He even denies his attraction to other men, let alone one of my kind. What am I to do? Can I go through life knowing he is out there without contacting him?* No, he decided at once. If the were—if *Paul*—didn't come to see him soon, then Laurent would seek him out. He didn't care if he had to spend every minute of every night haunting Bicentennial Park, he was determined to meet up with the other man and prove to him that they belonged together.

But how could he prove it? If the electrical feelings of want and need when they touched didn't convince him, what would? *I must find a way – I cannot give up!* In all the legends his blood nurse had told him as a child, the fortunate few who found their *Coeur de Sang* had to go through many trials and hardships in order to be with them forever. But in the end it was worth it, always worth it and they lived for eternity in the bliss of true love.

*I am a hopeless romantic,* Laurent acknowledged as he let himself into the carriage house and settled onto the hand-tooled leather sofa. *One taste of love and I am made as foolish and weak as a human.* And yet, he couldn't seem to help himself. He could still feel Paul's arms around him, could still taste the warmth of his mouth and smell the fur and spice scent of his skin. He couldn't stop wanting him and he didn't give a damn about their differences—he just wanted to feel the other man's hard, muscular body against his, to hear Paul whisper his name as they were joined as one. As they fucked...

A brisk rapping at the door shattered his fantasy. Laurent sat up straight and pulled his hand out of the waistband of his Prada pants where it had somehow crept, possibly to ease the ache in his cock. "Come—" he called but before he could finish the word, his father appeared in the doorway.

Despite his advanced age of well over six hundred, Rousard Montcrieve looked like a vigorous man in his forties. Laurent had gotten his eyes from his mother but his dark, almost-curly hair was straight from his father and they looked very much alike. The senior Montcrieve had a slightly more bulky build than his son, but he was still svelte and graceful as only a vampire can be and he moved with the silent ease of a being who has been on the Earth for nearly half a millennium.

"Father." Laurent sat up straighter still. "To what do I owe this honor?"

"Your mother and I have been talking, Laurent." His father stood in the middle of the small but richly decorated living room with his hands behind his back like a general reviewing soldiers in parade formation.

"Yes?" It suddenly occurred to Laurent that he must still smell of werewolf. He rose and moved as unobtrusively as possible to put the couch between himself and his father.

"And we've come to a decision. Son, it is time the title passed to you."

"What?" Laurent looked at him blankly.

"You've been doing very well since we moved here, admirably dealing with the changes thrust upon you."

*Meaning I haven't been pining away after Jean Pierre too obviously.* Laurent nodded neutrally. "Yes."

"And we're glad you've finally gotten a hobby. I had someone in to appraise your little art collection just the other night and I'm given to understand you have quite an eye."

Laurent was surprised. "Er, thank you, Father. But I still don't see what this had to do with you passing the title to me."

"Everything and nothing." His father waved expansively. "It is simply time. But with the title of viscount comes many responsibilities. For instance, you must take a consort—specifically a wife."

"I do not wish to take a wife. I prefer those of my own gender." Laurent tried to keep his voice firm but his father waved his objection away.

"As do I. But you can make a suitable marriage and only visit your consort once or twice until an heir is conceived. Then you can both take separate lovers and live as friends—that is how your mother and I managed it."

"I suspected as much," Laurent said dryly. "But I do not wish to live in a loveless marriage."

"That is simply too bad. As a Viscount of the Blood you have an obligation to produce a legitimate heir. Marriage is the only way to do so."

"I'm not the viscount yet," Laurent reminded him. "And to be honest, Father, I don't feel ready for such responsibility. I've only just turned one hundred, you know."

His father glowered. "Which is the age my own father passed the title on to me. You *will* take the title and you *will* be married, Laurent, and there's an end to it."

"But—"

"Your mother has a group of eligible young ladies of the Blood coming to visit us in two weeks' time. You will be on your best behavior and choose one of them to be your wife. We will announce your engagement on the same night I transfer the title to you."

"But..." Laurent's head was spinning—this was all happening so fast! He tried to think of an excuse. "But the council—don't they have to approve me before you can give me the title?"

"Indeed—they are coming as well, all three of them." Laurent's father grimaced. "It's costing me a fortune but I consider it well worth it to do things properly."

Laurent felt he had to say something to stop this before it went too far. His father was not a subtle man—he always made up his mind and then steamrolled over anything or anyone in the way of his goal. "Father, please—I'm very sorry but I can't do this—not now and perhaps not ever."

"Oh?" His father raised an eyebrow, his voice cold and dangerous. "And why not, pray tell?"

"I-I believe I have found my *Coeur de Sang*. So you see, I cannot tie myself to anyone else."

"I see no such thing." His father glared at him. "Who are you besotted with now? A gardener? The garbage man?"

A *werewolf*. The words trembled on Laurent's tongue but he couldn't make himself utter them. Desiring to join his life to a member of his people's most ancient foe would not be considered lovesick foolishness—it would be seen as madness. "He is... I do not know exactly what he does. I only met him recently," he said, playing for time.

The senior Montcrieve made a shooing gesture, waving the love of Laurent's life away like a troublesome speck of dust. "Whoever he is, you can forget about him and this foolishness about a *Coeur de Sang* because there is no such thing. I know your old blood nurse filled your head with nonsense but you must forget it now that you are of age." He frowned. "I've often wished I would have known what foolishness she was telling you. Had I any idea that she was making you into such a romantic fool I never would have turned her. She deserved no such reward considering the harm she did."

"You turned her?" This was news to Laurent. He had thought his human nurse had died of old age long ago.

His father scowled. "It was her wish and at the time I thought she had served me faithfully. She settled in this country as a matter of fact—somewhere in the mountains north of here."

"But...there are no mountains in Florida, are there?" Laurent looked at him doubtfully.

"How do I know where they keep their mountains in this benighted country? The last I heard, she was headed for a place called Asheville. I only remember it because it's the location of the Biltmore estate. Remember your mother has cousins who are Vanderbilts."

"Yes, I suppose." Laurent couldn't help but think they were getting far from the subject at hand. "Father, regarding your plans to pass the title to me—"

"The plans are in place, everything is arranged and you will do as you are told," his father said firmly. "I didn't come here tonight to *ask* if you wanted the title, Laurent. I came here to tell you. In two weeks' time you *will* choose a consort and you *will* be made the next Viscount of the Blood."

"But I don't want to!" Laurent gripped the back of the couch with both hands. Things were spinning out of control. "I won't!"

His father's face was like a thundercloud. "You will. Or I will find this *Coeur de Sang* of yours and nail his hide to the nearest wall."

"But —"

"His death will *not* be slow, Laurent. Am I understood?"

"You are." The words tasted like ashes in Laurent's mouth but what else could he do? His father had ways of finding things out. Laurent could not condemn the man he had only just met—a man who still wanted nothing to do with him as far as he knew—to certain death because he wished to defy his father. His only option was to renounce the title along with his family name, wealth, land and connections. It was an unheard of step and one he wasn't willing to take—not on the basis of such a brief meeting. *I will have to think of another way around it. Though I have no idea what to do.*

There was one thing he did know, however—now that he had found his *Coeur de Sang* he could not tie himself to another. He could not and would not besmirch his Heart's Blood with a loveless marriage just because his father wished him to take the family title.

But how was he going to get out of it?

\* \* \* \* \*

Paul spent the whole next day in a daze. He couldn't think, couldn't eat, kept making stupid mistakes at the shop until his dad told him to "Get the fuck outta here until you get your mind right."

He was still in a fog when he rode his bike over to the pack's usual hangout, a beat-up old bungalow in Liberty City that had seen better days. *Much* better days.

Paul parked his bike in front of the house with no worries. The neighborhood was full of drug dealers, whores and thieves but not a single one of them was stupid enough to mess with a pack of werewolves. Technically the human world was ignorant of their true nature but the *Lunas Locas* had made their presence felt on more than one occasion with deadly consequences. The result was the other inhabitants of the neighborhood knew *something* supernatural was going on, even if they didn't know exactly what. At this point Paul could have left a gold Rolex lying in the road in front of the pack's house and no one would have touched it.

He stuffed the cycle's keys in his pocket and strode up the front steps, his mind still a million miles away. *His smell, his taste...the way he felt against me—so fucking hard. As hard as I was. No, have to stop thinking about it. Have to stop—*

"Well hello, Skulls." It was Mercedes and she was blocking the doorway. Paul tried to side-step her but she was suddenly all over him like a cat in heat.

"Damn it, not again, Mercedes," he growled. "When are you gonna get it through your head that I don't want to fuck you?"

"You don't, huh?" She still hung on him, one hand at the back of his neck, her eyes shining a poisonous green. "Well that's okay, Skulls. 'Cause I don't have to fuck you in order to fuck you up." Without warning she hooked her nails into the side of his throat and clawed him hard enough to draw blood.

"Ow! *Mierda*, Mercedes. What the fuck?" Paul had had enough of her shit. Female or not, he wasn't going to let her use him for a scratching post. Pulling her arms from around his neck, he pushed her roughly away. Mercedes landed flat on her ass on the sagging wooden porch but when she looked up at him she was laughing.

"Just giving you something to remember me by. Enjoy the rest of your night, you fucking *cabron*."

"Crazy-ass *pinche puta*." Shaking his head, Paul walked into the house. The scratches on the side of his neck stung and throbbed. What the hell was wrong with that bitch? If she hadn't already been sexed-in he would have asked Angel to blackball her permanently. He might do it anyway—there was more than one reason to get kicked out of the pack and disrespecting the second wolf was a serious offense.

"So here he is, our fearless leader who abandoned the pack in the middle of the hunt last night."

The words snapped Paul out of his irritation and he looked up to see Chulo glaring at him. Worse, most of the pack was standing behind him—like they'd been fucking waiting for Paul to get there.

"I didn't abandon the pack, I went to check out a lead on that coven. Which turned out to be nothing, by the way," he added quickly. There was no way he was giving Chulo or anyone else—even Angel—the Coconut Grove address Laurent had given him. In the past he would have given a vampire up in a heartbeat, hell, he would have been the first in line to kill the dead son of a bitch. But Laurent was different. And just because Paul was determined never to see him again didn't mean he wanted him staked or reduced to a pile of ash by the sun.

"So you're saying you *didn't* give me point and send me off on a fucking wild goose chase on purpose." Chulo was still obviously pissed.

Paul shrugged casually. "I gave you point. What you did with it is up to you. So what *did* you do, Chulo? I killed my vamp—did you wipe out the rest of the coven?"

"No we fucking didn't because there *was* no coven and you know it. We scented everywhere and never caught another whiff."

Paul frowned because it was true—he'd been scouting for the coven of vamps before he'd stopped Chulo from killing Lauren and had never seen or smelled them either. But he couldn't admit that now. "Look, I can't be the only one who saw them. Where's Gordo? He raised the alarm in the first place." He found the skinny wolf standing almost right behind Chulo, looking like he wished he could be invisible. "Well, Gordo?"

"I, uh..." Gordo shifted uneasily. "Could be I made a mistake. I never actually saw more than just the one vamp. But you know, since they always travel in groups I thought—"

"Well I guess you thought wrong," Chulo cut him off. "There was only one vamp in the park last night and we never saw him again after you sent us off in the wrong direction. What happened to the *hijo de puta*, anyway, Skulls?"

"I told you, I killed him." Paul rubbed the side of his neck again, frowning. The place where Mercedes had scratched him was starting to throb and itch. It reminded him of a really bad case of poison ivy he'd had when he was very young, before the were genes kicked in and made him immune to most poisons.

"Why didn't you meet up with the rest of the pack afterward then?" Chulo was relentless.

"What are you, some kind of fucking lawyer cross-examining me?" he growled. "You can shove the *Law and Order* routine up your ass—I don't answer to you. Where the fuck is Angel?"

"Family business." Chulo looked smug. "And this time he left *me* in charge."

Paul felt the pit of his stomach drop but he wasn't going to let this fucker know how much Angel bypassing him in favor of his cousin worried him. "Whoop-ti-fucking-do, asshole. You finally made it to the grown-ups' table. Want me to pull out your chair for you?"

In the past this kind of trash talk would have pissed Chulo off but now he just stared at Paul and grinned. "How about that challenge we were talking about last night, Skulls? You up for it? You wanna go?"

In fact, Paul was starting to feel dizzy and the burning, itching pain in his neck was getting worse. But he'd be damned if he let Chulo know it. "No problem, let's go." He took a step in Chulo's direction and had the satisfaction of seeing the other wolf's smile turn into a look of uncertainty. "Well? Come on, *cabron*. Or are you a fucking coward?"

This was something Chulo couldn't let pass—not in front of the whole pack. "Hey, I'll throw down with you any time, anywhere, *hijo de puta*. But not until Angel's here to make sure it's a fair fight."

"Fine." To be honest, Paul was glad to put the fight off. The longer he stood here the worse he felt. "How about tomorrow night then?"

"He should be back then." Chulo nodded and Paul couldn't help noticing the gleam was back in his eyes. What the fuck was going on? He wanted to stay and find out but he suddenly knew that he had to get out of the house, away from the rest of the pack. He was either going to be sick or pass out and he couldn't show that kind of weakness in front of Chulo and the wolves who were now apparently backing him.

"I'll see you then." It was all he could do not to stagger as he walked out of the house and down the front steps. God, what was wrong with him? He had a vague idea it had to do with the way that *pinche puta* Mercedes had scratched him but his thoughts seemed to be fuzzy around the edges now—hard to hold on to.

*Home, have to get home.* His stepmother would know what to do. Aside from being his dad's bookkeeper, she was one of the few people he knew who was trained in were treatment and medicine. She'd done a nursing degree in human school and then taken another course somewhere in Arizona, where there was a big concentration of wolf packs. Lucia could help him...he hoped.



## Chapter Five

"Wolf's Bane."

"What?" Paul looked at his stepmother groggily, trying to make his eyes focus. He had no idea how he'd gotten back to the Chop Shop garage but he was pretty sure it had involved reckless driving.

"Wolf's Bane. *Aconitum vulparia*. It's in the scratches on your neck."

"Mercedes must have had it on her fingernails. I thought that was just an old wives tale." Paul reached up to touch his neck and winced. "*Dios*, it really hurts!"

"It doesn't grow around here but it's real enough. Witches used to plant it in their gardens to keep our kind out."

Paul coughed. "She said...said she was a *bruja* but I thought she was just blowing smoke."

"Apparently she was telling the truth." Lucia frowned. "I've never heard of putting it on your fingernails but I know they used to dip sharp flints in the plant's sap and use them kind of like throwing stars. They called them elf darts."

"You sure as hell seem to know a lot about it." Paul coughed again and scowled. Damn it, even coughing hurt!

"Everything but how to cure it. Try to shift." Lucia took a step back, giving him room. "Go ahead—the moon is full right now. Maybe that will help."

"Uh..." Paul wavered. Shifting to wolf form would ruin his clothes and when he changed back he'd be naked. He and Lucia were close but...

"Just do it," she insisted. "Shifting to your inner wolf should be enough to put you right again."

"Oh yeah—why didn't I think of that?" Maybe because it was hard to think with his brain so fuzzy. Taking a deep breath, Paul closed his eyes and called to the Mother Moon. But instead of the immediate surge of power he usually got, he only felt dizzier as though he'd been straining to accomplish some impossible task. Like he was trying to push an immense boulder up a steep hill and couldn't even begin to shift it. And though he normally shifted forms in a heartbeat—an alpha trait—now he couldn't even get his hands to turn into paws. He opened his eyes and looked down at himself uncertainly. "What the fuck? I can't do it. I've been shifting since I was twelve and now I suddenly can't do it."

"I was afraid of this." Lucia looked grim. Paul thought it was a measure of how worried she was that she hadn't gotten onto him for swearing.

"Afraid of what?" he demanded.

"It's in your bloodstream now. You should have shifted immediately, the minute she clawed you."

"Well how was I supposed to know she'd dig up some weird plant from the old stories and use it on me?" he complained. "Look, Lucia, I have to get this fixed. I have a challenge with Chulo tomorrow and I have to be able to shift."

"Paul...I don't think you realize how serious this is." His stepmother put a hand on his shoulder. "Forget about your challenge. We have more important things to worry about."

"What?" Paul tried to focus on her but she kept wavering in and out. Surely he'd heard her wrong. "What are you saying?"

"That if you don't do something quickly you're in big trouble." There were tears in Lucia's big brown eyes.

"What am I supposed to do?" Paul stared at her stupidly. "Go to the human hospital?"

"No, they can't help you there." She shook her head. "I wish we could have gotten you to a were treatment facility."

"Yeah, but the closest one is in Pensacola at the other end of the fucking state."

"It wouldn't matter if it was down the block now that the poison is in your bloodstream."

"So what am I going to do?" he asked again.

"You have to get the poison out of your system as soon as possible—before it starts to cause permanent organ damage and shutdown."

"Organ shutdown?" Paul couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You're telling me I'm going to *die*?"

"If you don't get the Wolf's Bane out of your system, yes." Lucia was crying openly now.

"But what...how...?"

"You're going to have to ask for help from that vampire I smelled on you last night."

"What?" His first instinct was to deny it but Lucia gave him a level look through her tears.

"Don't play games with me, *Paulito*. I know what I smelled. If he let you get close enough to do...whatever it was you two were doing, then he ought to be willing to suck the poison and tainted blood out and save your life."

"But I barely know him! I just met him last night." *And I was going to never ever see him again.*

"But you know where to find him?"

"Well...yes," Paul admitted begrudgingly. He thought of Laurent—those pale green eyes fringed with thick black lashes staring at him, filled with need. *If you have*

*need of me, if there is anything I can do to repay your kindness, or if...if you just want to see me again as I am already longing to see you, please come and find me.* "He does owe me one," he added. "I, uh, saved him from the pack last night."

"*Bueno.* So go call in your favor before it's too late." Lucia was taking a wickedly sharp-looking hypodermic needle out of the small, battered leather satchel she used as her nurse's bag. "I can give you a mild stimulant that should keep you alert for an hour or so. I'd take you myself but if this vamp revealed his daytime resting place to you he might not want you bringing another were with you."

"Good point. Ow! *Mierda!*" The needle stung fiercely but he began to feel more awake almost at once.

"Hurry." Lucia pulled him into a quick, hard embrace and he could feel her shaking. "Hurry, Paul. I don't want to lose you."

He tried to smile. "I don't want to lose me either. Don't worry, I'm sure I'll be fine."

"*Dios,* I hope so. From your mouth to the holy virgin's ears." She made the sign of a cross over him and then pointed to his bike. "Go—the sooner you get the poison out the better your chances are."

"I'm going, I'm going." He was still clumsy but at least he could make his arms and legs do what he told them. Straddling his cycle, he gave her a little wave. "Love you, Mom."

"I love you too, *mijo.*" She tried to smile. "Please call me and let me know you're okay. It's killing me that I can't do anything else for you. That I have to send you off to some *muerto* to get healed."

"He's not so bad," Paul said awkwardly. "You might like him if you met him." *I know I sure as hell did – even though I shouldn't.*

"I'll take your word for it. Now go!"

Paul went.

The ride to Coconut Grove was a blur and at first he couldn't find the address Laurent had given him. Crap, had the vampire given him wrong information? Had he been too worried to give Paul his real daytime resting place? *If so, I'm fucking toast.* But at last, just as he was beginning to feel really ill again, he found it.

The "villa" was more of a mansion tucked well back from the main road. Paul reached it by taking a long, winding path paved with crushed white shells that shone in the moonlight and crunched under his bike's wheels. There were albino peacocks wandering over the well-manicured green lawn on either side of the road, calling in harsh voices. The surreal nighttime vision made Paul feel like he was trapped in some kind of fever dream, except why would he dream of peacocks?

He was beginning to feel dizzy again but luckily he saw the carriage house off to the right. Ditching his bike in the bushes, out of sight of the main house, he stumbled to the carriage house's door. *This is it,* he thought, raising his hand to knock. *If he's not here I'm screwed.*

Before his knuckles could connect with the expensive-looking carved wood panel, the door flew open and Laurent was standing there, silhouetted in the golden light from inside. Paul thought he looked like some kind of angel. "Paul! I was so hoping it was you."

"S me, all right," Paul slurred. "Need...need your help." He staggered over the doorframe and would have fallen if the vampire hadn't caught him.

"Of course, anything I can do. Anything at all."

"Good. Need...need you to suck me."

"Are you drunk?" Laurent frowned. "I will be more than happy to take you in my mouth and pleasure you, Paul, but it saddens me that you felt you had to become inebriated to ask me."

Paul wanted to laugh but his throat felt too dry. He coughed. "Not...not my cock. Need you to suck my neck. P-poisoned." Tilting his head, he tried to show what he was talking about and winced as a bolt of pain shot down his entire left side. "*Dios...hurts*," he moaned.

"*Mon Dieu*." Laurent looked at his injury with evident concern. "I see what you are talking about. What happened?"

"Wolf's Bane. Witch...scratched me. Blood...poisoning." It was getting harder and harder to talk and things were fading in and out alarmingly. Paul was barely aware of it when Laurent lifted him and placed him gently on a large, soft bed. "Hurts," he complained again.

"I can see that." Laurent stroked his cheek, and despite the pain, Paul felt a shiver of need run through him at the light touch. "I am glad you came to me."

"Nowhere...else...to go." He could barely get the words out. "Please...dying..."

"Relax." Laurent's voice was warm and soothing. "Just relax. I am going to remove the poison."

Paul had a sudden thought that worried him. "Hurt...you too?" he rasped uncertainly.

Laurent shook his head. "No, *mon amour*. I am born to the Blood—I cannot be hurt by any poisonous substance."

Paul tried to laugh and couldn't. "Didn't think...I could...either."

"Hush." Lauren kissed his cheek lightly. "Look into my eyes for a moment."

"Why?"

"Because I do not wish to hurt you any more than you are already hurt."

Paul was so tired and the pain in his neck was so great it didn't seem to be worth arguing anymore. Struggling to focus, he did as Laurent said. As before he noticed the startling intensity of the vampire's pale green eyes. And then he felt like he was falling into a long, dark tunnel that someone had lined with feather pillows. It wasn't a scary feeling at all. He just felt...remote. Removed from himself somehow.

“Good.” Laurent’s voice sounded like it was coming from far, far away. “Now close your eyes and rest. When you wake this will all be over.”

*Or I’ll be dead*, Paul tried to say but he couldn’t get his mouth to form the words. His eyelids suddenly felt as if they had lead weights tied to them and he couldn’t keep them open a moment longer. He closed his eyes as the vampire had commanded and let himself drift away into the blackness behind his lids.

Laurent looked at the poisoned werewolf lying on his bed. Even ill and out of sorts he was beautiful. He was wearing faded jeans and a white mesh tank top. Through it Laurent could see his skin, a smooth, pale tan rippling with muscle. Brown eyelashes, much darker than the wheat-gold of his hair, looked like fans across his high cheekbones. His features were strong and well defined and Laurent could tell his nose had been broken more than once, probably before his wolf had begun to manifest itself. His mouth was gorgeous, lush and pale pink—ripe for kissing. Just remembering the one searing kiss they had shared made Laurent’s cock stand up and take notice.

*But Paul didn’t come here just so I could admire his beauty*, he reminded himself. *The poison must be removed at once*. Frowning, he examined the left side of the were’s neck where four long parallel scratches ran from his hairline to his collar bone. The scratches were red and angry-looking and there were little green lines radiating from their edges—the poison working its way into Paul’s bloodstream no doubt. Laurent was concerned because he didn’t know how far the taint had spread. How much of Paul’s blood would he have to remove in order to save him? Weres, like humans, needed a certain amount to survive, he was certain. He would have to walk a fine line—to draw out enough of the poison without taking too much blood. It wouldn’t be easy.

Leaning over, he cupped Paul’s chin in one hand and gently bared the were’s neck. It was a good thing he had bespelled him first, Laurent reflected as he chose a tiny clear spot between the infected scratches to place his first bite. With the skin so red and swollen it would be too painful for Paul to feel Laurent’s fangs driven deep into his flesh—although in time he might come to crave that intimate penetration...

*Stop it*, Laurent scolded himself. *You’re supposed to be saving him, not dreaming of how it would feel if you had a blood bond with him*. But it was hard to completely ignore his attraction to the were—drinking from someone for the first time was such an erotic experience. Laurent couldn’t help wishing that Paul was awake and they were making love as he drank from the other man’s neck. But that would mean Paul was ready to acknowledge his feelings for other men in general and Laurent in particular. Somehow Laurent didn’t think the wolf was quite there yet.

He pierced the skin carefully and sucked. With the first mouthful he was flooded with a delicious, unique taste unlike any he had ever had before. There was the bitter flavor of the poison, of course, but under it was a warm rich flavor that was Paul’s blood. *Mon Dieu – the blood of the gods*. Laurent closed his eyes, the better to savor the complex and instantly addictive taste. This was another part of the tale, he remembered his blood nurse telling him. That once one tasted the blood of one’s *Coeur de Sang*, one lost interest in drinking from anyone else. *It’s true*, he realized. *After this the blood of any*

*other mortal will taste like ashes on my tongue.* For a moment he was concerned but then the realization faded in the ecstasy of Paul's blood in his mouth and the wolf's hard body pressed against his own. Strong arms encircling him and the hard bulge of a cock rubbing against his hip...

Laurent pulled back abruptly. He had bespelled the wolf—there was no way any mortal should be able to break his hold and come back from the warm, black, in-between place in his own mind that Laurent had sent him to. But when he looked down, he saw Paul's dark blue eyes looking into his own.

"Feels fucking amazing," the other man growled. "What the fuck are you doing to me, anyway?"

Laurent cupped his cheek. "Biting you. Healing you, I hope." *Perhaps he has some kind of innate resistance to my powers.* He had never tried to bespell a were before—maybe they were harder to deal with than simple humans. Since they were also supernatural beings it seemed likely.

"Feels good." Paul looked concerned. "Too good. I'm not...not gay."

"So you have told me." Laurent sighed. "But it matters little as you are in no shape for love play."

"Don't know what I'm in shape for." Paul put a hand to his head unsteadily. "*Dios...fucking...feels like I'm so hard I'm going to explode. If I don't...don't pass out first.*"

Laurent looked at him with concern. Had he taken too much blood? The wolf was terribly pale and his full pink lips seemed to have a bluish tinge. Even as he watched, Paul's eyelids fluttered and his breathing became uneven. *Damn it, I did take too much blood!* He cursed himself for a fool—he'd been too taken with the unique flavor of the wolf's blood to gauge his own consumption and now Paul was going into shock. *He needs a transfusion. I'll have to give him some of my blood to heal him,* Laurent realized.

It was a delicate and risky maneuver. If done incorrectly he could turn Paul into a vampire—if weres could be turned that was. Laurent didn't even know if that was possible and he didn't want to find out. But that wasn't his biggest worry. There were other, less dire but even more complicated side effects that such an exchange might bring if he wasn't very, very careful. Still, he had no choice but to try. Already Paul's lips were more blue than pink and he was shivering from cold and shock.

*Have to get him warm or my blood will overwhelm him.* Laurent gathered the wolf's muscular form close to his own but without effect. Paul still shivered and shook. *Our clothes are in the way.* Once he realized it, he moved to remedy the situation immediately. Shrugging out of the designer shirt and slacks he had on, he turned his attention to Paul's clothing. He'd gotten the white mesh shirt off and was busy skinning the baggy blue jeans down Paul's muscular legs when the dark blue eyes fluttered open again.

"Why're you n-naked? What're...y-you d-doing?" Paul whispered in a hoarse, uncertain voice. "Told you I'm n-not g-gay."

"I am simply warming you up. Come." Hoping he was doing the right thing, Laurent finished stripping the other man and then covered Paul's body with his own.

He bit his lip, drawing blood at the pleasure of the first contact. Chest to chest and cock to cock their bodies seemed made to fit together. Despite his shivering and his many protests about not being gay, Paul was still hard. Laurent could feel the wolf's thick cock nestled against his own erect shaft as he pulled Paul close to warm him. Then he pressed his throat to Paul's mouth. "Drink."

"W-what?" Paul sounded confused, his lips trembling against Laurent's neck.

Laurent pulled back and looked at him. "You must drink from me, *mon amour*. I had to take too much of your blood when I drew out the poison. You must take some of mine in return or you will surely die."

Paul frowned. "Won't that...make me...vamp?"

"Not unless we continue to exchange blood on a regular basis," Laurent said, hoping he was right. Usually it took more than one exchange to turn someone but there had been cases... He pushed the thought out of his mind. Right now he had to save Paul, no matter the consequences. "You must drink," he urged, stroking the other man's face.

"Shouldn't..." But the look of stubborn refusal was fading from Paul's face to be replaced by one of uncertainty.

"Yes, you should," Laurent told him firmly. Paul was beginning to warm beneath him and his shivering had stopped but his lips were still tinged with blue. "Come," he urged. "It won't be so bad. A few mouthfuls should restore you."

"How though? Don't...don't have fangs like you."

Laurent realized that the other man was worried about hurting him and he felt a rush of affection for the wolf. "Just bite down hard on my neck, *mon amour*. Don't worry—I like a little pain with my pleasure." He nestled closer to Paul and pressed his throat to the were's lips again. Gods, he was so hard it seemed he would soon explode! The sharing of blood was an intimate act and the fact that they were both naked and pressed together with Paul's hard cock rubbing against his own made it doubly enjoyable.

"I'll...try, I guess." Paul still sounded uncertain but then Laurent felt something warm and wet caressing his neck. *His tongue—gods, he's licking me.* The realization was almost too much for him. He felt his cock surge and he pressed even closer to the naked man beneath him. Then Paul bit—a sharp, stabbing pain coupled with a bolt of pure erotic pleasure and Laurent could think of nothing else but the other man's teeth in his throat.

## Chapter Six

A warm taste like sweet copper and cinnamon filled Paul's mouth as his teeth pierced the vampire's pale skin. It was familiar—he'd tasted blood on his first hunt at the age of thirteen, after all—but foreign at the same time. *Dios, so good! Incredible!* The vampire's blood was like ambrosia—like the sweetest, best, most addictive liquor Paul had ever tasted in his life. With it came a surge of power and desire and a single word entered his brain...*mine*.

Growling possessively, he locked his arms around the slender but muscular form and pulled the vamp even closer. He could feel their cocks sliding together, lubricated by lust and need as well as a thin layer of precum that leaked from both of them. *Not gay, his mind chanted. Not gay. Just...doing this to heal me. That's all.* He hung on to that thought as he continued to suck at the vamp's throat. But no matter what he told himself he couldn't convince his cock that he wasn't having the time of his life.

It wasn't just the feel of another man's body against his—there was something else. Something about the way Laurent offered himself, the submissive gesture of baring his throat for Paul's teeth that drove him over the edge. He'd seen it in the past when other wolves took a female—the way the baring of a slender, white throat would drive the mating wolf into a frenzy of fuck-lust. But he'd never experienced it himself—until now.

As the warm blood flowed down his throat he felt his strength returning and desire surged through him. With a sudden movement he rolled them over so that he was on top of the vampire with his mouth still clamped to the pale throat. Laurent offered no objections to the new position. In fact, he moaned and pulled Paul closer, wrapping his legs around Paul's hips and pressing up with his pelvis to deepen their connection. "Yes, *mon amour*. Take what you need—all that I have is yours. Yes."

*This is how he would act if I was inside him. If I was fucking him.* The image of himself buried to the hilt in Laurent's unresisting body flashed across his brain like a comet streaking across the sky, and just as quickly, Paul pushed it away. But just that brief thought, coupled with the feel of the naked, muscular form beneath his own was enough to send him over the edge. He could feel Laurent straining up to meet him and, with a low growl, he pressed down, rubbing hard and letting his aching cock slide against the vampire's shaft.

*Shouldn't be doing this. Shouldn't...* But the delicious friction of the other man's cock against his own was too much for even the guilt to overcome. With a guttural roar, Paul felt himself letting go, the cum boiling up from his balls and shooting in short, hard spurts all over both their bellies. As if in answer to Paul's orgasm, the vampire lost it too. He moaned, bucking up suddenly, and then Paul felt a warm wetness added to his



own. *Dios, coming...coming so hard...* And then all thoughts were lost in the blinding intensity of their mutual release.

For a long moment his mind was a blank. Then as the wave of pleasure receded and his brain began to work again, the enormity of what he'd just done hit him. He had never felt anything like the release he'd just had but he'd had it with another man—and on top of that the other guy was a vampire. *Dios, what the fuck is wrong with me?* He released his grip on Laurent's throat and rolled off, staring blankly at the ceiling.

"Paul? Are you well?" Laurent's green eyes were suddenly blocking his view of the ceiling.

"As well as I can be, I guess." Paul had the sudden realization that the vampire was really close and both of them were still naked. He sat up suddenly, scooting away from the other man. But the gesture made him dizzy and he had to put his head in his hand to keep the room from spinning. "Feel like I'm gonna be sick."

"Don't move too quickly. Here, lie down again—your body needs time to metabolize my blood."

"Don't want to lie down." Paul knew he sounded childish and stubborn but he couldn't help it. Position was everything in the pack. To deliberately make himself vulnerable by lying on his back while the other man leaned over him went against every instinct he had. Now that he was well enough to sit up, he couldn't show weakness.

Laurent didn't fight him about it. Instead he rubbed Paul's back soothingly, his hand gliding in a long, slow caress up and down Paul's spine until Paul shivered. He looked at the vampire, frowning. "Could you not do that, man?"

"You don't wish me to touch you?" Laurent sounded hurt and Paul felt a stab of guilt but it was quickly replaced by anger.

"No, I don't. After what we just did..." He broke off, uncertain how to finish.

"What we just did *healed* you," Laurent pointed out but his voice was still soft, not accusing. "That it was mutually pleasurable was simply a side effect."

Paul frowned. "A side effect, huh? So we had to be fucking naked while we bit each other or I was going to die? Sorry, man, I don't buy that."

"We had to be naked in order for me to warm you up," Laurent said patiently. "Although I won't deny I found the experience most pleasurable."

"Well I didn't." The words burst from Paul's lips before he thought.

The vamp didn't say anything but his eyes traveled to the recent evidence of their mutual orgasm still staining Paul's belly.

"Goddammit!" Paul looked around for something to wipe away his shame but Laurent shook his head.

"Just a moment." He jumped off the bed and disappeared from the small but luxuriously decorated bedroom. Paul heard water running and then the vampire was

back with a wet washcloth. He got back on the bed and held it out. "I don't suppose you'll allow me to clean you."

"I can do it myself." Paul snatched the warm wet cloth and scrubbed angrily at his flat belly.

Laurent watched him for a moment before speaking. "I am sorry if what we did upset you but you cannot deny the connection between us."

"There's no fucking connection." Paul threw the washcloth to one side. "I came here because I needed help. Not because I wanted to do...what we did."

"You appeared to enjoy it as much as I did."

"I was half dead. Out of my mind. I didn't know what I was doing!" The words rang false but Paul didn't care. He needed a reason, an explanation, an *excuse*. Despite all the forbidden thoughts he'd had running around in his brain from the first time he'd gotten a hard-on and learned what his cock was for, he'd never actually acted on any of them before. *And I'm not going to act on them again. There's no way I would have done that shit if I'd been in my right mind.*

"I am sorry you feel that way. Whatever you may think, my intention was only to heal you, not to take advantage of you." Laurent's voice was cool and when Paul looked up he saw that the worry in the vampire's pale green eyes had been replaced with distance.

Paul's gaze flicked guiltily from the cold eyes to the smear of blood on the vamp's neck where he'd bitten him. "Look..." He sighed and ran a hand over his hair. "I'm sorry. I know I'm being a fucking *cabron*. It's just, I don't want you thinking we can have any kind of...of relationship here. I mean, *Dios*, I'm a were and you're a fucking vamp. And besides, *I'm not gay*."

"So you keep saying." Laurent got off the bed and began to get dressed. "In which case I suppose you should leave and go back to your girlfriend."

"I don't have a girlfriend," Paul burst out. "I don't have anybody."

"And don't want anyone either, apparently. You are happy to go through life alone?" Laurent raised one elegantly arched eyebrow.

"I do what I have to do." Paul hunched his shoulders. "Where are my clothes?"

"Here." Laurent threw them to him and stood there with his hands on his hips while Paul started to dress.

Paul frowned. "You mind not watching me, man? You're kind of freaking me out."

"A moment ago we were as close as two men can be without making love and now you do not even wish me to look at you?" Laurent threw up his hands. "*Mon Dieu*. You cannot be my *Coeur de Sang*. This must be some kind of mistake."

"What is this 'core day sang' thing you keep talking about?" Paul demanded, struggling into his jeans. "Is that some kind of a vamp thing? Because—"

"It needn't concern you." Laurent looked down, apparently studying the expensive Oriental rug beneath his feet. "Nothing about me needs to concern you now."

Paul didn't know what to say. He was swamped with guilt one moment and anger the next. How dare the fucking vamp act like some kind of victim just because Paul wasn't falling all over himself to pledge his eternal undying love? *Then again, he did save your life*, whispered a little voice in his head and the guilt took over again. "Look." He got off the bed, a little unsteadily, and shuffled toward the vampire. "I'm sorry, I just—" He put out a hand, meaning to touch the other man's shoulder, but Laurent gripped it in his own instead. Immediately a wave of desire swamped Paul, threatening to drown him in its heated depths.

"*Dios!*" He tried to pull away but Laurent wouldn't let him. Paul realized with a fresh burst of panic that the vamp was every bit as strong as he was.

"Stop." Laurent spoke softly but his voice carried an intensity that forced Paul to listen. "Be still," the vamp said, looking into his eyes. "Let yourself feel."

"Feel what? I don't feel anything." But it was a lie and he knew it. The surge of electricity between them was the same as the first time they'd touched. Stronger, actually, Paul realized. It was like doing what they had done had actually intensified his desire for the vampire. *I want him more than ever*, he thought dismally. *Madre de Dios, what the fuck am I going to do?*

"Why do you resist?" Laurent looked at him intently. "Is it because our people are enemies or because we are both men?"

"I don't know...both." Paul was beginning to feel desperate. "I have to go."

Laurent tugged at his hand. For a moment Paul resisted and then he allowed the vampire to pull him closer. "Please..." The word was torn from him. He never begged in the pack, never lowered himself to pleading with anyone, not even Angel. But he couldn't seem to help himself.

"Give me a kiss. A single kiss and I'll let you go." Laurent looked into his eyes. "Kiss me and tell me you don't want me as I want you."

"Want you? I don't even fucking *know* you," Paul protested but he couldn't help looking at the vampire's full red lips. Couldn't help remembering the first kiss they'd shared—the hot, hungry intensity of it. The surge of pure lust when his mouth met Laurent's.

"Your heart knows mine as my heart knows yours." The vamp wasn't budging. "Kiss me, Paul. Let me taste your lips once more if you are so determined to go."

"I..." He didn't want to do it but at the same time it was *all* he wanted to do. *Fuck, I am so messed up*. Feeling more confused than he'd ever been in his life, Paul pulled the other man toward him. *Shouldn't be doing this. It's fucking wrong*. So why did it feel so right when their lips met and Laurent's parted for his seeking tongue? "*Dios,*" he moaned into the other man's mouth. Laurent's reply was to pull him closer and deepen the kiss.

There was that spicy, faintly coppery taste again and this time Paul realized it was blood—*his* blood. And his mouth probably tasted of Laurent's blood. For some reason the thought sent another surge of lust through him and he buried one hand in the

vampire's short black hair and tangled the other in the expensive shirt Laurent was wearing, drawing him closer. Desire turned to an almost frantic need as he pressed himself hard against the other man, trading rough, luscious kisses, not stopping this time even when one of the vampire's fangs grazed his lip.

*God, so good. So fucking good...* He didn't stop—couldn't stop—until he found himself falling and suddenly landed on the bed on top of Laurent in a tangle of arms and legs. The jolt seemed to knock some sense into him and he sat up, trying to untangle himself, but Laurent held him firmly.

"Stay." The vampire's voice was low and seductive but there was a vulnerability in his eyes that twisted Paul's heart. "Stay and make love with me. I've been waiting for you for so long. Let me touch you. Let me love you, Paul."

"I-I can't." The words tasted like dust in his mouth but he made himself say them anyway. "I can't do...that. Not with you."

"Because I am born to the Blood? Because I am a vampire?"

"That and...because you're a guy." Paul shook his head. "Look, I just can't. It's not...it's not right."

"What isn't right? What could be wrong about love?"

Paul ran a hand through his hair. "In this case? *Everything*. Look, Laurent, I have to go. My mom is really worried about me. She'll think I'm dead or something."

At last the vampire released him. "I understand. But when will I see you again?"

Paul made himself get off the bed even though he didn't want to. He was hard again, his cock tenting the baggy jeans he wore and the idea of ripping them down and thrusting deep into the other man's body while Laurent moaned and writhed beneath him wouldn't leave his head.

"When will I see you?" Laurent asked again.

"Never." Paul shook his head. "I can't...can't fucking do this." He turned away quickly, but Laurent was supernaturally fast too. He was already at the bedroom doorway when Paul went to push his way out.

"Paul..." There were tears in his eyes—actual tears. Any wolf in the pack who showed such weakness would have been mocked and called queer or a *mariposa*. But Paul felt no such impulse now. He just wanted to pull the other man close and hold him. *But if I hold him, I won't let him go this time. I'll stay, like he wanted me to. And we'll...* He couldn't let himself think about what they would do if he stayed and gave in to his impulses. The urge to comfort and touch, to hold and be held was so strong he didn't dare stop, didn't dare to even say a word. Instead he pushed past the vampire and walked to the outside door as fast as he could.

"Please," Laurent whispered behind him. "Please don't go."

Paul leaned his head against the doorframe. The wood felt cool and solid against his hot skin. It took everything he had not to turn around. *I can't. Can't fucking do this. Have to get out now while I still can.* He wanted to see Laurent, wanted to look into those

beautiful pale green eyes one more time. But he couldn't even trust himself to do that much. If he looked at Laurent and saw the need he felt himself mirrored in the other man's gaze he would be lost. Lost forever.

"Paul..." Laurent's voice was dangerously close.

"I *can't*." The words ripped from Paul's throat, leaving him raw inside. Blindly he put his hand to the carved wooden door and pushed out into the steamy Miami night, leaving Laurent behind inside.

The world seemed blurry and out of focus as he fumbled in the bushes for his bike. Was it some kind of aftereffect of ingesting vampire blood or maybe some lingering Wolf's Bane still in his system? But when Paul raised a hand to rub his eyes, his fingers came away wet.

Laurent wasn't the only one who was crying.

\* \* \* \* \*

Laurent sank despondently onto the couch as the sound of Paul's motorcycle faded into the distance. To be so close, to actually hold his *Coeur de Sang* in his arms and then to lose him for such a foolish reason was unbearable. He dashed the tears from his eyes with the back of his hand. *Father would not consider it foolish. The weres have been our enemies from time immemorial.*

It was true. Despite the uneasy truce that existed between weres and his kind in the old world, the distrust between their peoples ran deep and was rooted in a violent, blood-drenched past. But Laurent was certain that wasn't the only reason Paul had left in such a hurry. *It is because we are both men. He thinks it wrong to love one of his own sex.*

The very idea of rejecting a lover based on sex was foreign to Laurent. He had been raised in the sexually permissive Court of the Blood, where almost nothing was forbidden. *Nothing but loving an enemy.* That was also true. If his father and mother had the slightest inkling that he had fallen hopelessly in love with a wolf...well, Laurent didn't even like to think of the consequences. Sufficient to say that more than his right to the family title would be in jeopardy. In fact, he'd been taking a risk having Paul in the carriage house apartment at all. His father might have walked in at any moment. But Laurent couldn't help himself. Any risk, any danger, no matter how great was worth it. Paul was worth it.

Sighing, he remembered the press of the other man's body against his. The wolf smelled of warm fur and leather and spice—a wild scent that made Laurent's senses tingle and his cock grow hard. *He felt it too. He wanted me as I wanted him.* Paul's mouth had been so hot—his kisses desperate—almost ravenous. *He kissed and touched me like a starving man being offered food for the first time.*

It made Laurent wonder if the wolf had ever had another lover before. Perhaps he had but Laurent was willing to bet said lover hadn't been male. How long had he been hungry? Laurent was no judge of age but he knew that weres aged slower than humans, though not as slowly as his own kind. Paul had to at least be in his mid-

twenties and if he had reached sexual maturity in his teens... *He's spent years. Years and years longing for what he felt he could not have. For what has been forbidden to him.*

Laurent tried to imagine how he would feel if he had never been allowed to follow his natural impulses and touch another man. Wouldn't he be hungry for hard male flesh beneath his fingers, desperate for the delicious friction of another cock against his own? That was how Paul had acted the few times he had allowed himself to take what Laurent had offered him. Like he was so starved for the touch of another man he couldn't get enough.

*Oh mon amour*, Laurent thought sadly. *How gladly would I satisfy your appetite! You could have as much as you wanted all night long. I would suck you and stroke you and let you take me as often as you wished. I would take you too, if you desired it.* But even in his wildest fantasies, he couldn't imagine Paul wanting that. To submit to another male, to allow another man to enter his body...no, he would doubtless see that as the ultimate sin. The ultimate shame. However, Laurent didn't mind the idea of always being on the bottom. Opening himself to another man didn't frighten or disturb him, and if there had ever been a man he was willing and eager to have within him, it was Paul.

*You might as well forget that fantasy. You'll probably never see him again, let alone make love with him.* Laurent sighed and ran a hand through his hair. He couldn't bear never to see Paul again—but what could he do if the wolf refused to come to him? *I'll give him a few nights*, he decided at last. *But then I must seek him out again. I cannot live knowing he is in the world but not in my life. There is a connection between us—I know it. I feel it.* And Paul would feel it too if he would only allow himself to be open to his attraction to another man.

In fact, Laurent could feel their connection now. Closing his eyes, he leaned his head back against the leather couch and pictured the wolf in his mind. He could almost see Paul—streaking through the night on his motorcycle, the powerful engine gunning beneath his legs and his eyes wet with tears... *Tears? Wait a moment.* Laurent sat up and opened his eyes. *Would he really be crying? Where did I get such an idea?*

Frowning he closed his eyes again and reached out, trying to picture Paul in his mind. He saw the wolf again, another flash of him leaning over the chrome handlebars of his bike, the wind whistling through his bristly dark blond hair. Laurent could almost feel that wind—cool and soothing against his wet, fevered cheeks. But he could feel something else as well. *Pain...confusion...why am I like this? Why do I want him so much? Why can't I just be fucking normal like everyone else?*

Laurent opened his eyes again, shocked. Had he actually heard Paul's thoughts? They had been faint and staticky, like receiving a transmission from a far distant source, but he was certain that his mental image of the wolf was not just his own vivid imagination at work. He was attuned to Paul now, seeing the world through his eyes, however imperfectly, when he concentrated. And that meant that Paul was probably attuned to him as well. But how?

"The blood exchange!" Laurent got up and began pacing beside the couch. "*Mon Dieu!* What have I done?"

And more importantly, what would the consequences be when Paul realized what had happened? Would he run away or come back to find out the cause of his new awareness? Laurent had to hope for the latter because now that they were bound, he would be in deep trouble if he never saw the were again.

## Chapter Seven

"*Paulito!* Thank the holy virgin you're all right." Lucia pulled him into a tight embrace the moment he parked his bike in the corner. "I was so worried! But you've only been gone a few hours so I was hoping you were all right, that you'd call."

"Decided I'd better come back instead." Had it really only been a few hours he'd spent with the vamp? It felt like he and Laurent had been together days and days. Like Paul had somehow gotten to know the other man better than anyone else he'd ever met in his life. How had that happened?

"So you're feeling better?" She looked at him anxiously. "The poison is gone?"

"All gone," he assured her.

"*Ai*, your neck." She touched the side of his throat with her fingertips.

"What about it?" Paul put a hand to his neck. It was a little tender but it didn't sting or burn anymore.

"Nothing—it's nothing." She frowned. "The scratches are healed but I don't understand why you can still see his...his..." She broke off, blushing.

"His fang marks," Paul finished for her roughly. "Yeah, he bit me. How else was he going to suck the poison out?"

"Of course—of course he had to bite you. I didn't expect anything else." Lucia cleared her throat but from the look on her face, Paul was sure his stepmother knew some of the wilder rumors about vamps and the other things they liked to do while drinking blood. Add that to what she already seemed to have guessed about him and Angel and who knew what she thought of him now?

Lucia must have seen the uncertainty on his face because she patted his arm and gave him a small smile. "I'm not judging you, Paul. I just wondered why the scratches that little *bruja* made on your neck are gone and the marks of his teeth are still there."

"Maybe because they're fresher—I don't know. Probably fade by morning." Paul sighed.

She bit her lip. "Was it very painful? You look like you've been crying."

"C'mon, Lucia, don't start that *mierta*—I mean crap. Of course I wasn't crying." He brushed self-consciously at his damp cheeks. "I didn't shed a single tear the night I was jumped-in to the *Locas*. So how is a fucking—sorry—freaking *muerto* gonna make me lose it?"

"I don't know." She frowned, studying his face. "Did it hurt much? What he did to you?"



*Not as much as what I did to him.* Paul looked away, not able to meet her eyes. "Not so much. Look, I'm really tired. Did, uh, did you tell Dad where I was?"

Lucia frowned. "I was about to but I wanted to give you a little more time. I thought if your father knew..."

Paul nodded. "Yeah, okay, I got it. Thanks." *If he knew I'd been practically having sex with a vampire – and a male vampire at that – he would completely lose it. Forget disowned – I'd be fucking dismembered before the sun came up.*

Lucia cupped his cheek. "Paul –"

"I'm really tired." He stepped away from her gentle touch, shrugging his shoulders apologetically. "Completely exhausted. I think I'm going to just go sleep for about a month. That okay with you?"

"Of course." She smiled. "I'm just so glad you're okay. Sleep as long as you want – I'll make sure nobody bothers you."

That meant she would run interference for him with his dad, which was a good thing. Paul didn't think he could face the old man right now – not after the things he'd been doing. He had a feeling his father would see it on his face or maybe just *know* somehow. Know that his son was...what? Paul didn't know himself at this point and he was too exhausted to try to figure it out now. He nodded at Lucia. "Thanks, Lucia. That would be great."

"What's going to be great is seeing you at the top of your game again. Didn't you tell me you had a challenge with that *cabron* Chulo tomorrow?"

Paul widened his eyes. "*Language*, Mom."

She laughed and there was mixture of relief and worry in her deep brown eyes. "Hey, sometimes you have to call them like you see them, *Paulito*. I'm just saying I want you to be well rested." She frowned. "Are you sure you're going to be up to it? I mean, maybe if I talked to your packleader, that Angel –"

Paul shook his head. His stepmother didn't understand. Despite having the were genes she'd never run with a pack before. "It's not like school when you could write me a note to get out of gym. This is a challenge – if I don't fight, Chulo gets my spot and I get kicked down to the bottom of the pack."

"Well, we can't have that. Although..."

"What?" he asked tiredly. He kept having flashes – little images of Laurent, even though he was trying as hard as he could to put the vampire out of his mind. He just wanted to go to bed – maybe with a good night's sleep he could put all this behind him. Maybe.

"I was just wondering – why can't you quit the pack? It's not good for you, Paul. And the way that Angel treats you –"

"Angel treats me fine," Paul said firmly. "And I can't leave, Lucia. Once you're in the *Locas*, you're in for life until you get busted out or die."

"That's what I'm afraid of." She shook her head. "I just wish you didn't have to run with them. You could be a lone wolf—your father is."

"And look where it got him. No friends, no status—all he's got is this shop."

"He's got you and me," she said quietly. "He has love, Paul. I don't think you're ever going to find that in the *Locas*. Not with someone who will love you back."

Paul shook his head. "I'm too tired. I can't talk about this right now."

"Okay, I'm sorry." She patted his shoulder. "I just worry about you, that's all. Go to bed and get some rest."

"I will." He gave her a quick, one-armed hug. "Thanks for everything. You saved me tonight, you know."

"No." She shook her head. "Your vampire saved you—whatever he is." Her gaze was piercing and Paul had the uncomfortable feeling that she knew exactly *how* Laurent had saved him.

"Yeah, well..." He shook his head. "Uh, good night."

"Good night, *Paulito*." She was still looking at him that way as he turned to climb the stairs that led to his apartment. Paul wondered how much she guessed about what he had done that night.

And how he could keep anyone else from guessing the same thing.

\* \* \* \* \*

He woke up from an extremely vivid dream. It was of Laurent—he was talking to an older female vampire who looked a lot like him. At least, she had the same pale green eyes and creamy skin, although Paul got the idea that she was considerably older. Why he thought that he didn't know—she didn't look it. But there was an air of maternal authority about her, the same kind that Lucia had, that made him think maybe she was Laurent's mother.

In the dream Laurent was arguing with her and then asking for something—trying to get some kind of information from the other vamp, though Paul couldn't quite figure out what it was. The dream kept fading in and out—like a radio station that wouldn't tune in right. It was damn annoying because he had a feeling that whatever Laurent was saying was important. And besides, he wanted to see the other man again, even if only in his dreams. *Which is the only fucking way I'll be seeing him from now on*, Paul thought, rubbing a hand over his face as he sat up in bed. *Got to get him out of my head. Got to forget last night ever happened.*

A glance at the digital clock beside his narrow twin bed showed that it was almost seven o'clock at night. *Dios, I must have been really tired.* Of course, being poisoned, being healed and having your heart ripped out took a lot out of a guy. Paul pushed the thought aside, irritated with himself. Hadn't he just decided to put the events of the night before out of his head? It was time to get going if he was going to make the challenge with Chulo.

He stretched experimentally and was glad to find that he was feeling well—better than well, actually—fucking fantastic and ready to fight. Nothing hurt or burned or ached and he was bursting with energy. He was going to decimate Chulo and show him where he belonged—at the bottom of the pack. *That fucking pendejo isn't going to know what hit him.*

Smiling grimly to himself, Paul swung his legs out of bed. Scratching his chest, he made his way to the postage stamp-sized bathroom that was barely big enough to hold a toilet and a tiny shower stall. Twisting the hot water tap, he waited for a minute until the water was hot before jumping into the shower. The hot water felt wonderful sluicing over his hair and down his naked body—like a warm hand caressing him all over. Paul sighed with pleasure as he reached for the soap. He didn't know what was different about him today but everything felt better—sharper, somehow. It was as though someone had dialed all his senses to maximum and left him humming like one of the custom choppers he built in the shop.

As he soaped himself all over, he tried to picture the impending challenge. No doubt Chulo would expect him to be either dead or so messed up by the Wolf's Bane that he would be completely unable to fight. Proving him wrong was going to be a fucking pleasure. *I can just see the look on that cabron's face when he realizes I'm going to take him down...*

But instead of the upcoming scene with the pack, all he kept seeing was Laurent. In his mind's eye he saw the vampire pacing and muttering something to himself. He could even tell what Laurent was wearing. A white linen shirt, with the top few buttons open to show the flat planes of his chest, was tucked into a pair of charcoal gray slacks that probably cost more than Paul's motorcycle. As he watched, the vampire ran a hand through his short black hair and said something in French that sounded suspiciously like swearing.

Paul frowned and shook his head, flinging water droplets from his hair. What was wrong with him? He'd never had such a vivid imagination before and even if he did, he couldn't see himself imagining details like what the other man was wearing, let alone being able to imagine him talking in French. Paul didn't even know any French—Spanish was the only language you needed to get by in Miami so why bother with anything else?

He finished soaping and rinsing his body, scrubbing extra hard to get Laurent's scent off him. The last thing he needed was for Angel and the rest of the pack to smell vampire all over him. But getting the other man out of his mind was proving a lot harder than washing away his scent. He kept getting flashes of the vampire no matter how hard he tried to concentrate on something else. Laurent talking. Laurent gesturing—his movements supernaturally fluid and graceful. Laurent pacing and shaking his head...

*Damn it, what's wrong with me?* Stepping out of the shower, Paul scrubbed his wet hair viciously with a towel and wrapped another around his waist. *Have to get over this. Have to stop thinking about him. How can I fight like this?* No answer was forthcoming and

Paul got more and more irritated as he dried himself off and yanked on a baggy pair of jeans and a red T-shirt. He had to get his mind right before this fight—he couldn't afford to be distracted during a challenge. Chulo was a big coward but if he smelled the slightest bit of weakness he would go for the throat. Paul had to be able to defend himself and his place in the pack.

Still trying to concentrate, he nearly missed his father as he ran down the stairs to the garage and grabbed his bike.

"There you are." His father shot him a disapproving look from across the garage, which was empty this time of night. "I could've used you in the shop today but Lucia said you weren't feeling good. Something you ate?"

"Uh, yeah, must have been." Paul ran a hand over his hair. "I was feeling like shit for a while there. Better now, though, thanks."

It was hard to claim sickness since it took a lot to put the were constitution down. Weres healed exponentially faster from almost any illness or wound than humans so claiming he had needed the entire day to recover from food poisoning was tantamount to a human claiming he needed a week to get over a headache. Still it was the story Lucia had used so he had to stick with it.

"Uh-huh." His father gave him a hard look. "Something you ate *my ass*. You were probably just out partying with Angel and the rest of those mangy mutts you call a pack last night and you wanted to sleep it off."

"Hey, the *Lunas Locas* are the toughest pack around," Paul protested, jumping automatically to his pack's defense. "You should be proud I'm in with them."

"I'll be proud when you actually start pulling your weight around here." His father shook the wrench he was holding in one hand for emphasis.

Paul felt himself bristle at the familiar argument. "I do everything you ask me to and I pay you rent on that crappy apartment." He jerked his chin up the stairs. "Just because I'd rather build custom bikes than spend all my time repairing broken ones is no reason to get pissed."

"I need somebody to take over this place when I retire, Paul—you know that. And I need you around helping instead of running with the 'crazy moons' all the time. You and that damn Angel you're always with—if I didn't know better I'd think you were a couple of homos."

Paul felt his cheeks getting hot. "Watch it, Dad. It's not like that between Angel and me."

"Well what is it like then? What the hell has that pack ever done for you anyway? You're never going to be packleader—you know that."

Paul frowned. "And I'm never going to want to take over the Chop Shop either. *Dios*, Dad. Maybe I want something else out of life besides inheriting this place. You ever think about that?"

"Something else, huh? And what would that be?"

"I want..." Suddenly Laurent flashed to the middle of his brain and wouldn't leave. Paul saw him as he had been the night before, naked and hot, writing beneath him as he offered Paul his throat. *Yes, mon amour. Take what you need...*

"You want what? Go on, spit it out."

"I want..." *Laurent*. The name hovered on the tip of his tongue and to his horror, Paul almost spoke it out loud. Making a massive effort to get past the image his brain insisted on showing him, he forced himself to go on. "Maybe I want my own place. Where I can build bikes all day instead of fixing the greasy old junkers people bring in."

It was a thought he'd had for a long time but this was the first time he'd ever come out and said it. Paul didn't know why he was picking now for the confrontation—maybe he was just trying to talk about anything but the vampire and what he and Laurent had done the night before—but somehow the words just came out.

"Your *own* place? Are you shitting me?" His father laughed angrily. "You don't know anything about running a business. You're too busy howling at the moon and marking your territory to learn the first thing about making a bike shop work."

"Yeah? Well you're not exactly making me want to stick around and spend some quality father-son time right about now," Paul shot back. Straddling his bike, he kicked it to life. His father was shouting something else but the loud purr of the motorcycle's engine drowned him out. "What?" Paul cupped a hand to his ear. "Sorry, can't hear you. Guess we'll have to talk about it later."

His father turned red in the face and started stalking across the garage toward him, still shouting, but Paul didn't give the older man a chance to get in his face. He gunned the engine and roared out into the deepening twilight instead, letting the powerful bike take him away from the old argument, the old pain.

*Dios*. He shook his head as the wind blew through his hair and calmed him down somewhat. The fight with his father wasn't the first of its kind and wouldn't be the last. What really bothered him was the way Laurent had popped into his brain and wouldn't leave. *What's wrong with me? I almost said his name. Almost told on myself. Why can't I stop thinking about him? Why won't he get out of my head?*

His brain was at it again as he drove mechanically to the *Locas* hideout. All he could see was Laurent. The vampire was taking off his shirt—his pale, smooth chest, while not as heavily muscled as Paul's own, was still distractingly beautiful. Laurent's nipples were a pale, pale pink and Paul found himself wondering how sensitive they were. He hadn't had a chance to suck them before but he wondered if Laurent would like that—like having his mouth there. *Stop it, stop it! Stop thinking like that. It's wrong—he's wrong and anyway you're not gay. Forget him!*

But he couldn't.

By the time he got to the bungalow in Liberty City he was completely twisted in knots. He kept seeing Laurent in his head—there and then gone the next moment but always popping up again. It was like his brain was a radio with a bad connection that could only tune in to a certain station. If Paul could have, he would have stayed away

from the pack until he could get whatever the hell was wrong with him cleared up. But he couldn't miss the challenge or he forfeited his place as second wolf to Chulo.

Paul parked his bike and squared his shoulders as he tromped up the sagging front steps. *Just have to go in there and get it over with quick. Kick his ass and leave.* He was concentrating so hard on getting the job done and over with so he could get out fast that he almost didn't see Mercedes until she slid out of the shadows and insinuated herself between him and the doorway.

"Well, well, Skulls. How are you feeling?"

Her sudden appearance snapped Paul back to reality. "How do you think I'm feeling, you *bruja*?"

Her eyes widened as she searched the spot where she'd scratched him. "A hell of a lot better than you should be." She raised a hand to his cheek but Paul caught her wrist and squeezed it hard.

"Uh-uh. Keep your fucking hands off me, *puta*."

"Let me go." She squeezed her trapped hand into a fist and hissed at him like an angry cat.

Paul let go of her wrist and glared at her. "From now on you don't put hands on me. The next time you touch me I'm going to forget everything my stepmother taught me about being nice to girls. You got it?"

"*Cabron*. Go fuck yourself."

"Whatever." Paul pushed past her into the bungalow. He wasn't a bit surprised to see the entire pack gathered in the small living room again but at least this time Angel was there too.

The packleader was sitting apart from the rest of the wolves in a large, overstuffed leather armchair. When Paul came in he looked up from the game he'd been playing on his smart phone and nodded casually. "*Que tal*, Skulls?"

"Not much. Just here to kick Chulo's ass." Paul glared across the room at the taller wolf, who was looking distinctly uncomfortable. As he watched, Mercedes came to stand by Chulo and pulled him down to whisper something in his ear. Chulo looked furious and whispered something back.

Paul had suspected that the third wolf was in on the attempt to poison him before and this made it pretty damn clear he was right. Still, it pissed him off that Chulo had resorted to cheating to try to take his place—a true wolf of the *Lunas Locas* should be above such underhanded bullshit.

"Oh yeah, I did hear that my cousin challenged you." Angel's voice broke his train of thought and he looked over to see the packleader pocketing his phone.

Paul squared his shoulders. He didn't like that Angel had mentioned the blood connection between himself and Chulo but it didn't change anything as far as he was concerned. "Yeah, he did. So let's get it over with."

Angel nodded at the door. "Out back. Let's not trash the place anymore than it's already trashed."

"Fine." Paul led the way, the short hairs on the back of his neck bristling with tension. He could feel the eyes of the rest of the pack on him and hear their whispers. How many others had known about Mercedes and her Wolf's Bane? How many had been willing to sit by and watch him die just because he was different? *I'm more different than they think.* He had another flash of Laurent from the night before saying, *Kiss me and tell me you don't want me as I want you.* Paul tried to shove it out of his mind but the image remained as he pushed out the door and went around to the weedy backyard of the Locas bungalow.

"Okay." Angel stepped out in front once they were all gathered in the surprisingly roomy yard. It was surrounded by a ten-foot-tall wooden privacy fence—the pack's one concession to keeping humans ignorant of what they did. Not that any of the humans in the neighborhood would dare to look into the Locas backyard, fence or no fence.

"I'm ready." Paul stepped up to the packleader, wishing his mind were clearer. If he had to fight while his head kept showing him pictures of Laurent, he guessed he could. It was just very fucking distracting.

"Chulo?" Angel looked at the other wolf who shuffled nervously and finally came forward.

"Yeah, okay, packleader."

"Good." Angel nodded. "So—fur or skin?"

"Fur," Chulo said immediately, before Paul could open his mouth. Paul frowned—Chulo was slightly bigger in wolf form just as he was in man form but if he thought size was going to work to his advantage he was dead fucking wrong.

"Skulls?" Angel looked at him and Paul shrugged.

"Doesn't matter. I'll kick his ass either way."

Angel looked up at the full moon. "All right then—change. And may the best wolf win."

Paul was already calling the Mother Moon, which was high in the sky, before his packleader said the words. But to his chagrin, instead of the power channeling down like a silver rope, all he could feel was Laurent's mouth on his. Instead of seeing the pale moonlight, he saw the vampire's pale green eyes and heard him murmur something soft and sensuous in French.

*What the hell? What's going on? What's blocking me this time?* It wasn't the Wolf's Bane anymore—he was sure of that. He no longer felt the sensation of trying to roll a too heavy boulder up a mountain—of straining to do something that couldn't be done. Instead, it was like something was interrupting his link to the Mother moon. Like static interfering with a broadcast signal.

It all happened in a split second and before he could try again, Mercedes stepped out in front of Angel and held out a hand. "Stop!"

Angel frowned at her, a low growl rising in his throat. "I'm packleader here and you're not even a real wolf. How dare you interrupt a challenge?"

"Forgive me, packleader, but I have good reason." She bowed her head submissively but Paul thought he saw a glitter in her poison green eyes. Something was going on—but what?

"Okay, so state your fucking reason." Angel looked more annoyed than actually angry, which didn't surprise Paul. The *Locas* packleader was always low key until he lost it and exploded into rage and violence. The trick was to know how far to push him, and Paul didn't think Mercedes had the hang of it yet. She was on thin ice whether she knew it or not.

"I just want this to be a fair challenge, packleader." She gave Angel a big, wide-eyed innocent look. "And I don't think it will be, because Skulls won't be able to change."

"What? What makes you think that?" Angel frowned at her.

Paul crossed his arms over his chest. "Because she poisoned me with Wolf's Bane yesterday." There was no way she could know about the images of Laurent interrupting his change so she must think he still had some of her poison in his system.

"What?" Angel looked between him and Mercedes. "Is this true?"

She nodded. "It was a total accident. I had been mixing a medicine for my aunt and I still had some on my fingernails, I guess. Anyway, it wasn't much but it might be enough to keep him from changing."

"Accident my ass. It was enough to fucking *kill* me." Paul glared at her. "Which is what you wanted, isn't it, you *pinche puta*?" He couldn't figure out why Mercedes was telling on herself—maybe she was trying to get it out and put her own spin on it before he did. But he was damned if he'd let her sugarcoat what she'd done.

"If it was enough to kill you, then why are you standing here?" Mercedes took a step toward him. "How did you get rid of the poison?"

"My stepmother's a nurse—you know that." Paul frowned.

"Uh-huh. So she bit your neck and sucked the poison out?"

Paul felt his stomach drop and another flash of Laurent leaning over him popped up in front of his eyes. "What? No. She gave me some meds. I was fucking lucky she had some or your little plan would have worked." He glared at her again.

"Uh-huh. Okay, that makes sense." Mercedes nodded thoughtfully. "Except for the fact that there's no cure for Wolf's Bane once you've got it in your bloodstream. You have to get rid of the poison—like sucking out a snake's venom. But that would kill another were. Hell, it would even put a fucking human six feet under. In fact..." She gave Paul an evil grin. "The only person who could help you once the bane was in your bloodstream would be a *muerto*."

*How does she know that? How much does she know?* Paul's heart began to hammer in his chest but he kept his face impassive. "What the fuck are you talking about?"



"Yeah, Mercedes – what the fuck?" Angel frowned at her. "Get to the fucking point already so we can get on with the damn challenge."

Mercedes rounded on him. "The point is that Skulls here has been fucking around with a vampire."

"What?" Angel gave her a look that wasn't quite as incredulous as Paul would have liked. "What the fuck makes you think that?"

"He was alone with that vamp we found the night you gave him point." Chulo stepped forward. "Sent the rest of us after the vamp's coven – only there was no fucking coven. Then he disappeared and didn't come back until the next night with some story about how he killed the vamp."

"You're just pissed that you didn't make a kill that night." Paul hoped he sounded calm but inside his gut was churning. He looked at Mercedes. "I'm still second wolf and you're making some pretty fucking strong allegations. Where's your proof, *bruja*?"

"Right there on your neck." She pointed to the spot she'd been looking at earlier – the spot where she'd scratched him.

*And the spot where Laurent bit me. Mierda! Are the marks still there? How could they be? They should have healed by now – hell, they should have been healed last night.* Paul put a hand to his neck, trying to think. "You're full of shit, Mercedes. If you think me getting over the poison you used on me proves I'm a –"

"A vamp fucker?" Mercedes put a hand on her hip and arched an eyebrow at him. "We all know you're a *maricon*, Skulls."

Paul felt his face getting hot as Laurent flashed in front of his mind's eyes again. "Oh, so now I'm a faggot because I don't want to fuck you, Mercedes? If that's the case then half the pack must be gay. We better change our name to the *Mariposas* right now and get it over with." This drew some uneasy laughter from the rest of the pack but not as much as it would have in the past. *They've shifted*, Paul realized. *They're against me now – all against me.* He'd always walked a fine line as second wolf because he was different, because he was a *gringo*. But now that Mercedes' accusations seemed to be hitting home, he'd somehow crossed over that line and become the enemy.

"All right, all right – enough with this bullshit." Angel held out his hands as though settling a fight. "I declare this challenge void."

"What? Why – I was all set to take him." Chulo stepped forward angrily, glaring at Angel. "Why do you always take his side? He's not even your blood – I am."

"Yeah and you're also a fucking *pendejo* if you think I'm going to let you go ahead with the challenge until we clear some of this up." Angel pointed a finger at his cousin. "Don't make me kick your ass myself, Chulo. Blood or no blood you'll be at the bottom of the pack if you don't shut the fuck up."

Chulo growled, his eyes flashing wolf-yellow but Angel growled louder, his lips wrinkling back from his teeth as he took a step toward his cousin. Abruptly Chulo gave a soft whine and looked down, breaking the staring match. Paul knew if he'd been in wolf form he would have been on his back right now, offering his packleader his belly

and throat in a show of submission. As it was he ducked his head and backed away. Mercedes was smart enough to go with him and the rest of the pack dissipated too, as though by silent consent. Soon Paul was alone with his packleader in the overgrown backyard with the nearly full moon riding high in the sky above them.

"Okay." Angel turned to him, frowning. "Now what the fuck, Paul?"

Paul shrugged, trying to look cool. "Mercedes is full of shit." It was a flat-out lie—the first he'd ever told his packleader and he hoped Angel couldn't smell it on him. He was doing his best to keep his breathing calm and his face neutral but his heart was still racing and the palms of his hands were damp. If Angel realized he was lying...

"Yeah, she usually is." Angel gave him a searching look. "So she really tried to poison you?"

Paul nodded guardedly. "Had the shit all over her fingernails and she clawed me. My stepmom said I barely got to her in time."

Angel's eyes narrowed. "And the marks on your neck?"

*Fang marks. So they are still there.* "The vamp in the park bit me before I eighty-sixed him."

"So why aren't they healed yet?" Angel sounded skeptical.

Paul shrugged, trying to look nonchalant. "How the hell should I know? I've never been bitten by one of those fuckers before. How do I know how long a bite takes to heal?" Inside his head he kept feeling Laurent's mouth against his throat, and then his mouth on Laurent's, the other man's body against his own as they rubbed against each other, pushing each other higher and higher... *God, have to stop thinking like this!*

"All right." Angel nodded but he was still frowning suspiciously. "Is what Mercedes said true—you can't shift right now?"

"No, I can't," Paul said shortly. *And as soon as I get out of here I'm going to find out why the fuck not.*

"Okay, so it's good I voided the challenge. But if I know Chulo, he's going to want a rematch and soon. I can give you a week—two max to get your shit together."

"That should be plenty of time." Paul lifted his chin. "I'll show him his place. And I want something done about Mercedes—she nearly fucking killed me."

In the past Angel would have agreed with him. Mercedes would have been busted out of the pack in a heartbeat. But now the packleader just frowned and shook his head. "Haven't you heard the old saying—what doesn't kill you makes you stronger?"

"Angel—"

"Look, Paul." Angel put a hand on his shoulder and looked into his eyes. "I don't know what's going on with you right now and I don't want to know. I just want my second wolf at my side without all this bullshit. So fix it, okay? You fix this shit before I have to fix *you*. You got me?"

Paul stared into the black eyes of his best friend and saw none of the warmth he was used to. Angel's eyes were flat and shiny as buttons in the moonlight. "Yeah," he said slowly. "Yeah, I got you, Angel. No *problemo*."

"Good." Angel patted his cheek gently. "Now get the fuck out of here and go home. I don't want to see you again until you're ready to fight."

Paul nodded and turned to go but home was the last place on his mind. Laurent was already making another appearance in his head—this time he was naked and wet in the shower. The image made Paul hard as a rock even though he knew it was wrong. The vampire owed him a major explanation and he intended to get it tonight.

## Chapter Eight

The angry hammering on his door didn't exactly take Laurent by surprise. The connection between himself and Paul – however imperfect it was – allowed him to catch glimpses of the were from time to time so he knew Paul was coming over. What he hadn't realized was how close the other man was. He'd been taking a shower and the pounding outside came just as he was trying to dry off.

"Open the fucking door!" He could hear Paul growling. "I know you're in there, Laurent – I can see you inside my fucking head. So get out here or let me in."

Cursing in French, Laurent rubbed a towel over his damp hair and pulled on a pair of slacks. Then he ran to the door, hoping to get Paul safely inside before the racket attracted his parents' attention.

"Come in and be quiet," he said, pulling open the carved wooden panel. "My parents are in the main house and they would be none too pleased to see us together."

"Fuck that." Paul pushed his way inside and turned to face Laurent, hands curled into fists at his sides. "What the fuck did you do to me?"

"Besides saving your life, you mean?" Laurent shut the door, keeping his eyes trained on Paul. He had known the wolf would be upset when he found out about their connection but he realized now he had underestimated exactly *how* upset.

"You might have saved my life but you fucked up my head. Why can't I stop seeing you? Why can't I stop thinking about you even for a minute?"

"Maybe because you're in love?" Laurent asked lightly. It was the wrong thing to say. He knew it the moment the words came out but it was too late to call them back.

Paul shoved him against a wall and pressed close so that their faces were barely inches apart. "You *hijo de puta*. I oughtta rip you apart." His voice was a low, menacing growl. "I'm only going to ask you one more time. What the *fuck* did you do to me?"

Laurent had to bite back a moan as their physical contact intensified the connection. Suddenly he could feel Paul's worry and confusion much more clearly and he knew the were could feel his emotions as well.

"Paul, please, give me a moment to explain," he murmured, hoping to defuse the situation. He could feel not only the were's confusion but his desire as well. It was like a fire burning just below his surface, an untapped well of need so immense it made Laurent shiver just to feel it. Paul's chest was warm against his, the worn material of his red T-shirt soft against Laurent's bare skin. The scent of fur and leather and spice filled his senses.

For a long moment they looked into each other's eyes, close enough to kiss but neither one of them moving. Laurent longed to close the distance between them but he

didn't quite dare for fear he would send the situation spiraling out of control. Paul would have to make the first move this time. *He's never had another man before and his need is so great. Like a volcano ready to blow.*

"Stop putting your thoughts in my head—of *course* I've never fucked another guy." Abruptly, Paul released him and stepped back. "But you're right about one thing—I'm about to explode I'm so pissed. So talk. Explain. What is this...this thing between us and how do we get rid of it?"

"You are so eager to sever the bond?" Laurent had expected nothing less but it still hurt to hear the other man say it out loud.

"I'm eager to get my life back. Ever since I met you things have been going crazy and now I can't even shift forms."

Laurent frowned—this was something he had not anticipated or picked up from his limited connection with the were. "You are unable to call your inner wolf?"

"More like I can't channel the power of the moon. It's like you're in my head blocking the signal—it almost lost me my place in the pack tonight."

"My deepest apologies." Laurent bowed his head. "I would never wish to interfere with such an important aspect of your life."

"So don't. Take it back—fix it, whatever it is you did. Just fucking *fix* it." Paul's frustration crackled through their connection like lightening.

"I am afraid it may not be that easy." Laurent sighed and went over to the couch to sit down. He patted the cushion beside him. "Come, I'll try to explain—in so far as I understand, anyway."

Paul came over and perched warily on the far edge of the couch. "Okay, so talk."

"You are so afraid to be near me?" Laurent raised an eyebrow.

"I don't trust you."

"Maybe it is yourself you do not trust. Do not forget, Paul, the connection we have works both ways. I know perfectly well that you want me as much as I want you." He held up a hand to stop the other man's protests. "And please, do not tell me again that you are not a lover of men. You insult both my intelligence and your own with such lies."

Paul's face was red. "You said you saw for yourself I've never been with another guy."

"Other than me, you mean?"

"That doesn't count. I was—"

"Not in your right mind. Of course." Laurent sighed. "Very well, let us put aside your sexual desires and come to the point. Last night when I took your blood and you took mine a bond was formed. It was by no means a complete bond, however, which is why it is giving both of us so much trouble."

"Both of us?" Paul frowned. "It's been messing with your head too?"

"It's very distracting," Laurent admitted. "Not that being able to see you and hear you from time to time isn't interesting and enlightening but the connection between us makes it very difficult to concentrate on anything else. I could barely keep my mind on the conversation earlier when I was speaking to my mother."

"I saw you." Paul leaned forward a little. "You two have the same eyes. It looked like you were arguing with her – trying to get some information."

Laurent nodded. "Indeed I was. I was trying to get the address of my old blood nurse—I believe she may be the only one who can help us."

"Your old *what*?"

"My blood nurse. I was born to the Blood—born a vampire. And of course, instead of milk a baby of my kind drinks blood. Accordingly my parents hired a human woman to feed and care for me, much like any other affluent couple would hire a nanny."

Paul snorted. "*Dios*, that's a new one. Never heard of a nanny who doubles as blood donor."

"It is the way things are done among my people," Laurent said stiffly. "And it creates a strong bond between the child and his nurse. I loved mine to distraction—she cared for me even after I began to drink from others. I was devastated when she was taken from me."

Paul's expression softened somewhat. "Yeah, my mom—my real mom—left when I was just a kid too. So what happened to her?"

"I believed that she died but just recently I learned that she is still alive. My father turned her to one of my kind as a reward for services rendered and pensioned her off. She is now residing in the area of Asheville, North Carolina. We must find her there."

"We?" Paul frowned. "What is this 'we' *mierta*? Why should I go on a road trip with you to find your old nurse?"

"Because we must both be present in order to do anything about the situation we find ourselves in. You cannot tie a rope more tightly or loosen the knot it is in unless you hold both ends in your hand."

"All right, I guess I can see that," Paul said grudgingly. "But why your nurse? You're telling me she knows more about vampire shit than your parents?"

Laurent sighed and ran a hand through his damp hair. "First of all, my parents would have you killed and me imprisoned or worse if they knew of our situation. Secondly, my nurse knows more about vampire lore and history than anyone else I have ever met. It was she who told me the legend of the *Coeur de Sang* when I was but a child. She will know how to heal or sever the imperfect bond that has somehow formed between us—I am certain of it."

Paul frowned. "The bond that has 'somehow formed between us'? You mean you didn't do it on purpose?"

"No." Laurent shook his head emphatically. "That is to say, I knew there was a possibility of some complication when I gave you my blood but I had no choice—you

would have died otherwise. So I took the risk—I am sorry the outcome has been so inconvenient for you.”

Paul shifted on the sofa, looking both unhappy and uncomfortable. “Look, it’s not like I don’t appreciate you saving my life. But I need to be able to shift forms. And like you said, it’s damn distracting having somebody else in my head one minute and gone the next. I mean, if this is an incomplete bond, I’d hate to see a complete one.”

“A completed blood bond is a beautiful thing,” Laurent said quietly. “Right now we only get flashes of each other’s lives and we cannot control what we see and hear. To have a complete bond is to be able to control and direct the connection and to have perfect access to each other’s thoughts and feelings.”

“What—like telepathy?” Paul frowned.

“In a manner of speaking.” Laurent shrugged. “But more complete than that. It is like...sharing your soul with another and always being perfectly in tune with them.”

Paul frowned. “Sounds fucking intrusive.”

“I have never heard it called so. A completed bond gives control so that you can tune in, as it were, to your lover whenever you wish and tune out when you have other matters to attend to.”

“Like tuning in a radio station.” Paul nodded. “Yeah, I get it. And the rest of the time you can turn them down to background noise?”

“Exactly.” Laurent was glad to see he was getting it.

Paul frowned again. “So why didn’t you make a complete bond to start with? I mean, not like I want us connected but it would be a hell of a lot better to be able to control it.”

“Because, as I told you, I did not form the bond on purpose.” Laurent stood and paced in front of the couch as he explained. “You must understand, Paul, the blood of a vampire that has been born and not made is a living entity, one that listens to and acts on the heartfelt desires of its host. I did not mean to cause any bond at all but...I wanted you so badly I fear my blood listened to my heart instead of to my head.”

Paul looked at him blankly. “So all this is your *blood’s* fault? I don’t mind telling you, *hermano*, that’s fucked up.”

“It was the instant connection I felt when I touched you—the call of the *Coeur de Sang*.” Laurent gestured with one hand. “I suppose you could say that your blood called to mine and my blood answered in the only way it knew how, by attempting to tie us together permanently.”

“Yeah?” Paul growled. “Well thanks but no fucking thanks. Sorry to disappoint your blood but I’m a free agent and that’s how I want to stay.”

“So you never want another beside you? Never want to share life’s joys and sorrows?” He turned to face the were, looking the other man in the eye. “You wish an empty bed and an empty heart all your life?”

Paul met his gaze for a moment and then looked down. Laurent caught a blast of discomfort from him.

"Paul?"

"It's not that I *want* that so much as that's how it has to be for me."

"Why? Because you cannot allow yourself to look in the direction your heart leads you? To another man instead of to a woman?"

"Don't start that shit again." Paul looked irritated. "Stop getting off the subject. Tell me why we have to go see your old nurse. Why can't we just call her?"

"She doesn't have a phone or any other connection to the outside world—so says my mother." Laurent shrugged. "She always was something of a recluse. She had spent much of her mortal life studying my kind and was overjoyed to be offered the position as my nurse in the first place. She devoted her life to me and my family and after her services were no longer needed she went into seclusion. I have only her address and nothing else—my mother does not even know if she still lives or not."

Paul rolled his eyes. "Great. So we have to go all the way to fucking North Carolina to find your old nurse who might not even be alive."

"I believe that she is," Laurent said sincerely. "She was not the type to give up on life, although I *can* picture her withdrawing into her own world made up of books and legends."

"Wouldn't she at least have to go out and, uh, get something to eat?" Paul objected.

Laurent shrugged. "There are ways to get around such things. Arrangements can be made with willing human donors. And one of the advantages of being a made vampire is that she will not need to feed so often as a born vampire, like myself, must."

Paul frowned. "What about that? Who are you going to snack on during this little trip of ours? Because no offense, *'mano*, but you sure as hell aren't biting me again. Not after what...what happened last time."

Laurent gave him a piercing gaze. "If you think the only reason you welcomed my advances was the fact that I was biting you at the time, you are more self-deluded than I believed. Do not worry about me, Paul. The blood I took from you last night will sustain me, at least for tonight, and after that I will find someone else to 'snack on' as you put it."

He didn't tell the other man that the bond between them would make the blood of any other mortal extremely unpalatable to him, not to mention almost worthless nutritionally. His body was attuned to Paul now—his blood wanted the were, *needed* him in more ways than one.

It was a problem he would just have to deal with. Once they found Nana she would be able to help them, either by making Paul see that the bond was right or severing it completely so that Laurent could drink from another.

It would be difficult to wait—especially since being so close to Paul had woken his thirst and he was already longing for another taste of the other man. Laurent sighed to



himself—well, he would just have to bear the discomfort until they found Nana. How long could the trip to Asheville take, anyway?

\* \* \* \* \*

“Twelve hours? Are you certain?”

Paul couldn’t figure out why the vampire looked so upset. “That’s what Mapquest says. Is that a problem?”

“I was hoping we could get there tonight.” Laurent sighed. “I just can’t believe it takes so long. You can get from Paris to Frankfurt in five or six hours.”

“Well, that’s Europe—we’re more spread out over here.” Paul studied the laptop screen in front of him intently. “Florida is a long-ass state and we’re starting at the very end of it. Then we have to go through Georgia and South Carolina before we even get to North Carolina and anywhere near Asheville.”

“All right, I believe you.” Laurent frowned. “It’s just...longer than I expected.”

“We could fly,” Paul offered. “Last-minute tickets would be pretty expensive though.”

“Yes and I do not have enough cash to cover them. I wouldn’t want to put such a thing on my credit card—it would be too easily traceable.”

Paul studied him. “So who is it you don’t want tracing you?”

“My father. He has big plans for me in the immediate future and he would not be pleased with me for leaving at all, let alone going to find my old nurse.”

“Won’t your mother guess and tell him? You *were* just asking for the address.”

Laurent frowned. “If she does guess, she will not tell my father. She prefers to keep a peaceful household and my father in a rage is terrible to behold.” He shook his head. “At any rate, I must take the risk. We have to find the way to heal the bond between us.”

“Not heal—get rid of.” Paul wanted to be very clear on that. “We have to cut it or whatever it is you do but I can’t have this weird connection. Can’t have you...running around in my head all the damn time.”

“Of course.” Laurent’s voice was soft and he looked away as he spoke.

Paul felt like a bastard but what could he do? It wasn’t like he was going to promise to stay connected to the vamp for the rest of his fucking life. From the minute he’d walked in the door all he could think of was grabbing the other man again and the connection between them seemed to make it worse—intensify the desire. He couldn’t go on having those wrong feelings forever or he’d go crazy. Pushing the guilt away, he tried to get down to details.

“So, road trip. If we start now we can get at least halfway out of the state before we have to get a room for the day.”

Laurent frowned. “Why should we get a room for the day?”

"Why do you think? So you won't wind up looking like a bucket of the Colonel's extra crispy the minute the sun comes up."

"Taking a room for the day will not be necessary," the vamp said stiffly. "I was born to the Blood of one of the oldest and strongest family lines. I can travel during the daylight hours as long as I am well covered and not in direct sunlight."

Paul stared at him. "No shit?"

Laurent gave him a small smile. "No shit, *mon amour*. It will, of course, deplete me somewhat but I think it will be worth a little discomfort on my part to get where we are going sooner."

Paul shrugged. "All right, if you say so. So how do you want to go? I have my bike parked outside."

Laurent shook his head. "I am afraid that would not offer enough protection for me once the sun rose overhead. Let us take my car instead."

"Okay, fine by me." Paul sighed. "I guess I should give my stepmom a call and let her know I'll be gone a couple of days. She can break it to my dad better than I can—he's already pissed because of a fight we had when I was on my way out tonight."

Laurent cocked his head to one side. "What did you fight about?"

"The usual. He doesn't like my pack—especially my packleader, Angel. He, uh, I think he thinks there's something going on between us." He could feel his face getting hot. Why had he told the vampire that?

"And is there? Do you care for this Angel?" Laurent asked quietly. Paul felt a tendril of curiosity from him and something else he couldn't quite name. Jealousy? Damn, it was so fucking *weird* feeling someone else's emotions beside your own.

"He's been my best friend since fifth grade. But other than that, no, not really." Paul tried not to think of the way things were between himself and Angel. Of the teasing way his best friend and packleader treated him.

"What do you mean, not really? Would you *like* there to be something more than friendship with him, this other wolf?"

"Even if I wanted it—which I don't—it could never happen." Paul looked down at his hands, thinking of what Lucia had said. *You know he's never going to feel for you what you feel for him.* "He—Angel— isn't like that. You might think he was—at least a little—when you first met him. But deep down...no."

Laurent nodded. "So he has power over you."

"Well, he *is* my packleader," Paul pointed out.

"No." The vampire shook his head. "I mean he has power over you because of your unfulfilled desires. He knows what you long for and dangles it in front of you, keeping it ever beyond your grasp."

Paul frowned. "You sound like my stepmother. Look, we should stop talking and hit the road if we want to make some miles tonight. It's already getting late."

"You're right." Laurent sighed and stood up. "I hope you don't mind me asking about your personal life. I would like to get to know you better if I could."

"Why bother." Paul gave the vamp a level look. "As soon as we get rid of this...*thing* between us, we're never going to see each other again."

Laurent looked sad. "Is that really what you want? Do you not even wish to contemplate a friendship between us?"

Paul wanted to contemplate a hell of a lot more than that. In the golden glow of the lamp beside the couch Laurent's skin seemed to have a radiance of its own and Paul could clearly see the small pink buds of his nipples. His eyes traveled up from the flat planes of the other man's chest to his full red lips and he couldn't help remembering how good Laurent's mouth tasted.

For a moment he allowed himself to wonder how it would feel to have those lips wrapped around his cock. He was already rigid and aching hard just from being in the same room as the other man. How would it be if he peeled down his jeans and offered Laurent a free pass to do anything he wanted? Laurent's mouth would be hot and wet and he would swirl his tongue around the head of Paul's cock before taking him deep in his throat and —

"Stop it!" Laurent's voice was harsh, snapping Paul out of the forbidden fantasy.

He looked up. "What?"

"You know very well what." A combination of anger and lust burned in the vampire's pale green eyes. "You are not only tormenting yourself with such thoughts but me as well." He stepped closer and suddenly he was on his knees in front of Paul. "Do you not know that I long to suck you? I am so hungry for your touch, so eager to taste you..." He put his hands on Paul's thighs and leaned forward so that his chest was almost brushing the straining ridge of Paul's shaft, trapped behind his jeans. "I would take your cock in my mouth now if you would let me."

"You really *want* to do that?" Despite his fantasies, Paul could scarcely believe it. It was an act of disgrace and degradation in the pack. A sign of failure and banishment.

Laurent frowned, like he was catching some of Paul's thoughts — which he probably was. "Among the other wolves, you use this as an act of submission and shame?"

"That's what it is," Paul said roughly, wishing the other man would get up and stop invading his space. But at the same time he didn't want Laurent to move — unless it was to come closer. *Dios*, he was so mixed up. He curled his hands into fists on his thighs to keep from reaching for the other man. "Why would you want to suck another guy's cock anyway?"

Laurent's gaze softened. "To bring pleasure to a lover, to watch his eyes as you take him deep in your mouth, to hear his soft groans as you bring him to the brink of pleasure and push him over. I would give you such pleasure, Paul — if you would let me."

The pale green eyes promised so much. *Let me love you. Let me show you how it can be.* Paul wasn't sure if he'd actually heard the words or imagined them but they made his

entire body tight with longing. *Dios*, why did the vampire have to be so fucking beautiful? Why couldn't Paul stop wanting him, wanting to touch him, to taste him and to let Laurent taste him?

For a moment he wavered. But... *It's wrong. Twisted. Sick. Mariposa. Maricon. Queer.* "No." He pushed away from Laurent and rose quickly, putting distance between them. "No and don't fucking ask me again. I'm not like that."

Laurent sighed deeply and rose smoothly to his feet. "Very well. But if you wish me to refrain from mentioning such subjects, kindly refrain from thinking about them so loudly. Remember that I am attuned to you as you are to me."

Paul didn't see how he could help what he was thinking but he gave a curt nod. "Fine. Now let's go, okay? I'll call my stepmother from the road."

"Very well. Let me pack a few things and we will be on our way."

"Good." Paul frowned. "Laurent," he said as the vampire turned to go.

"What?" The look in Laurent's eyes was cautious and unhappy.

Paul jammed his hands deep in his pockets. "I just want you to understand something. I'll go on this trip with you because there's no other way to get rid of this weird connection. But just because we're on the road together doesn't mean I want to get all cozy."

Laurent frowned. "Meaning?"

"Meaning you need to keep your hands to your fucking self. Understood?"

The look on Laurent's face went from cautious to completely closed. "You have made yourself perfectly clear. You need not fear any advances from me since you are determined not to acknowledge what lies between us."

"There's *nothing* between us," Paul insisted, wishing he could feel as certain as he sounded.

Laurent arched an eyebrow. "Then you should not fear my touch."

"I don't fear it." Paul gave him a hard stare. "But I don't want it either."

"You mean you don't *want* to want it. You fear that if we touch—even a little—the connection between us will overwhelm your determination again."

Paul didn't have an answer for that, even to himself but he could feel his frustration mounting. "Look, just *don't fucking touch me*, all right? How hard can that be?"

Laurent closed his eyes briefly, his lashes like black fans across his high cheekbones. "You have no idea, *mon amour*." Then he turned to go pack his things, leaving Paul to hope that this was going to be the fastest road trip in history.

*It'll be okay. We'll drive up there, his nurse will tell us how to get rid of this fucking weird connection or bond or whatever it is, and then I'll get a bus back home.*

What he couldn't admit—even to himself—was that he wasn't sure how long he could hold out. The pull to touch Laurent, to be in his arms, to kiss him, to taste him, was so intense it was an almost physical pain. *I'm not like that. Can't be like that*, he told

himself for what felt like the hundred thousandth time. *Just have to get through this so things can get back to normal.*

As if he'd ever been normal before.

Paul closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He had to get through this somehow. Just had to get through it.

## Chapter Nine

Laurent huddled on his side of the Boxster Spyder miserably. He was hunched inside the dark hooded jacket he had packed for the daylight hours, but despite the protection, he could still feel the draining presence of the sun. It was noon outside and the sunshine was beating mercilessly through the windows of the little sports car like a golden hammer despite their custom tint job.

"You okay?" Paul threw him a sidelong glance from behind the steering wheel. He seemed to enjoy driving the expensive car much more than Laurent ever had. In fact he'd been so excited over the Spyder that Laurent had felt envious. The way Paul kept running his hands over the sleek hood, the admiration he'd expressed for the all-leather interior—he couldn't help wishing he could have at least a little of that enthusiasm directed toward himself. Of course that wasn't going to happen—though Laurent could feel the other man's desire Paul had made it more than clear that he was determined to put their past encounters behind him and ignore the connection between them. In the face of such intense determination there was nothing Laurent could do. And now that the sun was up, he barely had the will to try, anyway. He lifted a hand to his temples and rubbed. *Mon Dieu, but I feel so weak.*

"Hey, man. I said, are you okay?" Paul's anxiety drifted across the car to him, tearing at his already tattered nerves. The wolf had been driving for hours since they had switched places the moment the sun started edging over the horizon. Laurent had been glad to hand over the wheel and he was even more grateful not to be driving now. The way he was feeling he doubted he could have walked three feet, let alone mustered the coordination to drive.

"I will be fine," he made himself say though he was beginning to wonder if that was true. Of course the way he was feeling was his own fault. His insistence that they drive during the day instead of stopping at a hotel had been stupid. Though he was capable of daylight travel, it was depleting him terribly—much more than he'd expected it would. He felt dry and dehydrated—his entire body a desert craving fresh blood. The problem was, the blood he craved was Paul's and the were had already made it more than clear that he wasn't interested in playing "blood donor" again.

Laurent wished he dared to roll down his window. The scent in the car—the warm wild smell of wolf—was almost more than he could bear. It was pure torment to be so close to the one he wanted—the one his body needed—and be unable to slake his thirst. And it wasn't just his thirst. With every breath of Paul's warm scent, with every glance at the hard muscular body riding so easily in the seat beside his, with every flash of those deep blue eyes toward him Laurent's desire grew as well. The almost overwhelming need to touch and taste and caress, the demanding drive to hold Paul

close and drive his fangs into the were's neck as Paul drove his cock deep into Laurent's body was becoming almost too much to bear.

*It is only the call of my blood – it recognizes him as my Coeur de Sang even if he will not. I must ignore it.* But how could he ignore a need that was rapidly becoming as vital as breathing? It almost made Laurent glad he felt too weak to do anything about his carnal urges. After turning down his offer of oral pleasure back at the carriage house Paul was on the defensive, his emotions roiling like a dark cloud of doubt and lust and shame that made an invisible but impenetrable fog around him. He was being careful—*very* careful—to keep to his own side of the car so that there was plenty of distance between them.

Laurent wondered at the cruelty of fate, making the one he ought to be bonded to for all of eternity not only the enemy of his kind but a man who refused to acknowledge his desire for his own sex. Either problem on its own he felt he could have dealt with but put together they created an almost insurmountable obstacle to forming any kind of relationship. Not that Paul wanted a relationship—he was obviously eager to dissolve their partially formed bond and never see one another again. The thought made Laurent feel as if someone were squeezing his heart with an iron-clad fist. If only the were would admit his feelings, if only he would allow Laurent behind his carefully built defenses...

He was so tangled in his own web of misery that Laurent barely noticed it when Paul signaled and got off the interstate. He only looked up when the car came to a stop.

"Where are we?" He squinted at the dilapidated building in front of them. It appeared to be some kind of hotel with a restaurant connected to it. A faded blue roof sloped over a two-story building that had seen better days. A sign that read, *Try 'n Buy – The Freshest Indian River Citrus Fruit!!!* sat in the corner of the dirty diner slash gift shop window.

Paul shrugged. "Some dumbfuck town in South Carolina."

"But..." Laurent struggled with the words. "Why? Why did you stop?"

Paul frowned at him. "Because we need a break—both of us. You're looking bad, *'mano*. Wilting like a fucking flower in the sun. Need to get you inside for a while, completely out of the sunlight."

Laurent wanted to tell him that being inside wouldn't help—that nothing would help but blood. But he didn't have the strength. "We'll...continue...soon?" he managed to ask.

The were nodded. "As soon as you perk up a little. Look, you guys can drink water, right?"

Laurent nodded. "In limited amounts. It...helps some."

"Good. I'll get you some." He gave Laurent another concerned look. "I parked in the shade. Can you walk or do you need me to carry you?"

"Thought you...didn't want to touch me."

Paul's face betrayed a mixture of exasperation and tenderness. "Look, I know I can come across as an asshole but I just didn't want..." He shook his head. "Anyway, I can make an exception. It's not like you're going to jump me in the condition you're in."

"No," Laurent agreed. "I think...think I can walk. But a little help...getting out?"

"Sure." Paul was out of his seat and around the side of the car in an instant. Laurent envied his easy movements. What would it be like to roam in the daylight as easily as he did the night? It must be so freeing. He felt like an old man as Paul took his arm and pulled him gently out of the car.

"Thank you," he managed to say.

"Welcome. You're okay now?"

"Fine." But it was a lie. Despite the shade Laurent was one step closer to the sun. He stumbled as a wave of dizziness hit him. The ground was a swaying slope and his legs were brittle, clumsy sticks that didn't want to bear his weight.

"Here." Suddenly Paul's warm, muscular arm was around his shoulders. "Lean on me if you need to." The were's voice was gruff and Laurent felt a wave of concern flow between them.

"Thank you," he whispered again. In the face of such weakness he had no pride left. He leaned heavily against Paul, trusting the other man's strength more than his own as they made their way into the gift shop restaurant.

The heavy, oily scent of fried food engulfed them as the door opened, making Laurent want to gag. All around were shelves filled with knickknacks and bric-a-brac. Alligator skulls grinning emptily at nothing, wind chimes made of long strings of shells, novelty T-shirts with ridiculous slogans printed on them. It was cheap and tawdry but at least it was out of the sun. With Paul's help, he sank with a relieved sigh onto the cracked blue plastic of a booth in the corner. They were the only customers besides a group of young men eating in the far corner.

"You okay?" Paul asked again.

This time Laurent could only nod. He was rapidly nearing the end of his strength but there seemed to be nothing he could do about it.

"Okay then." Paul nodded. "I'm gonna go take a leak. If the waitress comes while I'm gone order me a cheeseburger and fries and a Coke. And get yourself some water — you look like you could use about a gallon of it."

Laurent didn't say that a single sip of the were's blood would revive him more than ten gallons of plain water. He only nodded again and sank down with his head on the faded tabletop. *Mon Dieu, am I going to die here? Should I ask Paul to get a room until it is dark again or would it be better to just keep pushing on and hope that Nana can help?*

"Hey buddy."

The harsh masculine voice interrupted his desperate thoughts and Laurent forced himself to sit up and look at whoever was addressing him. "Yes?" he managed to croak.



"Yeah, you better look at me while I'm talkin' to you." It was one of the young men from the other end of the diner. From the way his friends were snickering behind him, he wasn't simply interested in passing the time of day.

Laurent was too depleted to be diplomatic. "What do you want?"

"What I want is not to have to see two fags sitting up in my favorite restaurant." The young man, who was wearing a black t-shirt that read "Pussy Patrol" in neon blue lettering, glared menacingly.

Laurent frowned, feeling a measure of his strength return out of sheer anger. "Excuse me? You wish my traveling companion and myself to leave this establishment because you believe us to be lovers?"

"I saw the way you had your arms around each other comin' in here." The man spat to one side to indicate his disgust. "We don't care for your kind around these parts."

For a moment all Laurent could do was stare. Was this man seriously asking him to leave because Paul had helped him into the restaurant? No wonder Paul was so concerned about any kind of touching between them—even nonsexual touching—if such a caring gesture was so easily misinterpreted. What was wrong with the people in this country anyway? *I should bespell him – make him offer his wrist. Even a small sip of his blood would be better than nothing.*

Lauren looked up, trying to catch the other man's eyes. "Look at me," he murmured. "And let me look into you."

"What?" The man with the "Pussy Patrol" T-shirt made a face. "What the fuck—You coming on to me or something?"

"Just look at me," Lauren insisted but he couldn't catch the man's eyes. His powers of persuasion, so devastatingly powerful during the night, were severely diminished by the sun overhead.

"What's going on, Ray?" One of the other men came over, frowning. "Pretty boy here giving you some trouble about leaving?"

"Fucker's trying to put the moves on me." The first man leaned forward threateningly, pushing his face close to Laurent's. "But I told him I'm not interested."

"Maybe we oughtta teach him a lesson." The second man grabbed Laurent by the arm and pulled him to his feet. "A trip across the hot concrete might set him right."

Laurent could feel everything spinning out of control. He was in worse trouble now than he had been the night at the park when he'd been surrounded by Paul's pack. And he was being menaced by mere humans—beings he was capable of swatting like flies once the sun was down. But mere humans or not, if they threw him out of the restaurant and into the direct sunlight he would surely die. Born to the Blood or not, there was only so much his body could take and he was already weak with thirst.

"Please," he tried to say but they were already hauling him out of the booth and dragging him toward the door. Outside the sun was dazzling, reflecting starbursts of

pure, painful radiance off the chrome of several motorcycles parked in front of the diner. He tried to struggle but it was no use – his strength was gone. *I'm going to die now*, he thought, feeling bewildered. *Die having never really bonded my Coeur de Sang to me. Die without ever telling him I love him or hearing him say that he loves me.* Of course he could probably live a thousand more years without hearing Paul utter those words considering how the were felt but still –

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

The familiar voice snapped Laurent out of his rambling thoughts and he looked up to see Paul standing in front of the swinging glass door, blocking it.

“Look, Ray, it’s the other fag,” sneered the man who’d grabbed Laurent to begin with.

Paul stiffened. “What are you talking about?”

“We saw the way you two lovebirds were leaning all over each other when you came in here,” snarled the first man. “And now we’ll be helping you out the door. I don’t need to sit here trying to eat my lunch and watch two homos kissing all over each other.”

“Yeah, ruins my appetite.” The second man shook Laurent roughly. “He’s going out and I suggest you follow him unless you want the shit to hit the fan.”

“The shit hit the fan the minute you put your hands on my...on Laurent.” Paul’s voice was a low growl and his eyes were suddenly wolf gold. He took a menacing step forward. “Let him go *now* or I’m gonna fuck up your shit so bad you’ll crawl out of here on broken legs.”

Ray, the man in the “Pussy Patrol” shirt, lifted his chin defiantly. “Yeah, motherfucker? I’d like to see you try.”

“Ray.” The other man sounded uneasy. “Lookit his eyes. What the fuck? They were blue and now they’re yellow.”

“They’re both gonna be black by the time I finish with him.” Ray took a step forward. “Come on, faggot.”

“You asked for it.” Suddenly Paul was a blur of angry motion. Laurent felt the two men’s hands pried off his arms and then Paul punched the first one in the stomach and the second in the chin. Both of them went down like sacks of dirty laundry, hitting the floor hard.

By then Laurent was falling himself. He had no one to support him and no strength left to stand on his own. He would have ended up on the floor with his attackers if Paul hadn’t caught him and swung him up into his arms. “Paul?” He could barely make his eyes focus. “Where...?”

The wolf shook his head. “Taking you to a room. We need to get completely out of the sunlight and away from these *cabrons* so you can rest.”

*Doesn't matter where we go. Too late.* But Laurent had no strength to say the words. Giving in to exhaustion, he let his head drop onto the were's shoulder and closed his eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

When he came to himself again he was in a dim, cool room on a lumpy king-size bed. Paul was bending over him with a glass in his hand. "Here, try some of this."

Laurent sipped obediently but the cold water did little to slake his thirst. Instead, it made him aware of how terribly thirsty he really was, setting his throat on fire with need. Moaning, he pushed the glass away. "No help. Makes it...worse."

Paul frowned and set the glass down on the night table with a thump that slopped water over the side. "Water isn't what you need, is it?"

Mutely, Laurent shook his head.

"What then?"

"You know...what." The words were so hard to get out. He closed his eyes again, wanting to drift back to oblivion, but Paul snapped his fingers in front of his face.

"Hey, stay with me. So you need blood, right?"

Laurent nodded.

"All right." Paul stood up. "I'll find you a hooker. Don't know where at this time of day but there's bound to be one around somewhere who won't mind you snacking on her if the price is right." He turned to go and Laurent mustered the strength to say something.

"Wait."

"What?" Paul frowned and sat beside him on the bed. "You shouldn't try to talk, *'mano*. You're too weak."

"Dying. Don't want...to be alone." Laurent reached for his hand and was surprised and gratified when Paul allowed the touch and even gripped his fingers tightly.

"Don't talk like that. You're not dying. I told you, I'll get you a blood donor—"

"Other blood...no good. The bond...need..." Laurent couldn't go on but Paul went very still and from the look on his face, he understood.

"*Dios*, you need *my* blood. Is that what you're trying to say?"

Laurent nodded. "Forgive me...the bond...you are the only...only one..."

"The bond hooks us together and makes me the only one you can drink from?" Paul frowned. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Couldn't." Laurent shook his head. "You don't...don't have to feed me. Just...just stay with me. Don't want to...be alone."

"*Dios*, Laurent. Of course I have to feed you. What the fuck? You think I'm going to let you die?" A mixture of worry and anger radiated from Paul like heat.

"Thought you said...not a blood donor."

The wolf sighed. "Looks like I'll be making another exception." He pulled his shirt over his head and started to lean over and offer Laurent his neck. The scent of warm fur and spice was strong, making Laurent's mouth water and his cock hard. *Mon Dieu. Want you, mon amour. Need you so much...*

But just as his fangs were elongating in anticipation Paul pulled away.

Laurent moaned softly. Surely they would not be so cruel. Better to die knowing there was no help than to be offered what he needed—Paul's life-giving blood—and have it withdrawn at the last instant.

"Wait a second." Paul was frowning. "Sorry, I know you're hungry. But look, I don't want you biting me where anyone else can see the marks. I had a hell of a time explaining your last little love bite and I don't want to go back home looking like you've been using me as a fucking pin cushion."

"Inner wrist?" Laurent looked hopefully at the other man's muscular forearms. "Elbow?"

Paul shook his head. "No good. I'd have to wear a long-sleeved shirt. And nobody would believe it was because I was cold. Not in fucking Miami."

"No," Laurent agreed faintly. He was rapidly running out of hope. "Thigh?" he asked, knowing that Paul was bound to refuse. But aside from the neck, the inner thigh offered the best access to large blood vessels.

Paul looked worried for a moment but then he stood up and began shoving off his jeans. "Fine. But no fucking funny business."

Laurent nodded. "Of course not."

"All right then." Paul stepped out of his jeans, pushing his shoes and socks off along with them. He was nude and his shaft was already half hard—a sight that Laurent was careful not to stare at. "Sorry." Paul's voice was gruff with embarrassment. "I, uh, usually go commando."

"It's all right." Laurent patted the bed beside him hopefully. "Please."

"Yeah, fine." Paul settled himself carefully at the top of the bed, leaning back against the headboard. "Can you, uh, reach me?"

"Yes." The warm, wild scent was filling his senses again and with it, Laurent found a small measure of strength. He felt like a man in the desert crawling toward a small oasis but he managed to position himself between Paul's spread legs with only a little clumsy maneuvering. Hovering over the werewolf's inner thigh, he opened his mouth and felt his fangs slide completely into place.

"Uh, is this gonna hurt?" Paul was eyeing his fangs warily. "I mean, the first time I was so out of it."

"No pain," Laurent promised him. His vampiric senses were working, whispering of the rich femoral artery pulsing deep beneath the surface of Paul's tanned skin. "Only pleasure."

"Okay, only –"

Laurent bit.

"*Madre de Dios!*" The words were ripped from him as Laurent's fangs pierced his skin. Paul had expected it to be painful—those fangs looked fucking sharp and he'd never liked shots. What he hadn't expected was the jolt of pure pleasure, like a lightning strike to his cock.

He was suddenly achingly hard, throbbing with need, his back arching, his hands gripping the cheap polyester bedspread on either side of him as the sensation went on and on. God, he couldn't take much more of this or he was going to come...going to come so hard... But he didn't. Every time he thought he was going to lose it he couldn't—he just hovered right there on the wickedly sharp edge of desire, unable to release. He was dimly aware of the soft sucking sounds and the pulling sensation as Laurent drank from his thigh and was even more focused on the feel of the vampire's cheek rubbing against his cock. But all of that took a backseat to the enormous teasing wave of pleasure that coursed through him like an electrical current and yet wouldn't let him come.

"*Dios, Laurent!*" he gasped. "Please! What the fuck are you doing to me?"

The vampire raised his head at last. "Only taking what you offered, *mon amour*." The pleasure began to fade the minute his fangs left Paul's thigh, leaving him with an aching hard-on. But at least he no longer felt he was being electrocuted by desire.

"Are you done?" Paul shakily ran a hand through his hair. "Because that is fucking intense, man. I don't know how much more I can take."

Laurent licked his lips in a distractingly sensual gesture. "I am well satisfied. I thank you."

"Welcome." For some reason Paul couldn't stop looking at the other man. In the dimness of the hotel room, with all the shades drawn, the vampire seemed to glow with an inner light that was almost pearlescent. His pale green eyes reminded Paul of two full moons and his mouth was so red...so inviting. Paul's cock throbbed. God, he was so hard he *hurt*. "Laurent," he heard himself saying. "Remember...uh, remember when you said you wanted to, you know, suck me?"

The vampire gave him a slow, lazy smile that made Paul's stomach flip. "But of course, *mon amour*. And I still do."

"You do?" Paul asked stupidly. He felt like he couldn't think straight—probably because all the blood in his body had rushed from his brain to his cock.

"On one condition." Laurent looked suddenly serious. "I want you to watch me. Watch me take your cock in my mouth. Watch me suck you and lick you. Watch me swallow every last drop of your cum and know that it is me—another man and a vampire—who is giving you this pleasure. I will not have you pretending away the truth."

For a moment Paul hesitated. Truth be told, closing his eyes and pretending, or at least not thinking about it, was exactly what he had been planning to do. But a part of

him—a part he'd buried so deeply it almost never came out—liked the idea of watching. *Shouldn't do this – shouldn't want this*, warned the little voice in his brain but he was tired of listening to that little voice. Tired of being controlled by it. "All right," he said at last. "But you get naked too. Not that I want to do...anything else. But if I'm going to watch—"

"You want to see the whole thing," Laurent finished for him. "Of course, *mon amour*." He stood gracefully and began to strip.

Paul wasn't sure if it was the sheltering dimness of the room or the blood the vampire had ingested but Laurent had shed his clumsy weakness as easily as he now shed his bulky outer coat and designer clothing. *Dios, he's amazing. So fucking hot*. The thought came unbidden as he allowed himself to admire the other man's body. Laurent's trim swimmer's physique wasn't nearly as muscular as his own but he was still beyond beautiful as, curling like a cat, he positioned himself between Paul's legs again.

"Watch me," he murmured, cupping Paul's throbbing shaft loosely in one hand and looking up to meet Paul's eyes.

"I can't fucking take my eyes off you." His voice was hoarse with desire. "Just, uh, be careful with the fangs. Okay?"

"Do not worry." Laurent's eyes gleamed like pale green jewels in the dimness. "I assure you I have enough practice to know what I am doing. Although I do not think I have ever wanted to do this quite so much before." He lowered his head and licked a long, slippery trail from the tip of Paul's cock to the aching base of his shaft.

Paul gasped, his hands curling into fists at the sudden pleasure. "More!"

"All good things to those that wait." Laurent gave him that slow, hot smile again. "Do you like what you see?"

"I'd like it better if I saw my cock all the way in your mouth." Paul didn't know where the words came from but they were certainly true. "Goddammit, Laurent, don't fucking tease me."

"As you wish." The vampire lowered his head and suddenly Paul's entire cock was engulfed in a warm, wet heaven. He moaned out loud as he felt the vampire swirl his tongue expertly around the shaft before taking him even deeper. His hips jerked involuntarily and then he forced himself to stop. He'd had blowjobs from girls before and one thing they hated was having a cock forced down their throat. But when Laurent lifted his head at last, the look in his eyes was pleasure, not irritation.

"Do not be afraid to thrust," he murmured, placing a soft kiss on the plum-shaped head of Paul's cock. "Remember, *mon amour*, we are equally matched in strength. You cannot hurt me and I rather like the feeling of you fucking my mouth."

The breath caught in Paul's throat. "You do?"

"Very much," Laurent assured him. "Thrust as hard as you like—let me know you're enjoying yourself. You are, aren't you?"

Paul nodded. "Best fucking blowjob I've ever had," he said sincerely.

Laurent nodded, smiling. "And it is not even over yet." He gave Paul a long, intense look. "I won't stop again until you come, Paul. I want to swallow every last drop."

"*Dios!*" The vampire's low, sexy voice and hot words were driving him insane with desire. Threading his fingers through Laurent's short black hair, he urged the other man down again. Laurent went willingly and soon enough he was sucking Paul down to the root again, his lips pressed against Paul's groin and his head bobbing up and down in obvious pleasure.

For a long moment Paul resisted the urge to thrust and just looked. This was a man—a man sucking him, a man taking his cock deep in his mouth and trying to make him come. *It's wrong*, whispered the voice in his brain—the voice of his father, the voice of the pack. But wrong or not, it was the most beautiful, erotic sight Paul had ever seen and he couldn't stop.

With a low groan he pulled back and then thrust forward, gently at first. Laurent's fingers tightened on his thighs and he pressed back, meeting Paul's mouth-fuck with a thrust of his own.

*He wants it*, Paul realized in wonder. *He really wants it. He enjoys this.* It was difficult to comprehend. The only male-on-male blowjobs he'd seen in the past had been performed by wolves who were in disgrace, being busted out of the pack. He remembered the agonized looks, the shame radiating from the unwilling men forced to take Angel's thick, uncut cock into their mouths. There had been no encouragement there—most of the shamed wolves simply held still and let the packleader fuck their mouths until he came. It was the only way Paul had been able to imagine how a same-sex encounter would be. But Laurent was showing him that it could be more—so much more.

Paul thrust again, a little harder this time, and was rewarded by a little moan of pure pleasure as the vampire sucked him even harder. Clearly Laurent hadn't been kidding when he'd told Paul that he could take it. It felt so damn good—so wet and warm and perfect. And the sight of the other man leaning over him was mind-blowingly hot, so hot that Paul couldn't resist thrusting again, even harder. Before he knew it he had both hands buried in Laurent's short hair and was bucking his hips up as hard as he could.

The intense pleasure he'd felt before while Laurent was drinking from him was back but this time Paul could tell that he was going to be able to come. In fact, he was almost there now—the warm, wet suction and the sight of the other man sucking him so eagerly were rapidly pushing him to the point of no return.

And then Laurent reached between his thighs and cupped his balls. That extra touch and the forbidden sight of the other man's lips wrapped around his cock were too much. The intense pleasure came to a peak, cresting inside him, and Paul felt the hot

cum boiling up from the base of his balls and shooting in short, hard spurts down Laurent's throat.

"Laurent! *Dios*, so fucking good!" Paul groaned, thrusting even deeper. He'd never had a blowjob from someone who actually *wanted* to swallow. Watching Laurent's slender throat move as he sucked greedily, trying to get every last drop of cum just as he'd promised, almost made Paul come again. The sensation was incredible—the feeling of allowing himself to have something he'd wanted all his life, though he had never been able to admit it before. Even the guilty voice at the back of his head couldn't dim the pleasure he felt at letting Laurent suck him and make him come.

And then at last it was over and Paul felt himself begin to go soft. Laurent must have felt the same thing because he pulled away slowly and somehow regretfully after milking Paul's cock gently for the last few drops. Then he gathered himself at the edge of the bed, his arms around his knees and his eyes on Paul's face.

Paul frowned. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I am waiting to see your reaction." There was a definite feeling of caution and worry coming from the vampire's side of the bed. "In the past you have regretted allowing yourself to become physical with me."

Paul tried to laugh and couldn't because what the vampire said was true. "So you're afraid I'm going to try to beat you up because you just gave me the best blowjob of my life?"

Laurent only nodded.

"Goddammit." Paul sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I guess I should want to...but somehow I don't." He shook his head. "I'm tired of all this. Tired of trying not to feel what I feel. I just want to forget about everything back home for a while. Forget what my old man would say or what the pack would think."

As he said the words he knew they were true. He'd been spending so much energy trying not to want Laurent, trying not to think of how wrong it was to want another man that way, that he was emotionally exhausted. "I can't fucking fight it anymore," he said in a low voice, looking down at his hands. "I don't know if it's because of the bond between us or what but...I'm tired of it. Just tired."

"Of course you are." Laurent moved cautiously to sit beside him at the head of the bed. Slowly, as though he was trying to pet a tiger that might bite, he slid his hand into Paul's. Paul let him and stared stupidly at the sight of their fingers entwined. *Dios, I'm holding hands with another guy.* But somehow he couldn't feel disgusted at the thought.

"What's happening to me?" The voice didn't seem to be his own.

"Nothing bad or wrong." Laurent's voice in his ear was soft, soothing. "Would you...will you let me hug you, Paul? Hold you, just for a little while?"

Paul closed his eyes for a moment and pictured it in his mind. Two men, naked, in each other's arms. It should have felt wrong—so why did the idea seem so incredibly right? "Yeah," he said at last. "Yeah, you can hug me."



Laurent slipped his arms around him and pulled him close. After a long, tense moment Paul relaxed against the other man. They slid slowly down to a lying position and he found that his head was pillowed on Laurent's shoulder and his arms were around the other man's waist. Laurent's skin was smooth and silky and his scent was sharp and clean and cool and somehow comforting. Closing his eyes again, Paul allowed the other man's breathing to lull him to sleep.

## Chapter Ten

Laurent held his wolf for a long, long time. Vampires didn't need much sleep and now that he had the blood of his *Coeur de Sang* coursing through his veins, he felt energized and healed. Besides, he didn't want to lose a single precious moment of this time with Paul. He could close his eyes and sleep anytime but when would he have so sweet a dream as this? Holding his lover in his arms...

*Don't be foolish, Laurent cautioned himself. Just because he is willing to let you suck him doesn't mean he suddenly wants a lifetime commitment.* It was true and he knew it. In his past experience straight men were often willing to receive oral pleasure as long as they were not expected to give anything in return. Still, it was a step in the right direction and in his heart Laurent did not believe that Paul was straight, no matter what the were might claim. The connection between them allowed him to know his wolf's true desires and Paul hungered for the feel of another male body against his own, that much was undeniably true.

Hours went past as the sun edged past its zenith and began to travel westward in the sky. Laurent felt its bright fire passing but he spent the time safe in bed, studying his wolf's features. Paul looked so peaceful in repose and his body fit perfectly against Laurent's—as though they were made to be together. Just the feel of the hard, muscular form against his own, not to mention the delicious, lingering taste of Paul's cum on his tongue, was enough to have Laurent hard and aching. But he made no move to take care of himself—pleasure, like sleep, could wait. For now all he wanted was to be close to Paul. Who knew when the were would allow such intimacy again? *He may be sorry when he wakes up, Laurent acknowledged to himself ruefully. He may even be angry again. I must be prepared for any eventuality.*

But when Paul finally opened his eyes they were filled with curiosity, not anger. "Where am I?" He frowned and shifted against Laurent, looking up in obvious confusion.

"In a hotel room in, as I believe you called it, 'some dumbfuck town in South Carolina'." Laurent gave him a small smile. "You brought me here when I was nearly dead to get me out of the sun. Do you remember?"

"Oh yeah. After I pounded those fucking rednecks." Paul sat up, rubbing his face.

Laurent missed the physical contact between them at once but at least the were didn't immediately move to the other side of the bed.

"You okay now?" Paul asked.

"More than okay." Laurent eyed him carefully. "Are you? Do you remember everything?"

Paul sighed. "So I guess you, uh, blowing me wasn't a dream, huh?"

Laurent shook his head. "Does that upset you?"

"I know it should." Paul ran a hand over his spiky blond hair. "I mean, it's the worst thing that can happen in the pack and my old man would probably have a fucking convulsion and die if he knew but..."

"But neither your pack nor your father are here," Laurent pointed out softly. "It is only us—you and me, Paul. Can we keep it that way, do you think?"

"I don't know." Paul frowned. "I knew something like this was going to happen if I let you drink from me again. Just having you close...it's too much fucking temptation."

"And yet you let me drink anyway." Laurent shifted a little closer so that their shoulders were rubbing together. "Thank you for saving my life."

"I couldn't let you *die*." Paul turned to Laurent and tentatively, tenderly, cupped his cheek. "I couldn't."

"Many would have," Laurent pointed out, nuzzling against his wolf's hand. Paul's palm was warm and calloused and comforting. "Your people hate mine with a passion."

"I know—weres hate vamps and vamps hate weres. But you're not just a vamp—I can't see you like that somehow." Paul sounded bewildered. "You're just you...just Laurent. And I couldn't let you go."

"I am glad," Laurent breathed. They were closer now and he couldn't take his eyes off Paul's full pink mouth. "Paul," he murmured. "May I kiss you?"

Indecision warred with desire on the were's chiseled features. "We shouldn't. Won't be able to stop with a fucking kiss and you know it."

"I swear I will not do anything you do not wish me to do. I am able to stop."

"That's the problem—what if I don't want you to stop?" Paul's eyes were flickering from deep blue to wolf gold. "What if I want to do more than kiss?"

"Do you wish me to suck you again? I will do so, gladly."

"Yeah, I know you would. But it hardly seems fair." Paul nodded between Laurent's legs where his slender shaft was hard and ready. "I'm not usually the kind of guy who takes without giving."

Laurent's breath caught in his chest. "What exactly are you proposing?"

"I don't know." Slowly Paul let his hand slide from Laurent's cheek to his chest. And then lower—his fingers trailed in a slow, tentative dance to rest on Laurent's thigh, right by his cock. "What's it like?" he asked, his voice so low Laurent could barely hear him.

"What is what like, *mon amour*?"

"Sucking another guy's cock. What does it feel like?" Paul looked up at him. "What does it taste like?"

"It is most pleasurable," Laurent said honestly. "The warmth of another male body against your own, the slide and push of a thick shaft between your lips. The feeling of power you get from giving so much pleasure."

Paul smiled. "You make it sound like you're the one on top when you're doing that...when you're sucking me."

Laurent arched an eyebrow at him. "In a way I am. I control your pleasure, I can choose to tease you and draw the experience out indefinitely or bring you quickly to climax. I am in control and you are only 'along for the ride' as you Americans put it."

"Never thought of it like that." Paul nodded and his fingers slid closer to Laurent's cock. "Can...uh, do you mind if I touch you?"

"You need never ask me that." Laurent leaned forward and nuzzled the werewolf's cheek with his own. "I always want your hands on me," he breathed in Paul's ear.

Paul shivered, visibly aroused by Laurent's words. "God, why do I want this? Why can't I just be normal?"

"This *is* normal—for us. Do you still wish to touch me?" Laurent held very still, not wanting to press the issue.

"Yeah." Paul moved his hand again, this time to grasp Laurent's cock loosely. He explored it slowly, stroking carefully from root to tip and back again, as though getting used to the feel of it in his hand.

Laurent bit back a moan. "*Mon Dieu!* Is it...as you expected?"

"I guess. I, uh..." Paul looked up at him. "I've never touched another guy like this before. Not sure if I'm doing it right."

"You're doing fine," Laurent assured him. "Simply touch me as you would yourself and you cannot fail to please me."

"Do you like this?" Paul stroked him again, with more certainty this time.

Laurent gasped and pumped upward into his hand. "You know that I do."

"Yeah." Paul was studying his face with half-lidded golden eyes. "I can tell." He stroked Laurent again. "Wanna kiss you while I do this."

Laurent didn't have to be asked twice. Leaning forward, he offered his mouth and sighed in pleasure as his wolf took the invitation eagerly. Paul's mouth was hot and his hand was insistent as he stroked Laurent's cock up and down in a rough, delicious rhythm that was rapidly becoming too much to bear. Laurent moaned helplessly and Paul swallowed the sounds eagerly, stroking harder until Laurent knew he couldn't take much more.

"Please!" He broke the kiss and leaned his forehead against Paul's panting. "Paul, I cannot bear it."

Paul stopped stroking much to Laurent's disappointment and frustration. But he didn't take his hand off Laurent's cock. "Feel like you're going to come, huh?" His eyes blazed gold in the dark room.

Laurent nodded. "I cannot help myself."

"I don't want you to come...not yet." Paul looked into his eyes and gave his shaft a long, slow up-and-down stroke. "Wanna taste you first."

Laurent's breath caught in his throat. "Are you certain about that, *mon amour*? Please don't think you have to—"

"I know I don't have to—I *want* to. Maybe I've always wanted to—I don't know." Paul kissed him again—a hard, rough, demanding press of lips to lips that was over too soon. "I don't want to think about it anymore. Just want to do it."

"As you wish." Laurent got a sudden glimpse inside his wolf's mind. *He wants this but he has to be the dominant one.* Slowly he slid down until he was lying spread-eagle on the bed. Arching his neck, he offered himself from the vulnerable column of his throat to his flat belly and erect cock. "Take me however you wish, *mon amour*."

"*Dios!*" Paul's voice was a low growl as he lowered himself onto Laurent and kissed him again. For a moment their cocks rubbed together, creating a delicious friction Laurent thought would be too much for him to bear. But then Paul slid lower and began kissing his throat. "I bit you here," he murmured, nuzzling just under the shelf of Laurent's jaw. "Why don't you still have a mark?"

"We heal very...very rapidly." Laurent could hardly get the words out.

"So do we. But your fang marks stayed on me."

"It is the bond. We mark...mark our mates to show ownership. Though I did not mean to...to mark you so permanently," Laurent gasped as Paul kissed his throat.

"Maybe I should return the favor." Paul nipped him playfully and then just a little harder, hard enough to draw blood.

Laurent groaned. "*Mon amour*, please. You do not know what that does to me!"

"So you like getting bitten as much as you like biting?" Paul lapped gently at the small wound, making Laurent moan with need.

"Blood play is often mixed with love play," he admitted. "To give yourself up to your lover, to allow him anything he wishes, is considered the most risky and the most pleasurable thing you can do."

"Would you give yourself to me like that?" Paul looked up at him.

"I would—if you wish it. I would submit to anything you wished. I would open myself for you." Laurent held the were's gaze with his own, daring Paul to understand him.

For a moment Paul's eyes blazed with lust but then he shook his head. "No, man. Sucking is one thing but that...that's going too far. I'm not gay. I mean, just because I want to try this it doesn't make me a fag. I just want to experiment a little, that's all."

Laurent's heart sank but he supposed he could expect nothing less. *Small steps*, he told himself. "Very well," he murmured, stroking Paul's shoulder. "I am willing to help you experiment if you wish. And we do not have to do anything you don't want to."

"Right now what I want is to taste you. Lie back."

The command was a pleasure to obey. Laurent let his head sink back against the pillows though he kept his eyes trained on his wolf. "I am yours, Paul. Take me."

"God, when you talk like that it drives me fucking crazy." Paul was all over him again, his mouth making a rough, hot trail of kisses down Laurent's neck and over his chest. He stopped to suck Laurent's nipples, teasing the small pink peaks until Laurent moaned and writhed under him. He had been with more experienced lovers but never with one so eager. It seemed that Paul wanted to devour him from the skin outward and he was more than willing to be devoured.

After what seemed like an eternity the were moved lower, making a hot, ticklish trail with his tongue over Laurent's flat belly and down to his straining cock. Laurent bit his lip hard enough to draw blood when Paul took him in hand again. It took everything he had to hold still, to not beg or thrust for the lush mouth that had been driving him insane for what felt like forever now. But he knew that Paul had to do things at his own pace — there could be no rushing him.

Paul studied his shaft for a long time, his eyes half-lidded with lust. "*Dios*," he murmured, leaning forward to rub the head of Laurent's cock against his cheek. "So fucking hot. Don't know why I want to do this so bad."

"Sucking cock is about need as much as desire." Laurent stroked the wolf's short blond hair. "If you are a lover of other men, you cannot help but want it." He expected Paul to protest that he wasn't gay again but the other man only shrugged.

"I don't know about sucking. Tasting seems all right, though." He rubbed Laurent's cock against his cheek again. "Your skin is so soft. And you smell so fucking good."

"I am glad you enjoy my body as I enjoy yours." Laurent continued to stroke his hair gently. He could feel the lust coming from Paul but he didn't need the connection between them to see how very much the other man desired this.

"Yeah, I want it," Paul admitted and Laurent realized he'd caught the stray thought. The were looked up at him. "How...how should I start?"

"With a kiss?" Laurent suggested. "If you wish, *mon amour*."

"Like this?" Keeping his gaze on Laurent's face, Paul leaned forward and placed a hot, open-mouthed kiss on the plum-shaped head of his cock.

"*Mon Dieu!* Yes!" Laurent gasped. "That's perfect, Paul. You see, you can taste without sucking if you wish."

"Yeah." Paul leaned forward again and lapped tentatively at the pearl of precum that was beading at the slit of Laurent's cock. He looked up. "Tastes good. Salty and kinda bitter. But good."

"I am glad you enjoy it," Laurent murmured.

"Wanna taste you more. Deeper." Paul's eyes were blazing. Through their connection, Laurent realized what he wanted.

"Another kiss, perhaps? More than just the head this time?"

Paul seemed to consider. "Kissing isn't sucking," he pointed out at last.

"No," Laurent said, giving the reassurance he knew his wolf so desperately needed. "It isn't."

"I mean, I could do this..." Paul leaned forward and took the head of Laurent's cock into his mouth and then another inch of the shaft, kissing deeply and lapping tentatively with his tongue before slowly allowing it to slide from between his lips. "I could do that and it's still just a kiss," he said, his voice hoarse with desire.

"Yes." Laurent nodded, trying to control his own breathing. God, but this hot little game they were playing was making him insane with need! "You can kiss me as much or as little as you desire," he said softly, trying hard to keep his voice gentle and encouraging. "It is completely up to you."

"What if I want to kiss all of it—all of you?" Paul looked up at him. "What if I want to take all of your cock in my mouth at once?"

"Still just a kiss," Paul assured him.

"As long as I don't suck." Paul nodded. "I could take it all—like this." He leaned forward and ovaled his lips around Laurent's cock, taking it deep into his mouth until Laurent felt himself bumping against the back of the were's throat. It was all he could do not to moan or thrust but he sensed that Paul wasn't ready for such actions yet. Instead he held his breath, watching as his wolf raised and lowered his head slowly, getting used to the feel of a cock shaft sliding between his lips. It was perhaps the most erotic sight Laurent had ever seen and he felt like he might explode if the game they were playing went on much longer. But he gritted his teeth and forced himself to hold still while the other man explored him.

"Paul..." he whispered. "So good, your mouth on me. So right."

Paul lifted his head, letting Laurent's hard cock slide from between his lips slowly. "You like it when I kiss you like that?"

"More than you can know." Laurent cupped his cheek. "You're so beautiful when you take my cock in your mouth. But we need to stop soon—I am very close to coming."

Paul shook his head. "Never thought I'd want to let another guy come in my mouth."

Laurent's entire body tensed. "Do you?"

"Yeah." Paul looked down for a moment. "Yeah, I guess I do. *Dios*, what's wrong with me?"

Laurent raised himself on one elbow and then lifted Paul's chin so that they were looking at each other again. "There is nothing wrong with you, Paul. You are perfect just as you are. There is no shame in desiring the flavor of another man's cum on your tongue."

Paul's eyes were shadowed. "I know plenty of people who would disagree with you."

"Yes, but none of them are here with us now. It is only us here in the bedroom together," Laurent reminded him. "But I will not push you. If you wish, we can stop right here. I am perfectly able to take care of myself." He reached for his cock but Paul knocked his hand away.

"No." His voice was a low, possessive growl. "Wanna taste you, Laurent. Want to take you all the way, the same way you took me."

"As you wish." Laurent lowered himself to the pillows again. "Do whatever you like with me, Paul. Kiss me...taste me...or suck me until I come in your mouth, the choice is yours." He deliberately made his words inflammatory, wanting to see how the wolf would react.

Paul didn't disappoint him. Lowering his head, he took Laurent deep in his mouth again and this time Laurent could feel the warm pull of suction as his wolf's tongue swirled around his shaft. *Sucking me – he's actually sucking me this time.*

"Yeah, I'm sucking you," Paul growled, looking up. "I'm sucking your cock, Laurent. And I'm going to suck you until you shoot your cum in my mouth. Is that what you want to hear?"

Laurent stroked his shoulder. "*Mon amour*, I wish only to hear what you need to tell me."

"Think I'm better at showing than telling." Paul lowered his head again and took him deep – so deep that Laurent groaned.

"*Mon Dieu*, Paul, your mouth – so good. So hot!"

Paul didn't answer this time – at least not with words. Instead he sucked harder, swirling his tongue around the base of Laurent's shaft, lapping eagerly as Laurent moaned.

It didn't take long after that. Laurent tried to keep himself from thrusting but it was a lost cause once Paul really got going. The fierce hunger, the need to be doing this with another man came through their connection so strongly that Laurent wondered how the wolf didn't explode with the pent-up passion. He wished he was in the right position to suck Paul as well, to give back some of the pleasure Paul was giving him. But Paul was holding him down, his heavy, muscular body blanketing Laurent's thighs to forbid movement. It was as though Paul has to reassure himself that he was in charge here – as though he had to change the submissive act of sucking another man's cock into one of dominance.

Laurent lay back and gave himself up to the pleasure because he sensed it was what his wolf wanted – what he needed. When he felt his pleasure cresting he tightened his grip on Paul's shoulders and groaned, "*Coming, mon amour.*" And then the cum was bursting out of him, shooting in short, hard spurts against the back of Paul's throat.

Paul swallowed it all eagerly and sucked Laurent even harder, as though trying to get more.

"Paul! Please..." Laurent could barely stand the intense pressure against his overly sensitized flesh. "No more," he begged. "Not now."



Paul let Laurent's shaft slide from between his lips. "When then?"

Laurent looked at him in astonishment. He kept waiting for Paul to be angry again, to start denying that he was gay and insisting nothing that happened was his fault. But maybe, as he had said, he was simply tired of pretending. Maybe as long as he was away from his home and his pack he would allow himself to explore his true nature. Laurent hoped fervently that it was true.

"You wish to do it again?" he asked uncertainly.

"Yeah." Paul nodded. "I don't know why but sucking you...it really turned me on, man. I'm horny like a fucking bear." The hard shaft between his legs showed that he wasn't lying or exaggerating a bit.

Laurent smiled. "Then let me return the favor. Lie back, *mon amour*, and let me pleasure you as you have pleased me."

"Suck me, you mean." Paul's eyes were golden again in the darkness as he arranged himself on the pillows and guided Laurent's head down toward his shaft. "Suck my cock, Laurent. Suck it deep and let me fuck your mouth until I come."

## Chapter Eleven

Paul lost count of how many times they sucked each other off but it was full dark by the time they left the motel room and headed back to the car. They rode in silence for a while with Laurent driving and Paul munching on several cheeseburgers he'd gotten the vampire to go through the drive-thru for. He was as hungry as fuck—and thirsty too. Not too surprising considering what they had been up to for most of the day.

He guiltily started to push the thought to the back of his mind and then stopped and made himself examine it instead. Was what he had done with Laurent really so bad? They hadn't hurt anyone—nobody was dead. Even the rednecks Paul had roughed up were fine—not that they had anything to do with it. Except...maybe they did.

Paul couldn't help remembering the flash of pure, possessive rage he'd felt when he saw their hands on Laurent. He'd been so certain he didn't want to touch the other man and yet when he saw someone else touching him, Paul had nearly lost it. And then after, with Laurent wilting in his arms, his beautiful green eyes ringed in dark shadows, his cheeks hollow and his breathing shallow... A protective instinct he'd never felt before had kicked in. *Just wanted to hold him. Wanted to protect him from those cabrons and the rest of the whole fucking world.*

Taking another bite of cheeseburger, Paul shook his head. There was something about Laurent—he brought out a tenderness in Paul that no one else ever had. It was like the night he'd healed Paul and then cried when he left—the urge to hold and comfort had been so strong Paul nearly hadn't been able to help himself. *Just like I couldn't help myself today. Is that why I did it? Why I enjoyed it?*

"You know that isn't the reason, my wolf. Not the only reason, anyway," Laurent murmured from his side of the car.

Paul sighed but he wasn't really mad. "I'm trying to work some shit out here, *'mano*. It's fucking rude of you to eavesdrop inside my head. And why do you keep calling me *your* wolf anyway? Don't deny it." He pointed the half-eaten cheeseburger at Laurent. "I've been hearing it off and on all afternoon."

Laurent gave him a sidelong glance. "Forgive me. I didn't mean to sound so possessive."

"I don't know." Paul gave him a small, lopsided smile. "Maybe...maybe I kinda like it. But if I'm your wolf then I guess you have to be my vampire."

Laurent put a hand on his thigh and gave him an intense look. "With all my heart, *mon amour*."

The unreserved devotion in his voice caught Paul a little off guard. "Uh, don't go all girly on me now, man. It's not like we're a couple or anything. I mean, we're still on our way to try to get this thing taken care of."

Laurent moved his hand and stared straight ahead at the road. "Of course."

"C'mon, Laurent, don't be like that. *Muerta*." Paul sighed and shifted in his seat. "I mean, all joking aside, there's no way we can keep this up after we get back to Miami. This is kind of like...a vacation. You know, you do new things, try new things. But when you get back home everything goes back to normal."

"Is that what you want?" Laurent's voice was quiet in the darkness of the car. "What you *really* want, Paul? For us to be normal and pretend we never met, let alone loved each other?"

"I don't know, okay? *Madre de Dios*." Paul wrapped the rest of the uneaten cheeseburger and shoved it back in the crackling white paper sack. "Look, we're having a good time. Do we have to spoil it by talking about it?"

"I suppose not." Laurent sighed and sat up a little straighter in his seat. "How much longer until we reach Asheville?"

Paul had the feeling that the vampire was making an effort to let things go and he was grateful for it. It was hard enough for him to face what they had done together, let alone the long-term implications of those actions. "Not too far now. I hope your nurse is at home."

"I hope so too." Laurent nodded at the paper bag still half full of food. "Please don't let me interrupt your dinner. You must be very hungry still."

"Not so much." Paul shook his head. "But what about you? Do you need blood again any time soon?"

Laurent looked at him from the corner of his eye. "And if I do should I tell you? Are you willing to feed me again?"

Paul was a little hurt. "Of course I am. Look, *hermano*, we're in this together. If you need something, you let me know."

"What if I need you inside me, making love to me? *Fucking* me?" Laurent shifted and whipped the Spyder around a slow-moving semi. "What about that, Paul?"

Paul closed his eyes, feeling his cock go instantly hard at the soft words. "*Dios*, Laurent, don't talk like that. You know how I feel...that's too much. Too far."

"Sometimes too far is not far enough," Laurent murmured. "But I will drop the subject if you wish."

"Please." Paul took a sip of his Coke. "Look, there's a sign—Asheville the next two exits."

"Excellent." But Laurent didn't sound pleased and through the imperfect connection they shared Paul could feel the other man's desire, as strongly as he felt his own.

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Nana, as Laurent called her, lived on one of the winding backstreets of Asheville's historic district. The house was a beautiful old antebellum mansion set well back from the main road with graceful white pillars and dark green shutters. It was also completely dark inside with not a single light showing through its many windows.

"Doesn't look like anybody's home," Paul murmured as Laurent pulled the Spyder into the graveled driveway and killed the engine.

"Let us not give up hope just yet. Nana was always a private person—perhaps she prefers not to announce her presence to the world. Come." Laurent got out of the tiny sports car gracefully, making it look like a dance move.

Paul followed reluctantly. "Look, *'mano*, maybe you better go up without me. She might not like it if she looks out the peephole and sees a were on her front porch."

"Nonsense." Laurent took him firmly by the hand, entwining their fingers as though they had been holding hands for years. "Nana will love you. She always valued difference and individuality."

"If you say so." With a sigh, Paul allowed himself to be pulled up onto the front porch and waited patiently as Laurent rapped on the broad front door. It was painted the same dark green as the shutters but the paint was peeling away in strips, adding to the illusion that nobody lived there. Or maybe it wasn't an illusion. Maybe Laurent's old nurse was dead or just moved away. Maybe—

"Laurent? Is that you? Is it really you after all these years, *mein liebbling*?" The door opened to reveal possibly the smallest person Paul had ever seen. She couldn't have been more than four-foot-five at the most and she had a crazy cap of curly grayish-brown hair that was twisted into a bun at the nape of her skinny neck. She might have been any age from forty-five to sixty when she was turned—Paul couldn't tell—but her bright blue eyes didn't look a day over sixteen.

"Nana!" Laurent seemed positively delighted. He grabbed the tiny woman up in his arms and swung her around, making her giggle like a girl.

"Stop it now! Stop it, *mein liebbling*. You're making me dizzy—I'm an old woman." She had a strong Germanic accent and pronounced it "vooman".

"You'll never be old to me." Laurent sat her down gently. "I am so very glad to see you again."

"And I, you, dearest boy. But why are you here after all these years? And who is your friend?" She eyed Paul with a sharp curiosity that made him feel somehow undressed.

"I thought you dead. My father only told me a few days ago that he turned you. If I had known earlier, please believe that I would have come much sooner, dearest Nana." Laurent took her hand and kissed it fondly.

"Of course I believe you." She smiled at him. "But you still haven't introduced your friend."

"Forgive me. Nana, this is Paul, my..." Laurent hesitated, clearly uncertain of what to say. "Well, I believe he is my *Coeur de Sang*."

"Laurent!" Nana's bright blue eyes opened wide in surprise and interest. "But this is wonderful, *mein liebbling*! You have found your true love—congratulations are in order."

"Uh..." Paul shifted uneasily. "You might want to hold off on that a little bit."

"Paul is uncertain as to if we really belong together," Laurent explained. "Although I am doing my best to convince him."

"Well, of course you are." Nana gave Paul another sharp look. "Well come in, come in, my darlings. We have much to discuss and we can't do it standing out in the open for God and everyone to see." Turning, she led the way into her house.

Inside it was beautiful. Polished teak floors shone in the glow of antique hurricane lamps and a broad entryway led up to a vast, sweeping staircase that reminded Paul of something out of *Gone with the Wind*. *Fucking girly movie*. Lucia had talked him into watching it with her although he'd made her promise not to tell anyone. He hadn't cared for it much but that was her price for sitting through *The Fast and the Furious* with him. Their weekly movie exchange night was one thing Paul kind of missed when he was away from his stepmother. He wondered what she would think of him now, going on a road trip with a vamp to find another vamp. Somehow, he didn't think it would bother her as much as it would his dad—but that could be said of almost anything.

"It's so bright inside," Laurent remarked, breaking his train of thought. "From the outside the entire house looks dark and deserted."

"I have it warded by one of the local witches." Nana led them deeper into the house, bypassing several large, finely furnished rooms, and finally into a small sitting room. "It costs me a pretty penny but it's worth it not to be bothered by the humans."

"Ah yes, the bothersome humans." Laurent appeared to be trying to smother a smile. "It seems to me you were one of them not so very long ago."

"Indeed I was, dear boy. But I was more than happy to shuffle off my mortal coil when your father offered. I only wish he would have let me say goodbye to you." She patted Laurent's cheek and settled herself in a high, wingback chair that appeared to be made for someone much larger. "Why don't you sit down, the both of you, and tell me why you're really here. It's not simply to see your old nurse—of that I am certain." She gestured to a red brocade sofa with feet carved like a lion's paws across from her. Laurent sat down at once and Paul settled beside him uncomfortably.

"You are correct in thinking that this is more than a social call, Nana, although I am happier to see you than I can say," Laurent said once they were settled. "You see, Paul and I met by chance and felt an immediate connection—wouldn't you say?" He turned to Paul.

"I guess so." It felt funny to admit having a connection to another guy but it was true. "It, uh..." Paul cleared his throat. "It felt like someone had shoved a lightning rod

down my spine. Just instant..." He waved his hand uncertainly, searching for the right word.

"Attraction, need, desire," Laurent supplied eagerly. "I knew at once he was the one I had been searching for—the one you told me I would find all those years ago, Nana."

"Indeed, and I am more than happy for you, Laurent." She cocked her head to one side, studying them both in a strangely birdlike gesture. "But what do your dear mother and father think of this? They were never very lenient in matters of the heart as I recall. I begged with tears in my eyes to be allowed to say goodbye to you and your father denied the request. I cannot imagine he would be very happy about you finding love outside your people."

"You are right," Laurent acknowledged quietly. "He...Nana, he has decided that I must take a wife in two weeks' time."

"What?" Paul turned to stare at him. "What the hell are you talking about? You're going to be married in two weeks to some girl? Why didn't you tell me this earlier?"

Laurent looked down at his hands. "I didn't know if you would care, *mon amour*. And...it seemed yet another obstacle to us being together. I did not want to discourage you from forming an attachment to me."

Paul snorted. "*Dios*, what's one more obstacle? It's already bad enough that you're a vamp and I'm a were. Plus the fact that you're gay and I'm, uh..." He coughed, feeling his cheeks go hot.

"You are not a lover of men?" Nana frowned at him.

"Not, uh...entirely." Paul shifted uncomfortably. "Look, could we just move on? We were talking about Laurent getting married." He tried to say the words casually but the idea of the man sitting beside him actually marrying someone else made him feel sick inside. It was a ridiculous reaction and he knew it—after all, he and Laurent would have to break off their relationship after they went back to Miami anyway so what should it matter if Laurent got married to someone else? Still, he didn't like the idea. Not one fucking bit.

"My father feels that since I have come of age, it is time he passed the title of viscount on to me," Laurent explained. "With the title, of course, comes many responsibilities, one of which is to take a wife and father an heir. I tried to explain to him that I had found my *Coeur de Sang* but he dismissed the idea as ridiculous and ordered me not to speak of it again."

"And did you tell him that your Heart's Blood was a wolf?" Nana raised one skinny gray eyebrow.

Laurent looked away. "I did not dare. You know how he would react, Nana."

"Probably the same way my old man would act if he found out I was with a vamp—not to mention another guy," Paul said morosely.

"My father would have no problem with your sex—he is a lover of men himself. But I fear that even if you were not a wolf he still would not think you a suitable companion for me."

"What? Why not?" Paul frowned.

"My dear boy," Nana leaned forward and patted Paul's knee. "Laurent is royalty. He is born to one of the oldest bloodlines of his people. For him to join his life to yours in a permanent and public way would be like the Queen of England to declare she wished to marry the man who disposes of her rubbish."

"So I'm not good enough for you? Is that it?" The idea hurt Paul's pride, though he didn't want to admit it.

"No, of course not." Laurent's voice was fierce and he took Paul's hand and squeezed it tightly. "You are my *Coeur de Sang*, the love of my life, Paul. I defy anyone to say you are not right for me."

"Well it doesn't sound like you dare defy your father," Paul pointed out, pulling his hand away.

Laurent's eyes narrowed. "And would you dare as much for me? Would you tell your father—your packleader and the other wolves in your pack—of our love?"

"I don't know, okay?" Paul ran both hands through his hair. "This whole situation—it's so fucking crazy. Uh, sorry," he added with a nod toward Nana. "It's just...ever since I met Laurent everything's been all messed up. My pack is turning against me, my old man is pissed, and I can't even change forms. A were who can't shift is no fucking good to anyone. Sorry." He nodded at Nana again.

"Do not worry about your language, young man, I have heard much worse in my day." Nana fixed them both a piercing gaze. "But it sounds to me like you have much deeper problems than either of you wants to admit. Why should you be unable to call your inner wolf, Paul?"

"Because the bond between us is incomplete," Laurent answered for him. "It was formed by accident when I was exchanging blood with Paul to save his life. It is not so bad when we are together but when we are apart—"

"It's fucking distracting," Paul finished. "And like I said, it gets between me and the moon and won't let me change. So we need a way to dissolve it."

Nana arched an eyebrow again. "This is what you wish? To break the bond?"

"Break it, cut it—whatever." Paul cast a look at Laurent who was sitting still and staring down at his hands. The look on the other man's face made him feel like the worst kind of asshole. "I mean, come on, Laurent," he said. "What are we supposed to do? Tell both our families to fuck off and move in together?"

"I would do that with you if you wished." Laurent's melodious voice was quiet. "I would take that risk to be with you."

"And it would be a risk indeed, *mein lieblich*," Nana murmured. "For you know how your father would react. Such a love could cost you your title—maybe even your life."

"You think I don't know that?" Laurent looked up at her and Paul could see the anguish in his eyes. "But didn't you always tell me that those who found their *Coeur de Sang* had to go through many trials and tribulations? Why should I expect to be any different just because of my bloodlines?"

Nana nodded thoughtfully. "It is wise of you to realize this, Laurent. Together, the two of you might overcome the obstacles that stand in your path. However, I do not believe that Paul wishes to face the conflict and danger such a union will bring."

Paul shrugged helplessly. "Don't get me wrong, I like Laurent. I'm, uh...more attracted to him than I ever have been to anyone else in my whole fucking life. And seeing that he's a guy, that's saying something. But I just..." He shook his head. "I just don't see how this is going to work. We're too different. I mean, a fish might love a bird but where are they gonna build a house together?"

"Anywhere they wanted to." Laurent gave him an intense look. "Away from the prying eyes of others we could be happy together, Paul, I *know* we could."

Paul looked back at him. "And you're willing to give up your whole life—all your cash, your pretty clothes, those sweet toys like the Spyder out there—just to be with me?"

Laurent didn't hesitate. "In a heartbeat."

"*Dios*." Paul stood up and started pacing. "Look, *'mano*, you're kind of freaking me out here. I thought we agreed that we were coming up here to get rid of this thing."

"You agreed to that—I did not." Laurent crossed his arms over his chest.

"It does not matter what you agree on," Nana broke in. "Because you cannot break the bond."

"What?" Paul whipped around to face her. "What did you say?"

Laurent felt like his heart would burst when he saw the panic in his wolf's eyes. *He truly does not wish to be tied to me. The very idea makes him feel hunted...trapped.*

Nana was unmoved by Paul's outburst. "You heard me, boys. I said that you cannot break the bond between you."

"Why not?" Laurent asked quietly. "And please do not tell me it is because Paul is my *Coeur de Sang*. If he does not wish to be with me, I will not keep him against his will. I love him too much to see him miserable."

"It has nothing to do with the way he feels, *mein lieblich*. It is simply the fact that you cannot break an incomplete bond. It is too tenuous to grasp—the connection is too unstable to sever."

"What the hell are we supposed to do then?" Paul was still pacing and looking extremely agitated. "I mean, what the *fuck*?"



"You must complete the bond. Only a completed blood bond may be severed...or nurtured, whichever you choose." Nana frowned at them both. "But if you choose to complete the bond and keep it, you must be wary. Though it will bring you closer and allow you, Paul, to call your inner wolf again, it will also make both of you terribly vulnerable."

Laurent bit his lower lip—as if Paul needed another reason not to keep their bond intact. But he had to know the details. "How, Nana? Is the bond of a *Coeur de Sang* different from a regular blood bond?"

"It is." She nodded gravely. "You will have the benefits of a regular bond—the ability to speak using only your minds, the ability to feel each other's emotions—but it will run deeper than that. If you picture it like a cord tying you together it would be like a thick rope or a steel cable as opposed to a thin string, which is the usual connection. That is why the blood bond of a *Coeur de Sang* never dies on its own—it feeds off both of you like a living thing. It is as though you were planting a beautiful tree together that has to be watered with your blood."

"Watered with our *blood*?" Paul stopped pacing and stared at her. "Fucking great. What the hell else happens? How does it make us vulnerable?" he demanded.

"You can be hurt through it," Nana said quietly. "If you are hurt, Laurent will feel your pain. And vice versa, of course. But the greatest danger is that if one of you dies, the other will too. The link between you will take you down into the grave with your beloved."

"What? It can fucking *kill* you?" Paul eyes widened. "I don't believe this!"

"The dangers are many but the beauty of a completed bond is indescribable," Laurent said desperately. "Think of always being perfectly in sync with the one you love. Of never being alone. Of—"

Paul held out a hand to stop him. "Look, *'mano*, I'm sorry but this just isn't for me and I don't think it sounds too fucking safe for you either. I think...I think we need to do what we have to do to get rid of this thing once and for all and try to forget it ever happened."

"Do you really think I could forget you?" Laurent asked him in a low voice. "Do you think there will ever be a night when I look up at the moon and don't remember your voice in my ear, your hands and mouth on my body, *mon amour*?"

"Hey, take it fucking easy, okay?" Paul threw an uncomfortable glance at Nana who was still sitting quietly, completely unperturbed.

"You don't have to pretend that you and Laurent aren't lovers, my dear," she said to Paul. "Otherwise, you could not have even a partial bond."

Paul's face went red. "It's not that way. Uh, not completely, anyway. I mean—"

"Now is not the time to discuss these things." Laurent rose and reached for the other man's hand. After a long moment of hesitation, Paul allowed him to take it but he didn't look happy about it at all. Laurent stifled a sigh. It seemed that Nana's information and the blunt way she had delivered it had set his relationship with Paul

back several crucial steps. He looked at his old nurse. "Can we stay here for the day, Nana? We can be on our way by tomorrow night."

"Nonsense." Nana stood up too and put her hand on Laurent's arm. "You'll stay as long as you wish, *mein liebbling*. Did you not say that you have two weeks before your father thinks to marry you off?"

Laurent nodded. "I did."

"Well then, it's settled." She clasped her hands together and smiled at him. "You can stay with me in my basement. I've just had it renovated into a lovely guest quarters and you two can be my first guests. That way you can take your time deciding what to do."

"But say we decide to complete the bond. Once we complete it, how do we break it?" Paul demanded. "How do we get out of it?"

"Is that really all that you care about?" Nana fixed him with a look so fierce that Paul shifted uneasily and looked down at his feet. "Do you know, young man, that once a blood bond is broken it cannot be restored? Would you throw away Laurent's one chance at happiness as well as your own so easily?"

"Look, I know Laurent means a lot to you and I'm sorry he thinks I'm his one and only and I don't feel the same way. I just...I need to know." He looked up. "I need to know there's a way out. I need to know we're not stuck permanently."

"You will not be stuck unless you wish to be," Nana said quietly. "Once you have completed the bond you will feel it here." She tapped Paul's sternum lightly with one finger. "It will be rooted in your heart and connected to Laurent. Should you truly wish to break the bond, you have only to concentrate and remove the bond—like pulling a plug with your mind instead of your fingers. But—" She shook her finger at him. "I warn you, it *will* hurt. You will be pulling out a piece of your soul and the pain will be considerable."

Paul lifted his chin. "I'm not worried about pain. I've had enough of it running with my pack—it's an old friend."

Nana frowned. "I do not speak of physical pain, Paul. But you will have to find out for yourself—or not, whichever you choose." She patted his arm. "Why do you not take these two weeks you have to think it over? Much can be learned in a short amount of time if you are both willing."

"I don't know..." Paul looked uncertain but Laurent squeezed his hand.

"Please, *mon amour*. I have been searching for you my entire life. Can you not spare me two weeks?"

Paul sighed. "Well...Angel *did* say he would give me about that to get my shit together. And I could use a break from the pack and my old man too. So, yeah, I guess so." He frowned. "But I'm not promising anything."

"Of course not," Laurent murmured. He leaned forward and nuzzled Paul's cheek with his own. "Thank you, *mon amour*."

“Uh, okay. You’re welcome.” Paul leaned away, obviously uncomfortable with the open display of affection.

Nana smiled. “I see that I will have to show you the guest room sooner rather than later. Laurent, you and I can catch up with each other at another time.”

“I look forward to it, Nana.” He smiled, feeling a burst of relief in his chest. It was true that all he wanted was to be alone with Paul. He needed to convince his wolf that they did, indeed, belong together—as well as convincing him to complete the bond. Because once Paul found out what they would have to do to complete it, Laurent was sure he would protest.

“Why would I protest?” Paul frowned at him, having apparently caught his last thought.

“Never fear, *mon amour*,” Laurent murmured, squeezing his hand. “You will find out soon enough.”

## Chapter Twelve

"We have to do *what* to complete the bond?" Paul asked incredulously.

"Do not pretend it is such a surprise, *mon amour*," Laurent said quietly. "Think of what was involved during our blood exchange. Bonding is a sexual thing, there is no way around it."

"Yeah, but...*fuck*." Paul ran both hands through his hair and paced back and forth in front of the queen-size bed in the center of Nana's guest suite.

"Exactly." Laurent sat quietly on the white antique lace bedspread, watching him. *He is upset, just as I suspected. But I feel the desire in him as well. He wants this – he just doesn't want to admit he wants it.*

"Stop that." Paul glared at him. "Stop thinking that you know what I want because you fucking *don't*. You hadn't even met me a week ago."

"That's true," Laurent acknowledged softly. "But I was searching for you. Wishing for you."

"Well I wasn't looking for anybody. I didn't ask for any of this *mierta*."

"But it happened anyway. Call it fate or simply coincidence but we are in each other's lives now. And we will remain so unless we complete the bond..."

"And then break it," Paul finished for him.

Laurent inclined his head. "If that is what you truly wish."

"What I wish is that none of this had happened in the first place." Paul's shoulders were tense, his frustration and confusion like a hand pushing Laurent away.

"Is it really so bad?" Laurent asked softly. "The idea of making love to me?"

"No, okay?" Paul sank down beside him on the bed and put his head in his hands. "Which is what makes it so fucking frightening. You're right – I *want* to. Want to...to do that with you. I shouldn't want that." His voice was muffled but Laurent could still hear the agony in his tone.

"Don't think of it that way if it distresses you, *mon amour*." Tentatively, in case Paul might shake him off, he put a hand on the other man's broad back. Paul shivered but allowed the touch. Laurent stroked along his wolf's spine soothingly, trying to think of a way to make this easier for him. "Think of it as a necessity," he murmured. "Something you *must* do whether you wish to or not. Until we complete the bond, neither of us will be fully in control of our lives."

"That's true," Paul acknowledged grudgingly. "And I won't be able to shift."

"That as well." Laurent nodded.

Paul looked up. "When you put it that way, I really have no choice but to do this."

"None," Laurent agreed. He was relieved to see some of the worry leaving Paul's face and feel the tense muscles in his back loosening up. *He just needed an excuse, he thought sadly. An excuse to be able to love me. To make love to me.*

"Yeah, I need an excuse, all right." Paul turned toward him and cupped his cheek. He pulled Laurent in for a kiss that was both rough and tender before letting him go and staring into his eyes. "You'd need an excuse too if you were raised like I was. There's nothing worse than being a faggot where I come from—*nothing*. To admit I want to do this..." He kissed Laurent again, more deeply this time. "With another guy...to admit I want to do even more..." He broke off, shaking his head but Laurent could hear the faint echo of his thoughts through their incomplete bond. *It's wrong. So fucking wrong.*

"It's *not* wrong, *mon amour*," he said and returned Paul's kiss gently. He could feel the other man's unwilling pleasure at the intimate gesture. His hunger for more. "But I understand that it is difficult for you to get over the teachings of a lifetime in a few days."

"Yeah, well..." Paul looked down at his hands, which were resting on Laurent's knees. "Like you said, I've got no choice in the matter. We've *got* to do it."

"We do indeed." Laurent nuzzled his cheek, inhaling the musky scent of warm fur and leather.

"All right then." Paul looked up at him, meeting his eyes. "But I want one thing clear—we're completing the bond so we can break it. As soon as we do this we have to *undo* it. Understand?"

Laurent felt like someone was squeezing his heart in a vise. "If...if that is what you truly wish, *mon amour*. But I wish you would give it at least a little time."

"Why, so I can reconsider? No." Paul's voice was harsh even though his eyes were filled with pain. "The longer we wait, the harder it's gonna be. The minute we finish we've got to rip this thing out by the roots. It's the only way."

Laurent bowed his head. "I will abide by any decision you make. Do you wish to wait until tomorrow night to complete the bond? The dawn is only an hour or so away."

"No." Paul's voice was thick and his hands tightened on Laurent's knees. "Now—let's do it now. No waiting."

"As you wish." Laurent leaned forward and brushed his lips against Paul's throat. "How do you want me?"

Paul groaned. "*Dios*, when you talk like that... You're not going to make this easy for me, are you?"

"Why should I?" Laurent kissed him again. He could feel the erratic beat of Paul's pulse, could almost taste the other man's desire in the air.

"Fine, if that's the way you want to play." Paul grabbed his shoulders and pushed him down onto the white lace bedspread. "But before we get started, explain it again."

"There must be penetration as I drink from you." Laurent writhed under the heavy, muscular body pinning him to the bed. They were equal in strength but it was a pleasure sometimes to allow oneself to be restrained. He wondered if Paul would ever learn that pleasure—he doubted it.

"Penetration. Right." Paul nodded. "So I have to fuck you while you bite me, right? Because if you say it has to go the other way, it's fucking *off*."

"So you will consent to enter me but deny me the same privilege?" Laurent raised an eyebrow at him.

Paul frowned. "Look, what we already did is bad enough. I mean, kissing and rubbing and sucking is one thing. Actually fucking another guy...that's the limit. As far as I go. There's no way I'm going to let another guy fuck *me*. It's too much. Too far."

"Even if the other man is me?" Though he was pinned to the bed, Laurent lifted his head and nipped suggestively at Paul's full lower lip. "Would you not open yourself for my cock, *mon amour*?"

"Never." Paul's eyes were hard. "So don't even think about it, Laurent."

Laurent sighed. "Well, fortunately for us, it is not necessary. We can complete the bond just as well the other way."

"That's good." Paul lowered his head and kissed him hard. "Then let's fucking get to it."

"Of course, if you are so eager to get it over with." Laurent rolled his hips up, pressing the hard ridge of his cock against Paul's groin. He could feel the other man's shaft, as eager and rigid as his own. As they ground together, Paul closed his eyes and let out a ragged groan.

"*Fuck*. You know that's not it. It's not just that I want to get it over with."

"I know." Laurent repeated the move, rubbing their cocks together again through the material of his trousers and the denim of Paul's jeans. "You want me, *mon amour*. Want me as I want you."

"*Dios*." Paul took his mouth in a ravenous kiss. At the same time he began pulling at Laurent's shirt. "I want you naked *now*."

"Then you should return the favor," Laurent murmured breathlessly. There was a moment of fumbling and then they were both naked, skin to skin. "Wait." Laurent sat up and Paul let him, though it was clear he would have been happier keeping him pinned down.

"What?" he growled, kneeling on the bed with his legs spread. His heavy cock rose from between his thighs in obvious anticipation.

"Nana's bedspread." Laurent nodded down at the antique lace. "We should be careful of it." He pulled it down and Paul made a noise of surprise.

"Black sheets? Black *satin* sheets?" He stroked the material as if to be sure they were real. "What's the deal with your Nana, anyway?"

Laurent shrugged. "Sometimes she knows things. Maybe she knew we were coming." He lay back on the bed and stretched languidly. "Well, lover? Don't you want me?"

"You fucking well know I do." Paul's voice was hoarse with desire, his eyes blazing wolf gold.

Laurent gave him a slow, seductive smile. "Then come and take me."

Paul looked at the vampire, spending a long moment just drinking in his beauty. Laurent's smooth, pale skin was luminous against the silky black sheets and his pale green eyes were half-lidded with desire. Paul had never expected to have another man look at him like that, to hear another man offer himself as Laurent was. But the warm come-hither look Laurent was giving him, as well as the slim, muscular body stretched out before him like a feast, made Paul's pulse race and his cock even harder, if that was possible.

Laurent was hard too, he saw. The slender, somehow elegant shaft of his cock rose stiffly between his legs, capped with a pale pink head. A single pearly drop of precum decorated its tiny slit. *I sucked that. Sucked him*, Paul thought. They had been in a darkened room and he hadn't gotten much of a chance to examine the other man's equipment. Though he had excellent night vision, everything was easier to see when lit by the soft golden glow of the lamps on either side of the bed.

"Yes, you sucked me," Laurent murmured, answering his thoughts. "Rather well, as I recall. Does that bother you, Paul?"

"No." The word was little more than a growl. Though he knew the memory of sucking Laurent's cock and swallowing his cum ought to be one of shame, Paul couldn't help the rising tide of excitement he felt instead. "Just makes me want to do it again," he admitted.

"Be my guest." Laurent spread his legs a little and arched his back like a cat. "Do whatever you wish to me—I am yours, body and soul."

As it had before, the vampire's willing submission shot a bolt of pure lust through Paul's entire body. *Dios! So fucking beautiful*. He leaned over Laurent and took the slim shaft in one hand. Then he looked up and met the other man's eyes. "Watch me," he said hoarsely. "Watch me suck you. Want you to see me take your cock down my throat."

"With pleasure," Laurent murmured, practically purring his surrender. Paul wondered briefly how he could do that. How he could give himself up to someone else—especially another man—so easily. He was pretty damn sure he wouldn't have been able to do it himself. If it had been a choice between submitting sexually to another man—even to Laurent—or dying, being six feet under would probably look like the more attractive option. But that didn't matter now. Nothing mattered but Laurent.

Paul took a long, slow taste of the other man's cock, licking from balls to tip and back again as he watched Laurent watching him. Fuck if he didn't love this. He loved the salty taste and the warm, clean, secret scent of the other man's skin. Loved the way

Laurent moaned softly in pleasure. Loved the feeling of power he got from giving that pleasure and watching the other man lift his hips, mutely begging for more.

Suddenly licking wasn't enough. Lowering his head, Paul took the long, slender shaft into his mouth until he felt the broad head bump against the back of his throat. He'd seen enough straight porn involving blowjobs to know what happened next. Taking a deep breath, he swallowed, taking Laurent even deeper, taking him all the way until his face was pressed against the other man's groin.

"*Mon Dieu!*" Laurent gasped and put a hand to Paul's head, fingers carding through his hair carefully. "Ah, *mon amour*. You do that so beautifully. Suck me—suck my cock."

*With pleasure*, Paul thought, hoping the vampire could hear him throwing his own words back at him. His own cock was hard as a rock as he thrust downward, rocking against Laurent as he deep throated the other man's shaft. *Never thought I'd be able to do this. Hell, never thought I'd want to do this.* But he did. It was an incredibly erotic sensation, taking Laurent so deep. He could feel the salty river of precum flowing down his throat and he swallowed it eagerly and sucked for more. *Gonna make you come*, he thought at the other man incoherently. *Come so hard you'll never forget it. And then I'm going to fuck you.*

He felt a surge of lust from Laurent's side of the connection and realized that the vampire must have heard his thoughts. The idea that he could still talk dirty even with his mouth filled with cock was fucking hot. He just wished it were possible all the time. *Once we complete the connection it will be*, whispered a voice in his brain. Paul wasn't sure where it came from—if it was his thought or Laurent's—but he didn't care. All he cared about was sucking the man beneath him to completion and swallowing all Laurent had to give.

"Paul, your mouth...so sweet...so hot..." Laurent was gasping now, clearly losing control, which was exactly what Paul wanted. Ruthlessly, he sucked harder, milking the slender shaft between his lips, working hard to make Laurent come.

*That's right. Come on. Fucking come for me—come now...* And then Laurent was gasping and moaning, his salty cum shooting down Paul's throat as he swallowed eagerly, sucking to get every last drop.

Laurent moaned and gripped his shoulders, his entire body rigid with pleasure. "Paul...Paul..."

Paul pulled back at last and looked up. "That's right, say my name." Slowly and deliberately, he licked his lips, savoring the last salty drops. "Say my name the way you're going to say it when I fuck you."

Laurent spread his legs wider and tilted his hips. "Take me, Paul. Do it now."

Paul's cock gave a surge of lust as he covered the vampire's long, lean body with his own. He captured Laurent's mouth in a hot, hungry kiss, feeding him the taste of his own cum until he moaned with need. Then he pulled back and looked into his eyes. "Need to be inside you. I fucking want you so bad."



"I want you too." Laurent twisted under him and reached for something on the nightstand nearest his head. "Here."

"What's this?" Paul looked at the unfamiliar bottle.

"Something to ease the way. You are rather large, *mon amour*," Laurent said mildly. "I would rather not take you dry."

"Oh, of course." Paul nodded. He snapped open the tube and squirted some of the thin, slippery lube onto his fingertips. "I, uh, I've never done this before. I mean, you know I've never been with another guy but—"

"I know what you mean," Laurent said gently. "It will be all right. Simply do what comes naturally and you cannot fail to bring me pleasure."

"All right." Reaching between their bodies, Paul found the other man's tight entrance. Hesitantly at first, he rubbed some of the cool gel against it and then, with some murmured encouragement from Laurent, he pressed two fingers slowly into his slick, hot channel.

Laurent arched his back, opening himself for the intimate touch with obvious pleasure. "*Perfect.*"

"Really?" Paul looked down at him anxiously. He wanted this so much, *needed* it so badly but he didn't want to rush things. Didn't want to hurt the man lying so beautifully and submissively open beneath him.

"Do not fear that you will hurt me," Laurent murmured, obviously catching his thoughts. "I have taken this road before, although perhaps not with one of your size." He nodded at Paul's thick cock.

Paul looked down at him in wonder. "You're not afraid? This doesn't bother you, even a little—giving it up for another guy?"

"I am giving myself to the man I love. Why should I fear?" Laurent gave him a sweet smile and then his eyes went dark. "What I fear is what must happen afterward. But I prefer not to think about it."

Paul knew he was talking about the moment they would have to sever the bond between them. But he also didn't want to think about it. "Let's just worry about *this* for now." He pressed deeper into Laurent's body, causing the other man to arch his back and gasp breathlessly. "*Dios* you're fucking beautiful when you do that."

"I am glad you find me so." Laurent's eyes were glazed with desire. "Come, Paul, take me. I need more than your fingers inside me. I need your cock."

The hot words sent Paul's lust into overdrive but still he hesitated. "The biting part—I guess it'll have to be on the neck?"

"There is no other way. But when we break the connection the marks should fade." Laurent sounded sad again and Paul didn't want that.

"All right then." He withdrew his fingers and positioned himself between the other man's thighs. "I'm going to fuck you now," he murmured, catching and holding Laurent's gaze with his own. "Gonna fill you up with my cock and ride you hard. Is

that what you want, babe?" The rough endearment sounded right as he said it and it seemed to go straight to Laurent's heart because his eyes softened.

"That is exactly what I want, *mon amour*. Do not wait any longer—take me."

The soft words of encouragement and lust drove Paul over the edge. Thrusting forward, he entered in one long, slow slide. Laurent's body opened to receive him and gripped him like a slick fist. "*Dios*, you're tight."

"And you're even larger than I thought." Laurent's eyes were closed tight and he wiggled a little, as though trying to get more comfortable.

"You okay?" Paul asked him anxiously. He was dying to thrust—every instinct he had was shouting that he needed to do this now, needed to take Laurent and make him his own. But he forced himself to hold back.

Laurent opened his eyes. "I am fine. I just had to...adjust to your girth."

"Maybe this is a bad idea." Paul started to withdraw but Laurent gripped his forearms.

"Don't. I want this—need it. We both do."

"Yeah, but if I'm hurting you..."

"You are much more likely to wound my heart than my body." Laurent's voice was quiet.

"I'm sorry." Paul frowned as he fought to restrain himself. "I'll try to take it easy on you."

"No." Laurent shifted in a deliberate way and Paul had to bite back a groan as the hot, velvety sheath of the other man's body caressed the entire length of his cock. "If this is to be our only time together, then let us make it count." Laurent's breathing was erratic, his eyes half-lidded with lust. "Fuck me, Paul. Really fuck me and don't hold anything back."

"You're serious?" Paul grabbed the other man's slim hips and looked into his eyes. "Because I really want to pound you right now. So don't say it if you don't mean it."

"I mean it." Laurent shifted his body again, his eyes blazing with need. "Do it, Paul. Do it now."

"You asked for it, babe." At last Paul gave in to the hunger inside him, the need to thrust, to take, to claim. The need to fuck and not just to fuck anyone—to fuck another man. To fuck *Laurent*. When he pulled almost all the way out of the tight, hot sheath and then thrust back in as hard as he could, it was like coming home. Like he'd been waiting for this moment all his life. *But it's not just that I've been waiting to do it with another guy. It's something about Laurent. Feels so right...so true.*

He couldn't explain the feelings, even to himself, but he was past caring. All his energy and desire were poured into fucking, into driving himself as deeply into Laurent's unresisting body as he could.

Laurent moaned and fucked back, thrusting in time to the rough rhythm Paul had established. His face was twisted with pleasure and pain, his lean form straining under

Paul's weight, taking everything Paul had to give and more. Paul thought he had never seen a more beautiful or erotic sight in his whole life.

"Paul...*mon amour*... Yes...yes, take me! *Fuck me.*"

"I'll fuck you. Fuck you so hard you'll never forget me." The words seemed torn from his lips and still he couldn't stop. He'd never fucked like this before, never thrown all caution to the wind and just allowed himself to pound the body under his. Then again, he'd never fucked another man, which probably had something to do with it. Women felt breakable, as though they might shatter if he gave in to his baser instincts. But Laurent...well, Paul knew exactly how strong the vampire was and exactly how much he could take—everything Paul had to give. He was stretched tight around Paul's cock, his head thrown back and his fingers digging into Paul's shoulders as he begged for more, harder, deeper. Paul was more than happy to oblige him.

Looking down, he saw that Laurent was hard again, his slender cock throbbing for release between them. Without missing a stroke, Paul fisted it and began to pump. *That's right, babe. Wanna make you feel good. Make you come again when I do.* And from the intense pleasure building between his legs, that wouldn't be long.

Laurent seemed to be right on the edge as well because he looked up and nodded at Paul. "Now, *mon amour*. Now when we are both on the edge. I must drink from you while you come inside me."

And though Paul never wanted to let another man penetrate him, he leaned down eagerly and offered the side of his throat to the vampire. *This is different. Having his fangs in me isn't the same as his cock—not at all.* The fleeting thought and the uncertainty that accompanied it was pushed aside when he felt the soft brush of lips against his skin. "Bite me, Laurent. Fucking *do it*," he rasped, aware that he was right on the edge.

Laurent didn't have to be asked twice. Baring his fangs, he sank them deep into Paul's throat and three things happened at once.

First Paul felt the sharp prick of fangs and then the sweet rush of pleasure that always accompanied letting Laurent drink from him. Second, he felt the familiar tightness in his balls and knew he was about to come harder than he ever had in his entire life. Third, he felt the other man's slender shaft pulsing in his hand and then a drenching wave of pleasure washed over him as he and Laurent came together.

And then a fourth thing happened.

Out of the shining moment of lust and love and desire and need, Paul felt something take root and grow inside him. It was as though someone had planted a tree—a tree with golden branches and iron roots—deep in the most inside corner of his heart. And the strangest thing was, he could feel the same kind of tree taking root inside Laurent at the exact same time. Had he thought it was weird to feel someone else's emotions? It was *twice* as strange to feel someone else's body.

Suddenly he was flooded with sensations that had to be Laurent's. He could feel a warm, rough hand gripping his cock and even stranger, a thick something invading him down below. *That's my cock inside him*, he realized in wonder. *I'm feeling what it's like*

*to be fucked.* The thought sent a surge that was equal parts lust and discomfort through him, filling him with confusion. *Weird...I don't really like it...do I?*

*Relax.* The voice in his brain was very definitely *not* his own and Paul looked down to see Laurent looking back up at him. The vampire's eyes were shining and there was a feeling of caution and worry coming from him, as well as a depth of love that Paul was sure he didn't deserve. *Of course you deserve it,* whispered Laurent in his brain. *Why are you so quick to think yourself unworthy?*

*Because I can't deal with this.* Feeling overwhelmed, Paul pulled out and scrambled away, jumping off the bed to put some distance between himself and Laurent.

"It's all right, Paul...all right." Laurent sat up and held out a hand.

"No, it's not fucking all right. I can *feel* you. I mean, not just your emotions—I can feel what you feel. *Physically.*" Paul watched as Laurent ran a hand through his hair and shivered as he felt the whisper of fingers across his own scalp at the motion. "This is too fucking weird, man—we need to get rid of this thing right now." *Pull it out—have to pull it out.* Closing his eyes, he felt around inside himself for the strange golden tree or bond or whatever the hell you wanted to call it. Should he picture himself grabbing it and yanking or—?

"Wait."

Paul opened his eyes to see Laurent standing right in front of him, a look of pleading in his pale green eyes. "Why should we wait? I thought we agreed to cut the bond as soon as we completed it."

"But it's not really completed yet," Laurent pleaded. "We are not in alignment. We need to properly position the bond before you can think of severing it."

"What do we have to do to get aligned? How long does it take? And will it involve me feeling you...uh, feeling what you feel?" Paul couldn't think of a good way to describe it but Laurent seemed to understand what he meant.

"After we're aligned you will be able to control that aspect of our bond—both of us will. Just give me a moment before you do anything drastic, Paul. I promise I will make it worth your while."

"Well...all right." Reluctantly, Paul allowed himself to be led back to the bed. He sat across from Laurent with his back against the headboard and gave the vampire an expectant look. "Okay, I'm waiting."

"Good." Laurent took a deep breath. "We'll do this slowly and you must be patient, *mon amour*. Though I know something about this process, actually *having* a blood bond is new to me as well."

"So you've never done this with anyone else? Any other guy?" Paul cocked an eyebrow at him.

Laurent shook his head solemnly. "I have been waiting. Waiting and hoping to find you—my *Coeur de Sang*."

"Well, you found me and you've got me," Paul muttered. "At least for now."

*And I intend to keep you if I can.* The thought came through their newly completed link loud and clear and Paul wondered if Laurent had meant for him to hear it. He very nearly tried to rip the bond out again but the look on the other man's face stopped him. There was a yearning in Laurent's eyes, a tenderness that Paul had never had directed at him before by anyone. Anyone who loved him that much—even if he didn't deserve it—should get at least a chance. *Thank you, mon amour,* whispered the voice in his brain and this time he knew Laurent had sent him the thought deliberately.

"Now take my hands," Laurent instructed aloud, reaching for him.

Paul took a deep breath and did as the vampire asked. When their fingers first touched he felt it again—the strange echoing sensation of his own fingers on Laurent's skin. It made him want to yank his hands away but Laurent shook his head.

"No, Paul. Close your eyes and relax. Let your body come into alignment with mine and the feeling will fade."

It was hard because the sensation was so damn weird but he forced himself to do it anyway. Lucia had made him do a guided meditation and relaxation DVD with her one movie night as a surprise. Paul had thought it was absolute crap but he used it now, taking deep, even breaths and concentrating on his heart rate and breathing until he felt himself beginning to calm down.

*Good, that's very good,* he heard Laurent whisper through their bond. *Now reach out to me with your inner self. Touch the part of me that touches you and we will become one.*

Paul had never imagined wanting to be one with anyone before but he was calmer now and somehow Laurent's suggestion seemed right. He imagined himself flowing forward and gradually, a picture formed in his mind's eye. Though his eyes were closed he could see it very clearly—the tree that had taken root inside him swayed, its branches moved as though by an invisible wind. And slowly the golden branches entwined with the silver branches of another tree—Laurent's tree, Paul realized.

As the two trees twined with each other he felt a shiver of pure pleasure go down his spine. It was a feeling of oneness—a completion like nothing he had ever known. *Feels like coming home. Like diving into cold, refreshing water after wandering for days in the heat. Like a pair of strong arms around you—someone hugging you who will never drop you or leave you behind.*

*It feels like love,* Laurent whispered in his head.

*If this is love then I've never really loved anyone before,* Paul admitted. *I mean, I thought I loved my stepmother and I know I love my old man even though I can't stand him half the time. And Angel...*

*You want him and respect him but you do not feel for him as you do for me.* Laurent seemed confident.

*I don't feel like this for anyone. This is so different, so...*

*So much deeper. Our souls are connected. Have you never heard the term "soul mate"? This is what it truly means.*

Paul felt as if he were floating on a warm sea of sensation. Joy flooded him, making it hard to think. Still, he struggled to retain his skepticism. "Look, this is all great," he said, forcing himself to speak aloud. "But how do we control it? I can't go through life feeling like I'm wetting my pants every time you take a piss, Laurent."

*Of course not. There was a tendril of amusement from Laurent's end of the bond. And you will not have to, mon amour, I promise you. Simply do as I tell you. I want you to picture a radio inside your head.*

*A radio? Like a car radio?*

*If you wish. It doesn't matter what it looks like. The main thing I want you to picture are the knobs. The tuning knob and the volume knob.*

Okay, got it. Back when he was a kid, before his mom had left them, his father had driven an old Chrysler Cordoba. The radio was well worn and always set to the classic rock station, which was all his old man listened to.

Paul pictured the Cordoba's radio. The two round plastic knobs, most of their silver worn off to show the black plastic beneath, and the old-fashioned radio dial with the long red line that pointed straight down at the numbers between them. He could almost smell his dad's cigarette smoke and hear him humming along with whatever hit from the seventies was currently playing... "Take it easy, take it eeeasy. Don't let the sound of your own wheels make you crazy..."

*Good, very good, Paul. You have quite a vivid imagination, Laurent whispered in his brain. Now look at the tuning dial. Reach out and touch it.*

Obediently, Paul imagined doing as he was told. Got it.

*Good. Now this is the knob that allows you to focus in on the part where we are connected. Turn it all the way to the left.*

Paul did. Suddenly the humming, buzzing sensation of connection, the feeling of another person inside his head and body that he'd had in some degree ever since the night Laurent had healed him, was completely gone. "What the fuck?" He opened his eyes, startled. "Where did you go? I can't feel you at all."

Laurent smiled and opened his eyes as well. "That is because you 'tuned' me out. It is startling to be suddenly alone in your own skin again, no?"

"Yeah, I guess so." And though this was exactly what Paul had been after he found he didn't like the feeling at all. It sounded girly and stupid as fuck but he felt...lonely. Empty, like a house with no one inside it. No, that wasn't quite right... He searched for a better comparison and couldn't think of one. There had to be some way to describe the feeling, right?

*You find it difficult to describe because it is indescribable. When you have a blood bond with someone, with your dearest love, it fills a hole in your heart you didn't know you had. When you tune them out, you sense the hole again as you never did before.*

*And what about...what happens if you...when you break the bond?* Paul forced himself to ask.

He felt a surge of sorrow so deep it nearly brought tears to his eyes coming from Laurent's side of the bond. *It creates a wound that never truly heals. Tell me, Paul, are you really so eager to do that? To end this when it is just beginning?*

A moment ago Paul would have answered yes with no hesitation. But now he hesitated. *Just finish the lesson. We can talk about everything else afterward.*

*Very well. Close your eyes and picture the radio again.*

Paul did as he was told. *Okay, I got it.*

*Good. Now turn the left-hand knob – the tuning knob – to the right a little. Until you see the red line in the middle of the dial.*

Paul did it and felt his awareness of Laurent and the bond they now shared growing again. He couldn't help breathing a sigh of relief as the empty place inside him filled. It was like having his hand go to sleep and then waking up again but without the irritating pins and needles. *I was numb but now I can feel again.*

*I was blind but now I see,* Laurent murmured in his head. *The bond between us will enhance both of our senses and reflexes when we use it correctly. I will be able to feel the presence of the moon and you will be able to scent blood over great distances.*

*I already have a pretty phenomenal sense of smell, especially when I'm in my other form. Oh, will I be able to shift again now?*

*You should be able to with no problem. But let us finish this first before you call your inner wolf. Agreed?*

*All right. What's next?* Paul asked.

*Now that you have control of how much or little our bond affects you with the tuning knob, I want you to turn your attention to the knob on the right.*

*The volume knob?* Paul imagined holding it between his thumb and forefinger. *What will it do?*

*It increases or decreases the amount we 'hear' each other. Turn it all the way up and you will feel what I feel, hear what I hear, smell and see and know what I know.*

Remembering the weird echoing sensation that had freaked him out so much before, Paul shivered. *Why would I want to do that?*

*It could be useful if you ever need to know my location. If we got lost or separated from each other or one of us was in trouble. Do you see?*

*I guess I could see that,* Paul admitted grudgingly. *What if I turn it way down low – like this?* He imagined doing as he asked. At once, he could barely hear Laurent's voice inside his head. He could still sense him but the bond was like a low humming in the back of his mind – something he could easily ignore if he needed to. *Oh, I get it.* He turned the volume knob up, being careful not to push it too high so that he started getting the echo sensation again. When it was at a comfortable level, he opened his eyes. *"Gotta admit, Laurent, that's pretty fucking cool."*

Laurent smiled. *"So you see how easily the bond is controlled? It need not bother you at all if you don't wish it to."*

Paul frowned. "Yeah, but as long as we have it, I'm still connected to you."

"And I to you," Laurent said gravely. "Does that really bother you so much, Paul? Do you really wish to destroy the link we have just forged?"

Paul remembered the feeling he'd had when he tuned Laurent all the way out. The feeling of being empty and alone. *I've been alone inside my own head my whole fucking life. It shouldn't bother me.* But it did. "No," he said at last, reluctantly. "I don't really *want* to break the bond. But we'll have to do it some time. We can't go back to Miami like this, Laurent."

"Why not? Now that you see how easily the bond is controlled, why can we not let it remain intact?" Laurent's words were reasonable but Paul could feel the tension inside him, the fear that he would take what they had and ruin it—that he would grab the beautiful trees that entwined within their bonded souls and rip them out by the roots. He felt a sudden overwhelming need to reassure the other man that he wouldn't do that. He wanted to take Laurent in his arms, to hold and comfort and protect. But he couldn't do that...wouldn't let himself do that.

"It's dangerous," he pointed out, fighting the urge to pull Laurent close. "This thing between us—it can hurt us."

"And how is that different from any other kind of love?" Laurent's eyes were full of anguish. "Please, Paul, we have two weeks. Let us take that time together to explore our new bond, to let it grow."

"I...don't know." Paul looked down, away from the intense pleading in Laurent's eyes.

"What is it?" Laurent's voice was soft, coaxing. "What is holding you back? It's not just the bond, is it?"

"No, okay?" Paul pulled away and got off the bed to pace. "It's not just the bond itself. It's who I'm bonded to. I mean, you're a *guy*, Laurent. Another male. I can't have a guy soul mate. What does that say about me? About us?"

"It says that we love each other—is that so wrong?" Laurent slid off the bed and came to him. "Do you know how rare this is? Do you have any idea of how many people search their whole lives to find their match, to find the one person to complete them and never do? We're so lucky, Paul—so incredibly fortunate to have found each other. Please..." He took Paul's hand in his. "Don't throw it away for some silly notion of gay or straight. This is love—a bond that will last for eternity if we let it."

Paul sighed and ran his other hand through his hair. He could feel Laurent's pain through their bond as well as his longing. *Need you. Need to be with you. Hold you close, kiss you, love you, touch you, stroke you. Please don't take yourself away. Please...*

"All right," he said at last. "I know how you feel because I... I feel the same way. I don't know about *eternity* but I guess we can at least wait the two weeks and decide then. Only..."

"Only what?"



"Won't waiting make breaking the bond even harder? I mean, the longer we wait..."

"I would rather endure more pain and have you bound to me, even for a little while, than to complete the connection and break it immediately," Laurent said quietly.

"All right then." Paul nodded. "We'll give it two weeks...well, it's a little less than two weeks now. Anyway, we'll see how it goes. I'll have to call my stepmom and tell her I'm staying longer than I thought." He sighed. "I'm sure my old man will fucking love that."

"My parents are unlikely to be pleased as well," Laurent said. "But there comes a time when you have to put familial obligations aside and do what is right for you." He put his arms around Paul and hugged him tight, fitting his lean body against Paul's more muscular frame. "This is right for us, *mon amour*. Of that I am absolutely certain. I only hope I can make you see it at the end of our time together."

"Yeah, maybe," Paul murmured. But he made no move to try to get out of the embrace. Laurent simply felt too good in his arms, too *right*. *I'll give it some time*, he promised himself, making sure not to transmit the thought across their bond. *A little less than two weeks and then we'll have to go back to Miami and go back to normal. There's no way we can keep things the way they are. Can we?*

## **Chapter Thirteen**

The time they passed together in Nana's house was the sweetest of Laurent's life. It was what he imagined a honeymoon must be like—a real honeymoon, not the kind his people usually took where each partner brought along a bevy of human lackeys and lovers to satisfy both physical and carnal appetites. Instead of all that, it was just him and Paul, getting to know each other and learning the boundaries of their new bond.

They stayed in the guest suite and made love often during the day when it was too bright for Laurent to go out without feeling depleted. During the nights they roamed the historic parts of the city like any other pair of tourists. Paul still wasn't comfortable holding hands in public but he would often bump Laurent's shoulder with his own in an affectionate way and more than once he'd grabbed him and pushed him into a dark corner for a passionate kiss. Laurent was always happy when his new lover risked anything in public—it made him hopeful that someday soon Paul wouldn't mind being physically affectionate where anyone could see. Of course, that couldn't happen in Miami but maybe if they moved someplace with a more enlightened attitude. California perhaps or even some part of Europe...

Though he knew it wasn't realistic, Laurent entertained himself daydreaming about such things. He imagined himself and Paul in a small house somewhere, perhaps by the sea so they could hear the surf pounding on the beach. In the tiny, quiet beach town no one would care if they held hands or kissed in public. Paul would have his own shop and build custom motorcycles—a dream he had confessed to Laurent after a leisurely session of lovemaking the second day at Nana's house. Laurent would write or perhaps teach night school classes at the local community college. Though his parents had thought it stupid and romantic, he had insisted on getting a degree in literature from Oxford some years back. He wondered now if the impulse to become employable in the human world had been the first stepping stone to building his own life...a life away from his parents and the vampire aristocracy.

He didn't dare tell his dreams to Paul and made sure to keep them private and hidden—something easier said than done. The blood bond was growing deeper and stronger every day, the gold and silver saplings strengthening into vigorous young trees that rooted deep in both his heart and Paul's and bound them inextricably together. And yet Laurent knew their appearance of strength was misleading. The bond was still so fragile, so new. If Paul decided he didn't want to be bound to another man, if he felt that he had to get rid of the bond before they went back to Miami... But Laurent couldn't let himself think such a thing. He pushed the fear aside quickly every time it tried to claim him and concentrated on the love growing between them instead.

And their love *was* growing, nourished by the bond and the way Paul was slowly but surely letting down his guard. He offered to let Laurent drink from him daily now—seeming to truly enjoy the process and the pleasure it brought them both. He didn't even demand that Laurent bite him on the inner thigh where the marks would be invisible. In fact, he didn't seem worried about the lasting evidence that he had a vampire lover—the necklace of fang marks that decorated the strong column of his neck—at all. Laurent wasn't sure if that was because he intended to sever the bond between them—which would immediately erase the marks of possession—or because he intended for them to stay together on a long-term basis, away from the prying eyes of his pack. Or maybe Paul was simply choosing not to think about it, which seemed the most likely explanation. The were was extremely good at living in the moment—a skill Laurent wished he had. As hard as he tried not to worry, the end of their idyllic time together loomed large in his mind, filling him with worry and doubt if he let it.

But by and large he was wonderfully happy—they both were. Only two things made their “honeymoon” less than perfect for Laurent. The first was that, no matter how often they made love, Paul still refused to admit his orientation. He continued to insist that he was simply “experimenting” and though he was eager to top Laurent, he had absolutely no interest in being topped himself.

Though his lover's continued denial of their true relationship made Laurent sad, he was willing to overlook it. He reminded himself that Paul had been raised in a rabidly homophobic society and besides, it wasn't like he objected to being the bottom although sometimes it might have been nice to switch things up a bit. Still...*small steps*, he told himself over and over. *Small steps. It may take years together before he's willing to admit what he truly feels, what he truly wants...if we have years.* But thinking that way was giving in to the fear and he quickly pushed it out of his mind.

The other thing that marred his time with Paul was the call he had to place to his mother. He did it their third day at Nana's house, after catching the tail end of Paul's own phone call home in which he seemed to be trying to reassure his stepmother of something. When he'd hung up the phone, Paul had seemed upset and subdued. But when Laurent tried to question him, he would only shake his head. Still, at least he'd been brave enough to make the call in the first place. Laurent had been putting off his own call home, dreading his mother's cold disapproval and his father's anger. However, he knew he had to make some kind of contact with them if he wanted to remain in Asheville without being bothered. His father might tolerate an absence that lasted a night or two but for any longer, Laurent needed his mother on his side to smooth things over. And she wouldn't do that unless he called and persuaded her to.

Sighing, he pulled out his cell phone and scrolled through his contacts until he came to her number. Then, with a rapidly beating heart, he hit send.

“Allo?” said a familiar voice on the other end of the line.

“Celeste?” Laurent asked.

“But of course, dear boy. Wherever are you? Your mother is beside herself with worry and your father is in a rage.”

Leave it to Celeste to know his family's business and to try to pry into his. "That is exactly why I am calling," Laurent said, trying to control his irritation. "Could you put my mother on the phone, please?"

"Well we're just in the middle of a bridge game. Two of your prospective consorts have gotten here early and they're just lovely. It's such a pity you weren't here to greet them."

Laurent remained silent and counted to ten. He reminded himself that it might have been much worse. His father might have been passing and decided to answer his mother's cell phone instead of the busybody Celeste—an act that doubtless would have ended badly. Finally his mother's friend seemed to take the point, or maybe she simply got tired of listening to him breathe.

"La, so touchy. Very well then, here she is," she said. There was a moment of silence and then his mother's cool, sophisticated voice floated across the line into his ear.

"Laurent, so very good of you to call." Far from being beside herself with worry she simply sounded bored. There was a pause in which she must have been making some kind of play in the bridge game and then she spoke again. "I suppose you know you're father is in a towering rage."

"Celeste said as much. Which is why I thought it best to call and check in."

"Mmm-hmm. And where are you, anyway? Visiting your old nurse, I suppose, since you pestered her address out of me the other night."

"I am." Laurent saw no reason to deny it. "And I plan to be here for a little while yet."

His mother made an annoyed yet somehow elegant sound at the back of her throat. "And I suppose you expect me to smooth things over with your father? I won't do it, Laurent. I don't understand why you felt it necessary to go running off to see that old bat anyway, let alone at such a crucial juncture when you're about to inherit the title."

"Maybe I don't want to inherit the title," Laurent said, playing for time. "Maybe I don't feel ready and I needed some time to think."

"And you can think better in Asheville than Miami?"

"I wanted to talk to someone with a warm heart who would listen to my fears and not judge me."

"And your old blood nurse is the sympathetic soul you sought out for this sentimental rubbish?" His mother snorted delicately. "Forgive me, darling, but I find that laughable."

"Why?" Laurent demanded. "Why should you think it strange that I go to visit the only female who ever showed me any affection? The one who kissed me and held me and tucked me in to sleep every dawn of my young life? The only one who ever truly loved me?"

There was a long moment of silence in which he was afraid he'd pushed things too far and his mother would simply hang up. But then she said, rather flatly, "If you're trying to make me feel guilty, please don't bother, Laurent. I raised you as I was raised and treated you with complete propriety commensurate to our station in life."

"Propriety isn't love." Laurent tried to keep his voice as cold as hers but the old hurt bubbled up inside him, making it difficult. He took a deep breath, forcing his emotions down. "At any rate, Mother, I didn't call to fight with you. I simply wished to inform you that I will be staying with Nana for a little longer. I need some time away from you and Father and I have no wish to be present while the house is full of visiting dignitaries and prospective consorts."

"Well you'd better put in an appearance at some point. The title passing ceremony can hardly take place if your father has no one to pass the title *to*."

"I am well aware of that, Mother." Laurent sighed. "Tell Father not to worry about me—I haven't forgotten my duty. I'll be in Miami on the night of the ceremony." *Whether I'll actually be at the ceremony is a whole other matter.* But he didn't say it aloud—his future with Paul was still too uncertain.

"See that you are." His mother sounded distracted. "I must go, Laurent—you're making me lose this hand."

"Will you speak to Father?"

There was a bored and slightly irritated sigh at the other end of the line. "Very well, I'll do my best to placate him. But you'd best be back in plenty of time before the ceremony if you know what's good for you."

"It'll be back the night of the ceremony," Laurent said evenly. "And not before."

She sighed again. "You had better be there or I won't answer for the consequences. Do remember, darling, that your father has a rather warm temper. I wouldn't push it if I were you."

"Of course not." Saying that his father had a "warm temper" was like saying the ocean was a bit wet but then, his mother had never been given to hyperbole any more than she'd been given to open displays of affection. Or any kind of affection, really. "I'll speak to you later," Laurent said.

"If you wish. Oh Celeste, I can't *believe* you played that card..."

Since her interest in the conversation was clearly at an end, Laurent hung up without saying goodbye. He doubted that his mother would notice or care but at least she would try to keep his father in check and that was really all that mattered.

Or so he told himself...

Despite the old pain that the conversation had stirred in him, Laurent had been able to put it aside and concentrate on his joy in being with Paul. He only hoped that his lover felt the same way but as their days together drew to an end, he knew the time for a confrontation was coming. Before too long Paul was going to have to make his decision and Laurent was terribly afraid to find out what it would be.

\* \* \* \* \*

If anyone had ever told Paul that he would go away on a vacation with another guy and that they would fuck like bunnies and snuggle in bed and talk about their hopes and dreams like some kind of fucking mushy chick flick afterward and that he would love every minute of it, well... *I would have punched their teeth down their throat. It's too fucking ridiculous*, Paul told himself, day after day. And yet, it was also too wonderful to stop.

Every time he woke up in Laurent's arms he told himself that it had to end, that he had to stop this now before it got any harder. And then Laurent would open those big beautiful eyes of his or murmur Paul's name, or send a surge of love and desire through their bond and he would ditch the idea. *Just another hour, another day...a little more time can't hurt, can it?* Deep down he knew it could and would hurt a hell of a lot. That the longer he waited to break the bond, the worse it would be. But he just couldn't bear to break it. Not now. Not yet.

They fell into an easy, comfortable routine. Roaming around Asheville together, seeing the sights. They toured the Biltmore mansion one night and Laurent described how it had been when the original Vanderbilts had still been living there. Paul was startled to learn that the other man was over a hundred but Laurent explained to him that vampires born to the Blood aged so slowly that he and Paul were essentially the same age. That made him feel a little better although he wasn't certain what to think when Laurent told him that they would stay the same physical age, growing old at exactly the same pace as long as they were bonded. "Your lifespan will match mine," Laurent assured him. "Instead of dying when you are ninety or a hundred, you will live for centuries — we'll both live for centuries — together."

The idea of living for five or six or seven hundred years seemed strange to Paul and sort of unreal. Could the blood bond between them really stop time? Or at least slow it down so much that he and Laurent would be together practically forever? And more importantly, did he *want* them to be together forever? *Doesn't matter what I want, not really. Because we can't be together, not and go back to our normal lives.* He didn't want to admit, even to himself, that he was becoming more and more reluctant to end this strange but wonderful relationship he found himself in. But reluctant or not, it had to be done. There was no way he could go back to Miami with Laurent's marks on his neck, no way he could admit to the pack and his old man what the other vampire meant to him.

The knowledge that he was eventually going to have to break the bond weighed heavy on him but Paul tried not to think about it. He lived in the moment, enjoying their limited time together as much as he could and refusing to think about the future.

Laurent made concentrating on the present easy. He never pushed Paul to talk about their relationship, like a girl probably would have. And despite being vampire and another man, he was a fucking incredible lover. He was also willing to listen to Paul and not scoff when he talked about opening his own bike shop and living

someplace besides the apartment over the Chop Shop's garage. Not to mention the fact that when he laughed in that soft, low, melodious voice or touched Paul's arm while he murmured his name, or did a hundred other little things, it made Paul want to hold him close and never let him go. *But I'll have to let him go. Soon...* He pushed the thought away every time it popped up but as their time drew to a close, it popped up more and more frequently.

In his weaker moments, mostly right after they finished making love, Paul began to fantasize about the two of them running away together. He knew it was stupid and unrealistic, but he kept getting these pictures in his head of him and Laurent living somewhere else—maybe a little house in the mountains where there was actually snow in the winter. Someplace where everybody would mind their own business and not give a shit about two guys shacked up together. Paul wasn't quite sure what Laurent would do although he knew he had some kind of fancy degree from Oxford. But he imagined himself working at his own shop all day and then spending the nights with Laurent, making love, talking, cooking—which was something that Laurent enjoyed and was bizarrely good at considering vamps didn't eat. He'd whipped up several meals for Paul in his Nana's disused kitchen that looked like something you'd see on the food channel on TV and had seemed delighted to simply watch Paul eat them.

It was completely unrealistic and Paul knew it but the longer they stayed together, the more the idea wouldn't leave him alone. He knew he would be giving up his place in the pack but somehow after a long, lazy afternoon of making love with Laurent, being second wolf in the *Locas* didn't seem like such hot shit anymore. As for his job, his old man could hire a new mechanic and rent out the apartment above the garage... *No, it's stupid. Don't even think about it—it would never work. Besides, you wouldn't be the only one giving things up. Laurent is fucking royalty. You can't ask him to abdicate or whatever the fuck they call it just to run off with you.*

Besides the unreality of his plan, there were other people who would be hurt if he and Laurent rode off into the sunset together. Angel for one. Paul didn't care much about the rest of the pack but Angel had been his best friend since fifth grade and he didn't think he could just leave without at least trying to explain. He also had to think about Lucia. His stepmother had seemed genuinely upset when he'd called and told her where he had gone and with who.

"I can't believe you're staying with a bunch of *muertos*," she kept saying. "I know that one of them saved your life but I don't like the idea of you being with them for so long. It's not safe, Paul. What if they turn you like them?"

"That's not gonna happen," he'd tried to reassure her—Laurent had promised him that their blood bond made it completely impossible. But somehow Paul hadn't felt up to explaining to his stepmother how his sexual love-link to a vampire would prevent him from becoming one of them. So the few words of comfort he'd tried to give her had fallen flat.

The fact that nothing he could say would persuade her he was completely all right bothered Paul—bothered him a lot. He loved Lucia and wanted to tell her the truth—

the whole truth about what was going on with him and Laurent. But there was no way he could do that on the phone. And no way she wouldn't believe he hadn't been brainwashed into some kind of unnatural relationship unless he could show her in person that he was still her same *Paulito*.

*Guess I'm going back to Miami one way or another, he told himself with resignation. Of course he'd always planned to go back all along but somehow the idea of just getting in Laurent's Spyder and heading north or east or west or anywhere but back down south seemed like a much more attractive option. Attractive but fucking unrealistic. Get with the program and stop being such a whiny pendejo. This thing with Laurent has to end and it has to end soon. There's no way you can keep it up and have a normal life. No way you can go back with bite marks all over your throat and let everyone know you've been fucking a vampire.*

That was the direction his thoughts were headed as he stood at the window and looked out at the waning moon one night near the end of their time. He felt Laurent through their bond before the other man came up behind him and slipped his arms around his waist. Felt the sadness and uncertainty and yearning as Laurent touched him. The heavy emotions caused a lump to form in his throat, which he tried unsuccessfully to swallow.

"*Mon amour.*" The soft kiss at the back of his neck sent shivers down Paul's spine.

"Yeah, babe?" The endearment came more and more easily to his lips and the casual affection between them no longer seemed strange. *Dios, so much can change in a couple of weeks. Wish it could stay this way but I know it can't...* He was careful to keep his thoughts guarded, not sending them across the mental link they shared as part of their bond.

"This must be our last night here. If I am to return in time for my father's ceremony and you are to fight in your pack challenge, we must leave as soon as it starts to get dark tomorrow."

"Yeah, I know." Paul had been trying to put off thinking of it but it was true—their time was almost up. He turned to face Laurent. "Are you really going to marry some girl? Whoever your parents pick out?"

"I do not wish to. It would be a lie to tie myself to another now that I have found my *Coeur de Sang*. But whether I take the title and marry the consort of my parents' choosing or not depends on you."

"Why me?" Paul frowned.

"Because if you choose to break the bond between us, I may as well do as my parents wish." He shrugged but there was pain in his eyes. "I will have nothing to live for so whatever I do with the rest of my existence will be meaningless."

"*Dios*, Laurent, no pressure, huh?" Paul felt a surge of frustration.

"Please, Paul, I have tried to be patient but now I must know. What is your decision?" Laurent's voice nearly broke on the last word.



Hearing the agony in the other man's tone made him feel like the worst kind of jerk. "Laurent..." He ran a hand through his blond hair, which was getting a little long for his taste. "Damn it, do we have to do this *now*?"

"I am afraid so. If you are going to break the bond then I need some time to recover before I can travel. You will too—as Nana has warned us, it is a painful experience on more than one level."

"Yeah, yeah, I know." Paul blew out a breath. "She's always saying *mierta* like that to me whenever you're not around."

"She is afraid you're going to hurt me." Laurent looked at him directly. "Are you, Paul?"

"*Madre de Dios*." Paul pulled away from the other man's arms and began to pace in front of the window. "I've been thinking about this a lot. A hell of a lot. Laurent, you *know* I want to be with you."

"Then be with me. Let us stay together, let our bond be unbroken."

"We can't *do* that. You know I can't go back to the pack or my dad's shop looking like this." He pointed at the neat sets of fang marks that decorated his throat.

"No, I suppose you can't." Laurent looked down.

Paul tried to explain. "It would be fucking suicide, '*mano*'. They'd know right away what we've been doing—or at least guess. And then if my old man didn't kill me, the pack sure as hell would. There's nothing worse than being a *maricon* in my world. Except being a vamp lover."

"So you at least admit that we're lovers?" Laurent sounded bitter.

Paul shifted uncomfortably. "I don't know *what* we are but whatever it is, it's not something anybody in my life could accept. I mean, my stepmom might get it but even she's freaked out by the idea of me being with a *muerto*."

Laurent lifted his chin. "So that's it then? That is your decision? We've had a good time but now we need to get back to reality and you can't do that with my marks on you. So you are going to break the bond and we'll never see each other again."

"What do you want me to say? That we can tell everybody else in our lives to fuck off and go live happily fucking ever after together? It doesn't work that way, Laurent. Not in my world."

"Fine." Laurent nodded tersely. "If that's the way you feel, then let us end this now."

"Laurent, come on..."

"No." The vampire crossed his arms over his chest. "You want to be free of me—of the bond—then do it. Pull it out, destroy it."

Rage and frustration bubbled up, too hot to contain. "Godammit, you stupid *hijo de puta*, you know I don't *want* to do this!"

"Yes, but you're going to anyway." Laurent's voice was remote, his eyes cold. "All I ask is that you do it quickly. Don't prolong the pain. Just do it."

"Fine, I will." Closing his eyes, Paul groped inside himself, searching for the part of him that was tied to Laurent. In his mind's eye he saw the two trees, silver and gold, their branches entwined. *So beautiful. So fragile. Don't want to do this.* But he had to. *I'll only take out my half though – won't mess with his.* Steeling himself against the pain, Paul pictured himself grabbing the golden tree by its slender trunk. Then he pulled.

The pain was immediate and intense. He could feel it in the very center of his chest—like trying to yank out a tooth without using Novocain. But it wasn't just a physical pain. As he pulled, he felt a wave of loss—an anguish so overwhelming that it took his breath away and his eyes flew open. *Not just my pain,* he realized. *Laurent's too. He's feeling it as well.*

*Yes, mon amour – I cannot help but feel it.* Laurent looked up at him and though Paul could tell he was trying to keep his face blank, there were tears standing in his pale green eyes.

*Dios, Laurent...*

*Finish it! If you're going to do it don't delay. I do not know how long I can bear this.* Laurent crossed his arms over his chest and hugged himself tightly, as though he were trying to keep from falling apart.

*This is hurting him. Have to do it quick.* Paul closed his eyes and tried again. The pain he felt from his end of the bond was bad—very fucking bad. It drove him to his knees. But though the wrenching, tearing sensation that seemed to come from the very center of his being was the worst thing Paul had ever felt, Laurent's pain was even worse. Feeling the other man's agony and knowing that he was the cause of it, knowing that he was hurting the person he cared for more than anyone else in the world was horrible. In fact, it was too fucking much.

Paul opened his eyes again. Laurent was no longer standing. He was huddled on the floor like a wounded animal, his face was a mask of silent agony, with tears streaming down his cheeks.

"Laurent...babe..." Paul couldn't stand. He crawled over to the other man and took him in his arms. "Can't do this. Can't fucking do it."

"Then don't. Just...don't, please, *mon amour.*" Laurent buried his face in Paul's shoulder and Paul pulled him closer. Wrapping his arms around Laurent's waist, he held on tight.

Being close helped and gradually the ache began to ease. It was as though he had loosened the golden tree's roots but they were slowly repairing themselves and sinking into the soil of his heart again. Paul didn't know how long they held each other but inside he was making a silent promise—a vow to himself and Laurent. *Not going to try that again. It's too much, too bad. Don't want to lose you that way.*

"Paul?"

Laurent's soft voice made him look down at the man in his arms. "Yeah, babe?"

"Do you mean that? Truly? You will leave the bond intact and you won't try to break it again?"

Paul nodded. "Yeah. I'm sorry. I didn't know it would be so bad. So...so final."

"Nana did warn us." Laurent sat up but made no move to get out of his lap. "Are you staying with me only because it hurts too much to leave?"

"Not just that," Paul told him. "It's... I don't want you out of my life. The holy virgin knows what the fuck we're going to do but whatever it is, it'll have to be together."

"I love you." Laurent kissed him, a sweet, tender kiss that sent waves of love and desire washing over him. "So much, Paul. So very much."

"Ah Laurent..." He didn't know what to say. Telling another guy he loved him, even though he did, was still way past his comfort level.

*You do not have to say it. I feel what you feel.* Laurent kissed him again and then smiled. "Well then, we must plan for our future. What shall we do?"

"Good fucking question." Paul pinched the bridge of his nose hard, trying to push back the tension headache that was trying to form behind his eyes. "I think it's safe to say our old way of life is out. Mine is, anyway. I can't go back to the pack like this and I can't imagine I'll be welcome at the Chop Shop either—not after the old man sees your marks."

"I was hoping that you allowed me to mark you so because you intended to keep the bond intact." Laurent stroked Paul's throat, sending a pleasurable shiver down his spine.

"Hell, maybe I was, I don't know. I sure as fuck didn't know it at the time though."

"Maybe you knew it with your heart, even if you didn't with your mind." Laurent smiled at him. "My old life must end as well. My parents will never accept you as my choice of partner."

"Are you sure you want to do that—give it all up?" Paul looked at him uncertainly. "I mean, I'll be losing my place in the pack, which sucks, but I can deal with it. And as for working for my old man, well, it's time for me to get out on my own anyway. But you...all your connections, your money, your, uh, throne."

"I was to be a viscount, not a prince. And know this, Paul, I will gladly give it up—all of it." Laurent stroked his cheek. "You are all that matters to me now. My title and lands and fortune...they're all empty without you."

"Glad you feel that way. I don't exactly think I'd fit in at the vampire court."

"About as well as I would fit in with your pack," Laurent said dryly. "So then, the question remains: where shall we go and what shall we do?"

Paul shrugged. "Well, we can't stay in Miami or anywhere near the pack. You don't leave the *Locas* voluntarily. You're in it for life until you die or get busted out. So we have to go somewhere else—a different state. Hell, maybe a whole different fucking country."

"Somewhere no one will care who we are and what we mean to each other." Laurent sounded thoughtful. "I have heard that the western coast of your country is more tolerant. California, perhaps?"

Paul nodded. "Sure, why the fuck not? It'll be tough at first but I have a little money saved. I can work at another bike shop somewhere and save up to get my own place. Maybe you can teach or something."

"I had thought of that...when I allowed myself to hope that we would stay together." Laurent kissed him and smiled. "I have a little money too, in a Swiss bank account that my father can't touch. It may take me awhile to access it but in the meantime we can sell the car. That should give us enough to live on while we get things sorted out."

Paul shook his head. "I hate that you have to sell your sweet ride, *'mano*."

"It doesn't matter. Nothing matters except us staying together." Laurent kissed him again and sighed.

"What's wrong?" Paul stroked a hand through his soft black hair and looked at the man in his arms anxiously.

"I was just wishing that we could leave tonight. That we could get in the car and drive and never look back. But I fear that will be impossible."

"Yeah." Paul nodded regretfully. "I have some loose ends to tie up. I need to talk to Angel—need to let him know I'm going even if I don't tell him why."

"Will he understand?" Laurent frowned anxiously.

Paul shrugged. "Who knows? But he'll come closer than the rest of the pack. I don't give a flying fuck for any of the rest of them but Angel...he's been my best friend since fifth grade. I owe it to him to say something. And even more than him I have to talk to Lucia—my stepmom."

"She is not very happy about our relationship, is she?" Laurent gave him a penetrating look.

"No, she's not. She's afraid for me the same way Nana is for you." Paul pulled Laurent in for a brief kiss and then gave him a long, considering look. "But I think...I *hope* if she meets you she'll understand. Would you be willing to talk to her?"

"I would be honored to meet one so dear to your heart. I hope that she will see I have only love for you after we speak. But what of your father?"

Paul shook his head. "I think it'll be better to just let Lucia tell him I decided to move out of town to try and make it on my own. Letting him know I was...uh, with another guy would probably give him a heart attack or some shit like that."

Laurent frowned. "Unfortunately, I think my own parents' reaction will be even more extreme. However, I *must* go back and tell them. I will have to formally renounce any claim I have to my father's title, lands and wealth as well as my family name."

"*Dios*. You have to do all that?"

"Yes. I must make it clear to them there is no possible way they can persuade me or we will never be free of them. My father will hunt us to the ends of the Earth unless I do so."

"And I thought my old man was bad. *Dios*." Paul shook his head. "Okay, so we go back, tell everyone we're leaving and then turn right back around and hit the road. Does that sound about right?"

"It does." Laurent put his head back on Paul's shoulder. "I wish we need not go back at all."

"Yeah, I know, babe. But we have to."

"Then I wish our obligations were already fulfilled and we were driving west with the wind in our hair and your hand on my thigh."

Paul couldn't help smiling. "Sounds nice."

"More than nice." Laurent nuzzled his throat, pressing a soft kiss to the sensitive spot just under his ear. "Make love to me, Paul. I need you inside me."

The hot words coupled with the feel of Laurent's hot mouth against his throat was enough to have Paul hard and throbbing behind the fly of his jeans. "You got it, babe," he growled and pushed Laurent to the floor...

\* \* \* \* \*

Looking back on it afterward, Laurent thought it was the most passionate sex they had ever had.

Paul had never been so tender with him. Usually when they made love there was an urgency, a need to satisfy the hungry fire that burned so brightly in both of them—in the were especially who had been deprived of a man's touch for so long. But this time Paul took his time, kissing Laurent everywhere, worshiping his body with his mouth and tongue until Laurent thought he would explode. Every time he tried to kiss or touch Paul back, his wolf shook his head and murmured, "No, let me do this. Just relax and enjoy yourself, babe."

Laurent understood that it was his lover's way of apologizing, of trying to make right the hurt he had caused when he had tried to break their bond. And it was also Paul's way of showing what he could not say—that he loved Laurent with all his heart.

At last Paul spread his legs and fit the head of his cock to Laurent's entrance. "So fucking hot," he whispered hoarsely as he slid in deep, making Laurent moan and arch his back. "So tight. And all for me. You're mine, Laurent. *Mine*."

"And I will be forever." Laurent's breath caught in his throat as the head of Paul's thick cock bumped over the spot inside him that sent sparks of pleasure shooting down his spine. "Ah *mon amour*, I love to feel you inside me!"

"And I fucking love to be there." Paul's voice was a possessive growl. "Stay with me, Laurent. I'm gonna try to make this last awhile. Want to be inside you as long as I can."

"Do whatever you wish, I am yours." Laurent meant the words with all his heart. Now that Paul had promised not to break the bond, he could relax and enjoy giving himself completely.

"*Dios*, Laurent. Need you so much. Want you so much." True to his words, Paul stroked deep and long, his eyes never leaving Laurent's face. He seemed intent on giving pleasure, caressing Laurent's cock in time to his thrusts, which were slow and deep and deliberate.

Laurent didn't know how long it lasted. It seemed forever that Paul filled him over and over, their eyes locked together, their hearts beating as one, the bond wide open between them so that every touch, every kiss, every gasp was exponentially magnified. When they both came, Laurent said the words he knew Paul couldn't say aloud. "I love you, *mon amour*. So much. So very, very much. Never let me go."

Paul kissed him, taking his mouth with a deep hunger that made Laurent moan. "I never will." Then both of them got lost in the overwhelming pleasure and no more words were possible.

## Chapter Fourteen

"I'm sorry to see you leave, *mein lieblich*. But I understand why you must go." Nana cocked her head to one side in the birdlike attitude Laurent remembered from his childhood. "But do you really think it's safe to tell your father you are renouncing your title for a were?"

"I'm not going to mention the were part." Laurent crossed one leg over his knee and leaned forward on the red brocade sofa. Paul was packing the car by himself since the sun had still not fully set. "That would be pushing him too far. But I must stand up to him, Nana. I cannot allow him to force me to do something I know is wrong for me."

"Your father believes that might makes right, as I recall," she said dryly. "You might be better off just sending him a postcard from wherever it is you and Paul decide to settle."

"So he can track me down and do something horrible to Paul? No, absolutely not." Laurent frowned. "He has to be made to remember that I am of age and no longer under his legal guardianship. I will formally renounce the title as well as our family name—in front of the entire council if need be. Once I do that, he can do nothing but let me go."

Nana frowned. "I hope you are right, my darling. I truly do. And what of Paul's people? What will he say to them?"

"We are going to see his stepmother in person because he feels she may understand our relationship if she meets me. After that he will call his packleader and try to see him alone, without the rest of the pack. It seems...safer that way."

"I see." She nodded. "Probably a wise decision."

"Yes. Paul is concerned about how he will react when he sees my marks on him." Laurent sighed. He couldn't help but worry about how Paul would handle Angel. He could tell through their link that Paul had been more than half in love with the packleader for most of his life. Did he still feel for him? And would that lingering residue of emotion cloud his judgment?

"Okay, car's all packed and the sun just set. Time we got a move on." Paul came in, dusting his hands on his jeans.

"Well then, you had better go." Nana rose and took one of Laurent's hands. Then she reached out to Paul. After a brief moment of hesitation he took the offered hand and gave her an uncertain smile. "Very well, my darlings." Nana looked at them both. "You are both dear to me now and I fear for you."

"We will be fine, Nana," Laurent tried to reassure her but she shook her bushy head.

"I only hope you are correct. Remember what I have always taught you, Laurent—the course of true love is never easy but always worth it in the end."

"I will remember," he said solemnly.

"The bond between you is a special thing—a *sacred* thing," she emphasized, squeezing both their hands and looking more at Paul. "Cherish and feed it. Nurture it and let it grow and get stronger and in doing so, make you both stronger as well. For once broken, it can *never grow again*. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Nana," they said at the same time.

"Good." The old woman smiled. "Now both of you give me a kiss and take care of yourselves. And if you ever need a place to stay together again away from prying eyes, come see me. You are always welcome."

"Thank you, Nana." Laurent leaned down to kiss her on the cheek. When he straightened up, Paul did the same. Nana caught the were's hand and looked into his eyes.

"Take care of my Laurent," she told him sternly. "Keep him safe and love him as much as you can."

"I, uh, promise." Paul sounded uncomfortable but sincere. "I'll do my best to take care of him, Nana."

"That's good then." She let go of him and then smiled at them both. "Well? Off you go, *mein lieblings*. Godspeed to you both and don't wait so long to come see me again next time."

"We won't, Nana, I promise." Laurent gave her one last hug and a kiss on her wrinkled cheek and then took Paul's hand. "Come. We'd better go if we're going to make it in time."

"I am glad we decided to speak to your mother first," Laurent said as Paul pulled the Spyder into a spot around the side of the Chop Shop. "I think I need a little more time to work up to speaking to mine."

"I thought your mom was the easy one." Paul scanned the lighted windows, hoping to see Lucia's silhouette.

"She is." Laurent sounded so grim that Paul turned to face him, frowning. "Hey, we don't have to do this if you don't want to. We can just see my stepmom, put my bike on a trailer hitch behind the car and hit the road."

"No, as difficult as it will be, I *must* do this. It's the only way we can ever be free." Laurent sighed. "But I must admit I am not looking forward to my father's rage when I renounce the title."

Paul gave him a crooked grin. "Just tell him you'll stay and keep the whole monarchy *mierta* going as long as he doesn't mind you being with a were."

"That is the one thing he must not find out." Laurent looked pale in the glow of the dashboard lights. "If I renounce the title for my own reasons and go my own way, it is



all well and good. But if he knew I was bonded to a wolf he would have grounds to hold me against my will. I would be considered mad and a danger to myself and others."

Paul gave a short, barking laugh. "Yeah, my old man would think I was fucking crazy too if he knew I'd been hooking up with a vamp. Especially a *male* vamp. At least your dad doesn't mind you fucking around with another guy."

"And what will your packleader say?" Laurent looked away but Paul could feel the tendrils of anxiety coming through their bond.

"You let me worry about Angel." He patted Laurent's thigh. "I never felt for Angel what I feel for you, babe." He cleared his throat awkwardly. "He, uh, never followed through on any of his...I dunno, offers? Promises? Anyway, he kept me hanging. You don't do that."

Laurent looked at him and smiled. "Yes, you know you can take me any time you like. I am always ready to have you inside me."

The soft words sent a surge of lust straight to Paul's cock. "Keep talking like that and I'll have to fuck you right here."

"I think that would be a poor idea. Your father might come up at any moment."

"I doubt it. He's usually home this time of night watching the game on his flat screen. I *am* hoping that Lucia's here, though. But if she isn't I can always call her and ask her to come over. C'mon." He got out of the car, motioning for Laurent to follow.

If Laurent was reluctant to meet Paul's stepmother, he certainly didn't show it. He followed willingly enough as Paul unlocked the side door of the Chop Shop and stepped inside. The lights were on so *somebody* had to be in—hopefully it was Lucia staying late to work on the books again.

"Lucia?" he called as Laurent stepped in behind him and closed the door. "Uh, Mom? You here?"

"Paul?" She stepped out of the lighted office. "Paul! *Paulito*." She ran forward and gave him a hug, then stepped back and looked up at him. "You smell like vampire. And your neck..." She reached up to brush her fingertips against the freshest set of fang marks, on the right side of his throat.

"I am afraid those are my handiwork." Laurent had been standing silently in the shadows beside the door but now he stepped forward, smiling apologetically.

"*Madre de Dios*." Lucia put a hand to her heart. "I didn't even see you there. Forgive me. You must be Paul's, um... friend?"

"I am." Laurent came forward and took her hand. Bowing over it, he brushed her knuckles gently with his lips and murmured something in French.

Lucia's caramel-colored skin took on a pinkish tinge. "I'm pleased to meet you too. Any friend of Paul's—"

"He's more than my friend." Paul felt he had to make that clear. "You know that, Lucia."

"Paul..." She shook her head. "I always thought that maybe...the way you and Angel were always together and the way you looked at him..."

"Laurent isn't Angel. But about the rest of it, yeah. I'm, um, sort of into guys right now." Paul shifted uncomfortably. When he'd imagined this scene with Lucia, somehow it had never occurred to him that he would have to come out and say that he was if not gay, exactly, at least interested in other men. "The bite marks on my neck—that's a vamp sex thing," he said lamely, trying to explain without actually explaining.

"And completely consensual," Laurent hastened to add.

Lucia looked at him uncertainly. "So you really want this? To be with a *muerto*?"

Paul took her hands. "I really do. Laurent is special to me. I, uh, care for him a lot."

"And I love Paul as well," Laurent said firmly. "Please believe me, Mrs. Kraskowski, when I tell you that your son is more dear to me than my own life and that I would never hurt him. I know our relationship may be hard to understand but—"

"Hard to understand, huh? Well if that isn't the fucking understatement of the year."

Paul dropped Lucia's hands and whipped around to see his father standing at the other end of the garage, his arms crossed over his chest and a look of disgust on his face. Standing beside him was Angel.

"What the fuck, *'mano*?" The packleader gave Paul a look of disbelief.

Paul frowned. "Angel? What are you doing here?"

"I came looking for you. Your old man was coming in to work on something and he let me in." He threw Paul's father a look of distrust. There had never been any love lost between the two of them although they appeared to be on the same side now, as Paul was dismally aware.

"Yeah, well...you found me." Paul spread his hands. "Here I am."

"Yeah but where have you been? And what the fuck have you been doing?" Angel frowned, moving closer with one eye trained on Laurent who stood quietly by Paul's side.

"What do you think? You heard the vampire." Paul's father walked forward too, pointing a finger at him. "You know, I always thought you and Angel here were fucking around and that was bad enough. But now I catch you with a fucking *vampire*? What the hell, boy, have you completely lost your mind?"

*Paul, Laurent whispered through their link. What would you like me to do? Would it be easier for you if I stepped outside?*

*No. Hell no.* Suddenly Paul was mad—more than mad. Fucking *furios*. What right did his father or his packleader have to say who he should be with? Who he should love? *You stay right here beside me*, he told Laurent. *I don't give a fuck what they think—we're together.*

"Well?" Paul's father bellowed, obviously unaware of the silent conversation going on right in front of him.

"I'm not crazy and I'm not ashamed. Laurent and I are together and I don't give a flying fuck if you like it or not." Paul reached for Laurent's hand and laced their fingers together defiantly. Laurent said nothing but squeezed his hand tightly in a silent show of support.

"Seriously?" Angel still looked like he couldn't believe it.

"C'mon, Angel—don't look so surprised." Paul narrowed his eyes. "After all the years you spent teasing me? Offering what you never intended to give? Are you really so fucking shocked that I found someone who would make good on his promises?"

Angel's face darkened. "I never promised you *shit*, you fucking *maricon*."

Paul waved his words off. "Yeah, whatever. Tell it however it makes you feel better, *'mano*."

"You're not my brother and you're not my friend. Not anymore." Angel spat on the floor. "But you *are* still a member of the *Locas*—for now. Which makes me your packleader. So drop the vamp and get your narrow ass over here, Skulls."

Paul lifted his chin and stared the other man in the eye. "Fuck you. I'm resigning from the pack—effective immediately."

Angel gave a disbelieving laugh. "*Resigning*? There's no resigning from the *Lunas Locas* and you fucking well know it. You die or get busted out. I was gonna bust you out since we had so much history together back in the day, but you're getting awful fucking close to door number two, Skulls."

Laurent stepped forward. "Are you threatening my beloved? Because I can assure you that such an offense would be fatal on your part." His voice was cool and deadly, his eyes like chips of hard green glass as he stared at Angel.

Angel growled, his eyes going wolf-gold. "You *hijo de puta*—you turned my best friend into a *mariposa*. I'm gonna fuck you up good."

"You'll have to go through me first." Paul stepped in front of Laurent, growling as he let his own wolf come to the surface. "I'm not fucking around, Angel. You touch a hair on Laurent's head and you're going to be sorry."

"That's it, get out of my garage." Paul's father made a disgusted motion at all of them. "You heard me, I've had it with this shit—*get out*." He looked directly at Paul. "And don't come back. Ever."

"Baby, you don't mean that." Lucia grabbed his arm but Paul's father shook her off.

"The hell I don't. Look at him—he's a fucking *faggot*, Lucia."

"It doesn't matter who Paul chooses to be with, he's still your son." Lucia's voice was soft. "And mine too. I won't stand by and let you make a mistake you'll both regret."

"You know what I regret? I regret that he was ever born in the first place." He looked at Paul. "Your mother was right to leave when she did. I'm glad she didn't stick around to find out what you are."

Paul felt like he'd been punched in the gut. A part of him realized that his father was just saying whatever he thought would hurt the most. But still, to have the old pain of his mother's desertion thrown in his face was almost too much to take. Without the love and support Laurent was sending through their link he didn't know what he would have done. "That's fucking low, man," he managed at last.

"No, what's low is being a faggot. A fucking *vampire-loving* faggot." Paul's father gestured at Angel. "Go ahead and do what you want to him, just do it outside my shop. I never want to see him again."

Lucia's mouth was quivering with suppressed emotion. "This is wrong and we're going to talk about exactly *how* wrong it is later." She looked at Paul. "Maybe you should go, *Paulito*. But I want you to know I still love you, no matter what you are or who you're with."

"We're going." Paul pulled Laurent closer to him, grateful for the warmth and courage he was pouring through the bond. "I'll talk to you later, Mom." He turned and pulled Laurent out the door, leaving the Chop Shop forever. He took a deep breath and the muggy Miami air felt like soup in his lungs. "Well that went well."

"I assume you are being sarcastic." Laurent squeezed his hand. "Paul, I am so sorry. I—"

The door banged behind them and suddenly Angel was standing there, glaring at Paul.

"Not so fast, Pauly. Your old man might be done with you but I'm not. It's time for some pack justice. Chulo!"

"Here, packleader." Chulo appeared from around the side of the building and behind him were Gordo, Shakes, Juanito and most of the rest of the pack.

Paul stared at them in disbelief. *Oh shit – now we're fucked*

*Courage, mon amour. We will not go down without a fight.* Laurent stepped out in front of Paul and glared at Angel. "You will not touch him unless you go through me first."

"That might be rather difficult as you're going to be coming with us."

Paul felt Laurent's surge of fear through their link at the sound of the new voice. Turning, he saw several well-dressed vamps gliding toward them from the shadows of the parking lot. Paul recognized one of the women from the vision he'd had of Laurent before their bond was complete. *That must be his mother.* And the older male vamp with a frown on his face looked too much like Laurent to be anything but his father. Paul shook his head. "Great, what is this—family fucking reunion night? You've got to be kidding me."

"I assure you, *mon amour*, this is no joke." Laurent's voice trembled slightly though he tried to keep it steady. His parents were there with several other vampires he didn't recognize and none of them looked happy. "Mother, Father. May I ask what you are doing here?"

"We've come to collect you. The ceremony is in an hour, you know." His mother frowned and sniffed delicately. "What is this place anyway, darling? It stinks of dog."

Angel and the rest of Paul's pack growled menacingly but Laurent's father raised a hand and addressed them directly. "We mean you no harm. We are only here for our son."

The volume of the growls increased. "Fucking vamps. Let's fuck 'em up," someone shouted. Howls of agreement answered the statement and for a moment Laurent thought they were going to come to blows. But then his father spoke again, raising his voice to be heard over the angry chorus.

"There is no need to fight. We will take our son and be on our way and you can have the wolf." He nodded at Paul but his eyes were fixed on Angel's the entire time he spoke. "I repeat, *we do not need to fight.*"

"Uh, yeah...maybe you're right." Angel nodded despite the angry growls of the rest of the pack. His eyes were glassy and he looked at Laurent's father as though he couldn't look away.

Paul was staring at his packleader in disbelief. *What's going on? What is he doing to Angel?*

*He's bespelling him,* Laurent sent. It was an impressive display of power and it seemed to be working. All his father's attention was concentrated on Angel as both pack and coven were set to spring on each other. Suddenly Laurent saw their chance. *Quick!* He squeezed Paul's hand. *Let's get away while they're focused on each other.*

*Good idea.* Slowly they began backing away. Laurent knew the exact location of the Spyder in the parking lot behind them. The key was in his hand and he was ready to drive as fast and as far as it took to get them free of their old lives. If they could just make it a little farther —

"Not so fast, little 'un." A cold hand had him by the arm and Laurent looked up to see that a perfectly enormous male vampire was impeding his retreat. Laurent didn't recognize him but it was obvious he had been made from a human rather than born to the Blood. Besides his cold-as-ice skin and lack of a heartbeat, his breath stank of the grave.

"Who are you? Let me go!" He tried to yank away from the unfamiliar male but the made vampire's grip only tightened.

"I'm the tracker your daddy sent to find you. And believe me, you boys gave me plenty to watch." He nodded at Paul and grinned, revealing blackened stumps where his teeth should have been as well as two yellowish curving fangs.

"Get off him, you fucker!" Paul threw a punch that landed right on the huge tracker's jaw. The made vampire staggered but shook it off. He grinned.

"Nice try, wolf boy, but I don't think so. See, I don't get my money 'less this boy's daddy has him safe and sound at home in time for his little ceremony. So I aim to deliver."

"Deliver this, *cabron*." Paul swung again but this time his fist was caught in midair by someone else.

"C'mon, Skulls—time to go home." It was Chulo with his arms locked around Paul's waist. Paul tried to twist around and punch him but suddenly the pack surged forward, surrounding him and the other wolf. Apparently Laurent's father had been successful in convincing them not to fight.

"Paul, no!" Laurent tried to reach him but suddenly his father was holding his other arm. And then someone slipped something so cold it burned around his wrists—silver restraints. Laurent began to feel weaker at once.

"Let him go, Laurent," his father growled. "We have no time for this now—the ceremony is due to begin soon and the council still has to approve you. Not that they'll want to if they catch wind of tonight's little episode." He shook Laurent roughly. "What the hell were you thinking, running off with a were? If word of this gets out we're *ruined*."

His father went on and on, his voice getting angrier and angrier, but Laurent barely heard him. All he could see was the snarling wolf pack dragging Paul off, away from him. And all he could feel was his lover's fear and anguish as they were parted.

He tried again to get loose and go after Paul but the hands holding his arms were too strong and the silver made him weak. He was trapped—they both were. Trapped and separated and Laurent didn't know when or if he would see his *Coeur de Sang* again.

## Chapter Fifteen

“What the fuck was that?” Chulo demanded as they dragged Paul out of the trunk of Angel’s tricked-out lowrider. They’d stuffed him in there after tying his hands behind his back with silver-laced duct tape that Angel had gotten from his uncle. The tape was expensive and specially made for restraining pack members who were in disgrace. Bound in the dark and weakened by silver, it hadn’t exactly been the best ride of Paul’s life.

“What the fuck was *what*?” Angel looked pissed but Chulo was too dumb to know when to shut his mouth.

“You know *what*. We were gonna fuck those *muertos* up and then you just stopped when that tall one said to. He was all ‘these aren’t the droids you’re looking for’ and you folded like a house of cards. What’s the deal?”

“Shut the fuck up,” Angel snapped. “We came to get Skulls and we got him—that’s all that matters.” He shook Paul’s arm for emphasis and dragged him roughly up the sagging front steps of the pack’s bungalow.

Paul would have said something but there was duct tape on his mouth too. He thought about trying to chew through it but the silver filaments would have made him even sicker and weaker than he already was. Trouble...he was in so much fucking trouble. The pack wanted blood and Angel would be more than willing to give it to them. The packleader had been humiliated in front of everyone when he gave in to the vampire’s mind games. And he would see that as all Paul’s fault.

*Paul? Paul, are you well?* Laurent’s voice through their link was faint and hard to hear. Paul wasn’t sure if that was because of the distance between them or the silver he was bound with. He could tell, though, that Laurent was completely focused on him—all the way tuned in. Which was probably not a good thing considering what Nana had said about them feeling each other’s pain. And if he died... *No. Not gonna happen.* Paul pushed the thought away. Angel wouldn’t do that no matter how pissed he was—they had too much history together.

*I’m good,* he sent, trying to sound stronger than he felt. *Uh, look, Laurent, maybe you better tune me out for a while.*

*And leave you alone, bound and gagged? No! I would come to you now if I could but my father has me bound with silver restraints. I will find a way to get to you though—I must!*

*You worry about your situation and I’ll worry about mine, babe,* Paul sent.

*No, truly, mon amour, I will come to you somehow—I swear it.*

Through the link Paul caught a quick flash of Laurent’s worry for him, as well as the other man’s surroundings. Laurent was standing in a small, windowless room that

was a hive of activity. People were coming and going and at least three of them were working on getting Laurent into some kind of fancy outfit. He was wearing tight black pants tucked into high leather boots and a long pale green brocade coat with lace dripping from the neck and sleeves that concealed the silver bracelets locked around his wrists. The clothing looked like something out of one of the period piece movies Lucia was always making Paul watch when it was her turn to pick on movie night.

*What the fuck are they doing to you – what's with the outfit? You look all Masterpiece Theater and shit,* Paul sent, glad to have a distraction from his own impending doom.

*They are preparing me to stand before the council – the ruling body of elder vampires. They must approve me as fit before I take my father's title.*

*Hmm, I'm guessing the approval process isn't helped any by the fact that they caught us together, huh?*

*It does complicate the matter some. My father is trying to hush it up but –*

A sharp slap across the face broke Paul's concentration and he lost the tenuous connection.

"Look at me when I talk to you." Angel was right in his face looking pissed. "What the fuck is wrong with you anyway?" He ripped the duct tape off Paul's mouth, taking plenty of skin with it.

Paul winced and jerked back. Through the link he could feel Laurent feeling the echo of his pain. He thought of tuning the vampire out but somehow he just couldn't – even though Laurent couldn't come to him physically, Paul needed the emotional support he was pouring through their bond.

"I said what the fuck is wrong with you? Answer me!" Angel demanded.

"Nothing." Paul spit blood from a cut lip. "Just thinking, that's all."

"Yeah, thinking about how we're gonna fuck 'im up." Chulo laughed and the other wolves joined in until Angel held up a hand for silence.

"Leave us, all of you. I need to talk to Paul on my own."

"Why you need to see him alone? I thought this was gonna be pack justice." Chulo looked sullen.

"Yeah, *pendejo*, this is pack justice and I'm the packleader. So do what I fucking say or you're going to be next after I finish with him," Angel growled.

"Sorry." Chulo and the rest of the wolves slunk out of the room. Mercedes was the last out the door. She blew Paul a kiss on her way out.

*"Hasta la vista, cabron."*

"Bitch," Paul growled.

"Witch," she corrected him. "And I have some more Wolf's Bane with your name on it as soon as Angel is finished with you."

Angel frowned. "No more of that shit, Mercedes. It's toxic to all of us – you shouldn't be fucking around with it. Leave Paul to me."



"Yes, packleader." But there was an unpleasant gleam in her poison-green eyes as she left, shutting the door behind her.

Angel started pacing. Paul, still kneeling on the hard wooden floor with his arms tied behind his back, watched warily. He could feel Laurent in the back of his head, watching and listening. The vampire didn't say anything but he was sending waves of comfort and support through the bond that made Paul feel calm even though he knew none of this could end well.

"Okay," Angel said at last, stopping in front of him. "I get it that you're into other guys. I guess I always kind of knew that about you."

"Knew it and used it." Paul looked up at him. "Don't try to deny it. You liked having me on the string but you were never going to deliver."

Angel frowned. "That's fucked up. Don't talk like that."

"I'll talk however I fucking want. Tell me, Angel, were you ever going to give me a taste? Or did you just want to keep me close to shore up your position as packleader?"

"I told you, don't talk like that. I'm not...that way. I'm not fucking gay."

Paul laughed even though it hurt his split lip. "You sound like me two weeks ago."

"That's right, two weeks—it's only been two weeks! What *happened* to you?" Angel knelt down, getting on Paul's level. "How could you do that, *'mano*? And with a fucking vamp? Are you under some kind of spell or something? I saw the way they can make you do things you don't really want to do—the way that other one convinced me not to fight even though I wanted to kick his ass. Is that what he did to you?"

"Laurent didn't do anything but love me," Paul said softly. "I met him in the park the night you sent me to take point and there was this... I don't know, this instant connection. His people have a name for it—*Coeur de Sang*. It's like you have a soul mate out there you never knew about but once you touch them..." He shrugged. "That's it. You just know."

"Know what?" Angel looked confused.

"That you belong together. That you can never be with anyone else. And then after he sucked out the Wolf's Bane that *pinche puta* Mercedes infected me with, we had an even deeper connection. I didn't mean for it to last but I couldn't help it. Hell, after a while I didn't *want* to help it." He sighed. "Look, Angel, I wanted to tell you about it. We've been best friends since fifth grade—I figured I owed it to you to let you know I wanted out of the pack instead of just up and leaving. That's one reason I came back."

"I can't let you out just like that, Paul. You know that." Angel shook his head.

Paul sighed. "Yeah, that's why I was going to try to talk to you in private. Without the rest of the pack. But I can't stay—I have to go with Laurent. He needs me."

It looked to Paul like Angel was wavering between rage and confusion but finally rage won out. "*He needs me*," he mimicked savagely. "Will you fucking listen to yourself? This is a *vampire* we're talking about—a *muerto*. We hunt their dead asses down and *kill them*. Look at you." He gestured contemptuously at the fang marks on

Paul's neck. "You let him use you like a fucking chew toy. Let him fuck you and bite you and...and...I mean it's *disgusting*."

"Actually *I* was fucking *him* when he bit me. That's how we do it." Paul knew he was only making the situation worse, throwing gasoline on the fire, but he couldn't help it. Angel had kept him hanging for literally years, panting after him like a trained dog. *Not your dog anymore, 'mano. And I'm never going to be again.*

"You *hijo de puta*." Angel slapped him again, hard enough that Paul's head rocked back and he saw stars. "You make me fucking *sick*."

"Yeah, right—like you never wanted it from another guy." Paul grinned up at him recklessly through red-stained teeth. "I've seen the look on your face when you bust a wolf out of the pack and make him suck your dick. You fucking love every minute of it."

"Shut up!" Angel screamed. "That's fucked up—it's sick!"

"It's *true*," Paul shouted back. "True and you know it. But you want to know what the sick thing is? For years I wondered what it would be like—to be the one on my knees in front of you, sucking you. I *wanted* that. I wanted *you*. But you were never going to let me have you, Angel, so I found somebody else who would." His voice dropped and he stared his best friend in the eyes. "Someone who loves me like you never could."

Angel's face was twisted in rage and pain and his hands were balled at his sides in fists. Looking at him, Paul realized there were actually *tears* in his eyes. He had never seen his normally cool and collected packleader look so wild, so out of control. *Shouldn't have said all that. I pushed him too far.* But it was something he'd been waiting to say for years and it was too late to unsay it now.

"That's it." Angel stood and crossed his arms over his chest. "I wanted to help you, Paul, but you're leaving me no fucking choice."

"Angel—"

"No. There's nothing more to say." Turning, he walked to the door and threw it open. "Everybody back in here. It's time for pack justice. And this time I fucking mean it."

*Paul, are you all right? What's happening?* Laurent's voice came through their link.

*I don't know, babe, but I think it's gonna be bad. I want you to tune me out now—all the way out. Don't want you to see this. Don't want you to feel it either.*

*Never. Your pain is my pain, I won't leave you.*

*But what if...* Paul didn't want to say it, but it had to be said. *What if they kill me? I'll take you down too. I hate to say it but maybe...maybe it's time to think of breaking the bond.*

*What? No—you swore to me that you would never do that, never try that again.* Laurent sounded almost desperate. *Please, Paul...*

Paul started to answer but then Angel kicked him, breaking his concentration.

"Pay attention—your judgment is here, *maricon*."

Paul thought of saying he wasn't the only *maricon* in the room but decided he'd pushed things far enough already. Instead he watched as Chulo and the pack filed in, their eyes wolf-yellow with blood lust. *I'm just an outsider to them*, he realized as the pack surrounded him. *For so many years I ran with the Locas but I was never one of them. Not really.*

Angel came to stand in front of him, shouldering the other wolves out of the way to do so. He looked down at Paul, his eyes red and his mouth a trembling sneer of hatred. "Paul Kraskowski...Skulls, you have been accused of consorting with the enemy. You were caught with a vampire—a *male* vampire—and you admitted that you've been doing...all kinds of sick shit with him. What the fuck do you have to say for yourself?"

*Say whatever you need to in order to get out alive. Deny me and what we are to each other. I don't care. Save yourself, mon amour*, Laurent's voice whispered urgently in his head.

*No. I can't lie anymore. This is who I am.*

Paul lifted his chin and words that he'd been denying, even to himself, suddenly flowed to his lips. "What do I have to say for myself? That I love him. I love Laurent and I want to be with him. If that means I can't run with the *Lunas Locas* anymore, then so be it."

"Fine, if that's the way you want it." Angel took a deep breath, his eyes filled with pain and rage. "Paul, you've been my second wolf for years and my friend for longer than that. I fucking hate to bust you out but—"

"What?" Chulo interrupted. "That's fucking weak, man—we need to kill this *pinche cabron*."

"*Hijo de puta!*" Angel turned on his cousin and punched him full in the mouth. Chulo fell over backward and landed on his ass. He looked up, his eyes wide and wounded.

"Hey, what the fuck?" He spit blood on the floor.

"I am the packleader here," Angel stormed. "I make the decisions and if you don't shut your fucking mouth I'll shut it for you—*permanently*."

"Okay, okay. *Dios*," Chulo muttered. "I was just saying—"

"Well don't. Just fucking keep your mouth shut and let me get through this." Angel took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He was silent for a long moment until his fists unclenched and he stopped shaking. When he turned back to Paul and opened his eyes, they were flat, black buttons showing no emotion at all.

"Uh, packleader?" one of the wolves asked uncertainly.

Angel nodded at Paul. "Kill him."

\* \* \* \* \*

"You don't understand, Father. I must go to him! They're going to *kill* him." Laurent struggled, throwing himself against the hands restraining him again and again,

wild with grief and fear. The silver restraining bracelets around his wrists made him sick and weak but that didn't matter. He had to get to Paul, had to stop them, had to —

A stinging pain across his face broke the panic that gripped him and he realized that his father had slapped him. "Get hold of yourself, Laurent. At least *try* to comport yourself with some dignity."

"But...they'll kill him." It was the only thought in his head, that and the hideous frustration that he was trapped here, held against his will by his own kind while, somewhere across the vast urban sprawl of the city, Paul was bound and helpless without him. It didn't matter that Laurent would die too—he just didn't want to die alone. Didn't want his last moments to be without the man he loved. "They're going to kill him," he said again, dully.

"Good. It will save me the trouble of doing it myself. Now let me see..." His father examined Laurent's silk brocade coat and fluffed the lace cravat at his throat. "I think you look respectable, if a bit wild. The council need never know any of this foolishness took place."

"It is *not* foolishness—it is love." Laurent stopped struggling and faced his father directly. "I love him, Father. I don't want your title or the lands and wealth that go with it. Not if it means I cannot also have Paul by my side. I renounce them. I renounce *you*."

His father slapped him again and then straightened his cravat. "That is *enough*. I won't hear such ravings."

"But you have to let me go—I am of age and I have renounced my right to our name and title." Laurent tried to pull away. "Give me the keys to these damn silver restraints and set me free."

"I will do nothing of the kind." His father surveyed him coolly. "Such ravings are simply a sign of your madness—why else would you have gone with a were in the first place? If I had not already gathered the council I would put this ceremony off but as things lie, we must go through with it. Hopefully when the dog is dead, your symptoms will pass."

"Your father is quite right, my darling." His mother glided into view, radiant in a silver beaded Vera Wang gown. "It's time you got over this little case of puppy love and moved on with your life. I've picked a lovely girl for your consort—she won't mind a bit if you bed men on the side. So long as they don't have fleas." She sniffed.

"I can't move on—Paul *is* my life, more than you know." Laurent glared at them both. "You don't understand—we are *bonded*. If he dies, I die—doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Pish." His mother waved dismissively. "You can survive the death of a blood bond—people do it all the time."

"This is no ordinary bond," Laurent protested. "Paul is my *Coeur de Sang*."

"Such nonsense—there is no such thing, no matter what your old nurse told you." His father glared at his mother. "You should have told me he was going to see her earlier—look at all the problems it has caused."

"How was I to know he was up there with a mangy were? Anyway, don't blame me—I'm sure he gets his abysmal taste in men from you."

"How dare you? I would *never* bed a were." His father frowned. "That goes beyond poor taste and into the realm of lunacy—which he undoubtedly got from *your* side of the family."

Laurent could bear their bickering no longer. "Mother, Father, please, Paul *needs* me. I *must* go."

"You'll do nothing of the sort." His mother smiled and patted his cheek. "Now be a good boy and do as you are told."

"We're going out to face the council now and you'll behave properly if you know what's good for you." Laurent's father looked at the huge made vamp, the tracker he'd sent to find Laurent in the first place. "Bring him in right behind me and see that he does as he's told." Then he held out his arm to Laurent's mother who took it with a nod.

"Come, darling, this is a great day for our family." She smiled brightly at Laurent.

"Your mother is right. And if you do anything to ruin it or dishonor the family name I'll see your skin stripped from your body." Laurent's father gave him one last glare and then his parents turned and left the room where he'd been dressed and held.

"C'mon, boy. Let's do like your daddy said." The tracker propelled him out the door, his hands firm on Laurent's shoulders to keep him upright. By then, Laurent needed the support—he could barely stand, let alone walk.

He could feel the echoes of pain through his link with Paul. They were kicking him, beating him—his wolf was in agony. Laurent felt every punch, every kick, every blow that fell but he refused to tune Paul out. He kept the link as wide open as he could and poured as much strength as he could muster toward his lover. *Be strong—I will come to you. I don't know how but I will get free and come to you, mon amour.*

There was no answer from Paul's end. Only pain.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Kill him! I said kill him, you fucking *pendejos*. Put your fucking backs into it!"

Angel was probably shouting but Paul could barely hear him. His ears were going—probably from being kicked in the head so many times. His vision was blurry too, one eye almost swollen shut and the other clouded by blood.

*Gonna die now. I'm sorry, Laurent...so sorry but I can't take you down with me. Love you too much.* He thought the words but was too weak to send them through the link. Too weak to do anything but curl up and hurt and bleed. He tried to shield himself from the worst of the blows but his arms were still taped behind his back. And he was so fucking *cold*. He could feel Laurent sending love and strength through their link and it helped but not enough. Nothing could be enough now, when his own pack had turned on him. He'd been beaten before, back when he was first jumped-in to the *Locas* but that had

been mild compared to this. This was...this was going to be his death. And Laurent's too if he didn't do something about it.

With the last of his strength, Paul reached inside himself and imagined gripping the slender trunk of the golden tree rooted in his heart. *This is going to hurt like hell.* It was true—this was going to hurt more than anything his pack was doing to him. But it had to be done.

*I love you, Laurent. I should have told you that before. Sorry I didn't. But I'm telling you now...I love you.* Somehow he was able to send the message. He had a blurred image of Laurent standing in front of a table with people all around. The vampire had an agonized look on his face, doubtless because he could feel Paul's pain. Well, he wasn't going to feel it anymore and he wasn't going to die—Paul would fucking well see to that.

*Love you,* he sent and then, bracing himself, he tightened his mental grip on the slender golden tree and pulled with all his might.

\* \* \* \* \*

"We're here, little buddy. Look alive," muttered the tracker.

Laurent looked up and saw that he was standing in the formal dining room of the Coconut Grove villa. Seated at the table were three ancient vampires, all born to the Blood, of course. A made vampire would never be allowed in the council. Standing to either side of the table were the other people, vampires and human alike, who made up his father's retinue. All of them waited in hushed, expectant silence for the ceremony to begin.

Laurent looked at them but their faces blurred together. All he could see was Paul, lying in a bloody heap on the hard, dirty floor as the wolves of his former pack beat him and kicked him to death. *Paul, hold on...hold on! I have to get away—have to get to you somehow.* But the tracker was holding him tightly and two other massive vampires obviously in his father's employ guarded the only exit from the room. He was trapped, stuck.

"We are gathered here today in order to pass the title of Viscount of the Blood to Laurent Montcrieve," intoned one of the ancient council members. "As you all know—"

"I do not want the title." Inside Laurent felt as bruised and bloody as his lover was but he forced himself to stand erect and speak loudly and clearly, making sure there could be no mistake.

"Excuse me but...what? What was that you said?" The eldest council member, who had to be close to a thousand, frowned up at Laurent.

"I, Laurent, do now, here and forevermore renounce and forswear myself of the name of Montcrieve and the title of Viscount of the Blood," Laurent said rapidly. There was a muted gasp from those gathered in the room and from the corner of his eye he

could see his father's angry face but he didn't care. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered but getting free to go to Paul.

"Laurent—" His mother started but Laurent wasn't done yet.

"I have found my *Coeur de Sang* and he is a were. A werewolf," he said clearly. "I have formed a blood bond with him and I have no interest in choosing a consort from any of the ladies my father has assembled here." He nodded to one side of the room where a trio of lovely young women of the Blood were standing. They were all dressed as stunningly as his mother and their eyes were wide with shock. Laurent could not have done more to ruin his father's plan if he'd publically admitted to a preference for incest or bestiality.

*There, now they will have to let me go—I am an outcast. Paul, can you hear me? I will be coming to you soon!* Laurent listened but he didn't get the sense that his lover had understood him. Both of them wearing silver certainly weakened the connection. Cursing the restraints around his wrists, he tried again. *Paul? I am coming to you. Hold on, mon amour! Hold on to life!* Still he got no sense of recognition. Then...

*I love you, Laurent. I should have told you that before. Sorry I didn't. But I'm telling you now...I love you.*

*I love you too. I—* And then the wrenching pain began. Laurent fell to his knees as he felt Paul uproot his end of their blood bond. His own end, the silver tree that had taken root in his heart the night they had first made love, was untouched. But Laurent felt it begin to wither at once, like a plant dying for lack of sunshine or rain.

*Both of us, the bond needs both of us to live,* he thought weakly and then rough hands were dragging him away from the council and out of the room.

*Paul,* he sent, knowing it was useless but not able to help trying anyway. *Paul, please...please...*

But there was no answer from Paul's side of their link—even the pain was gone, replaced by a horrible numbness. Laurent realized with growing dread that he could no longer hear Paul or feel him at all.

The bond was broken and it could never be repaired.

## Chapter Sixteen

When he woke up the beating had stopped. At first Paul didn't know what to think. *Where am I? Am I dead?* He certainly felt dead—*wished* he were dead. The hole in his heart where his half of the bond had been ached like an empty socket. He had that feeling again—the same one he'd had when he tuned Laurent all the way down and out. The feeling of being horribly alone in his skin with no one to love him. Only this time it was a hundred thousand times worse. This time it was permanent. *Laurent...Dios, so sorry. I miss you so much already. I wish –*

"He's dead," a familiar voice said near his ear.

"Are you sure? Because it looked to me like maybe he was still breathing. I got a gun in my car—a .44 loaded with silver caps. We can make sure." The second voice sounded like Chulo.

"I said he's fucking dead!" The first voice again. It was Angel, Paul was sure of it.

"Okay, okay. So we need to get rid of him. The body, I mean. You wanna take him to the dump? Or just throw him in the gulf?"

"I'll deal with it," Angel growled.

"That's not how it's supposed to go," a feminine voice objected. *Mercedes*, Paul realized. "He's a wolf who died in disgrace. According to pack law –"

"Don't you fucking dare tell *me* about pack law, you *pinche puta*," Angel roared so loudly that Paul almost flinched. "I fucking *wrote* the pack law and I'll change it any damn time I want. Now get the fuck out of my face and let me deal with this. All of you."

There was some angry mumbling and shuffling and then Paul sensed that the room was clearing out. Soon it was empty except for him and Angel.

"Paul..." Angel knelt by him and Paul dared to open one eye. Not that he could open it very much, it was almost swollen shut. "Paul...Pauly..." Angel was crying, his tears falling on Paul's face and stinging the fresh cuts.

"Angel?" he croaked, trying to sit up.

"Shhh—lie still. Just lie there awhile. Got to make sure everybody's gone."

"You..." Paul coughed. Every part of him ached. "Thought you were gonna kill me, *'mano*."

"I should've but...I couldn't. Couldn't let them." Angel sat back and swiped the back of one hand angrily across his eyes. "Fuck, man...why'd you have to change?"



"I didn't change, not really." Paul tried again to get up and couldn't. He was too weak. Too hurt. "I've always been this way. Just...couldn't admit it until...until Laurent showed me how."

Angel stuck a finger in his face. "Don't you fucking talk about him to me. He took you away from me. He stole my best friend and turned him into a...into a..."

"Go ahead and say it—you said it before. I'm a faggot. A *maricon*. A *mariposa*. I'm gay." Paul laughed and the sound hurt coming out of his throat. "*Dios*, I spent so long denying that. Thinking if I didn't do this or didn't do that it wouldn't be true. And now when I finally realize what the truth really is, it doesn't matter anymore."

"Why you say that?" Angel sniffed and pulled a razor-sharp butterfly knife out of his pocket. He twirled it expertly until the blade popped into view and then went to work on the duct tape wrapped around Paul's wrists. "You're gonna make it." He sawed at the tape, cursing when the silver filaments stung his unprotected flesh. "Soon as I get you out of this fucking tape you'll heal in no time. Did I ever tell you my uncle gets this tape made special for torture? *Dios*, you don't want to know where he puts it when he's breaking some sad *cabron* down or busting them out."

Paul lay still, letting his ex-packleader and best friend work on the tape, letting Angel's words flow over him. He was going to live. He was going to wake up tomorrow morning and breathe in and out and walk around and still fucking *exist*. Not that it mattered. Nothing mattered now that he had broken the bond. *I ache for him. For the way he touched me, for the feel of him in my mind. But he's gone and I can never get him back.* He didn't even know what had happened to Laurent. The last thing he'd seen, he'd been standing in front of the council and it had looked like he was being judged. Judged by the other vampires and found wanting.

Looking up, Paul saw that the night was officially over. Outside the small, dirty window the sun was rising—it was going to be another sweltering Miami day. For the first time an icy shard of fear pierced his heart. *Laurent, what will they do to you? Where are you? Are you safe?*

He wished with all his heart that he could send the questions through their link but when he tried, it was like shouting into a dead telephone. The bond was well and truly broken, at least on his end. He hadn't tampered with Laurent's end but what good was it if Laurent's part of the bond still worked? It would be like talking into a Walkie-Talkie with no one at the other end.

"Gonna get you out of here," Angel was saying as he finished stripping the tape off Paul's wrists and forearms. "Just as soon as everybody else is gone. So just lie there and heal a few minutes."

Paul wanted to get up and go looking for Laurent but he had no choice but to do what Angel said. He was still too wounded, too weak to go anywhere. *But I'll be well soon and then I'll find you, babe. Even if it's too late for our bond, at least I can be sure you're safe.*

\* \* \* \* \*

"You stupid, ignorant, ungrateful little *bastard*!" Laurent's father pushed him up against the wall in the hallway and slapped him again and again, reddening his cheeks as he inflicted the stinging pain.

Laurent stood there, silent and uncomplaining. Why should he protest or try to protect himself? The only reason he had for living was gone. Paul had broken their bond and even now was probably dead on the floor of the dirty, ramshackle house his pack kept as a hideout.

"Rousard, stop it! Stop it at once!" Laurent's mother was suddenly there, holding his father's arm to stop the blows. But Laurent's father wasn't so easily stopped.

"This little fool has ruined us! We'll never be received in polite society again! I'll be lucky to keep the title myself, let alone pass it on to anyone else."

"It isn't his fault," Laurent's mother protested. "He's mad! Completely insane, darling. There's no other explanation for such behavior. That dreadful were must have bitten him and given him something. Some kind of mental illness."

"I don't care if he's mad as a hatter, he must *pay*." His father clenched his hands into fists and looked up and down the deserted hallway. "Tracker? Where's the tracker?"

"Here, boss." The huge made vampire suddenly appeared out of nowhere. "Whatcha need?"

"Take him and throw him out into the sunlight. The direct sunlight, mind you—not the shade. And see to it he doesn't get back into the house."

"Rousard, no!" Laurent's mother protested. "Laurent is still our son."

"He renounced the family name and the right to my title. He shamed us all in front of the council. He is no son of mine." Laurent's father gave him a final disgusted look and nodded at the tracker. "Do it."

"Uh..." The immense vampire looked uncomfortable. "I would, boss, but I wasn't born to the Blood like you. I'm a made vamp and we're a whole helluva lot more vulnerable to the sun than your kind."

"Then get someone else to help you," Laurent's father snapped. "I don't care how you do it but I won't have him under my roof one moment longer." He turned to Laurent's mother and held out his arm. "Come, Lisette."

Laurent's mother hesitated a moment, looking at him. "But—"

"I said *come*." His father's voice cracked like a whip.

"Go, Mother." Laurent nodded at her wearily. "It doesn't matter what happens to me. If Paul is dead, I want to die too."

For a moment he thought he saw a glimmer of tears in her eyes. Then she shook her head and took his father's arm. Together they swept down the hallway, doubtless going back to where the council was seated to try to undo the damage Laurent had done. He

took scant satisfaction in the knowledge that their task was probably impossible. Nothing mattered now that Paul was gone from his life. If his father hadn't ordered him thrown out into the sunlight, he probably would have walked out into it of his own volition. *At least it will be a quick death.* Even a vampire born to the Blood with a lineage as ancient as his couldn't survive being out in the open with no protection for long, especially under the brutal Miami sun.

"C'mon, boy, let's get going." The tracker took him by the arm and began propelling him along the hallway, in the opposite direction from which his parents had gone. Again, Laurent put up no resistance.

He staggered along in the tracker's grip, feeling clumsy and weak. The silver bracelets still locked around his wrists sapped his strength and the aching hole inside him where Paul's half of their bond had been was like a fresh wound, seeping blood. *Weak. I feel so weak. I may expire before I even reach the outside.* The thought held no terror for him. Nothing frightened him anymore now that the worst had happened.

"Ah, there you are." Laurent looked up to see Celeste standing there, blocking their path.

"Yeah, here we are but who the hell are you?" the tracker growled.

"I was sent by my Lady Lisette. She said you needed some help to get rid of the boy?" Celeste arched one delicate eyebrow at the big tracker.

"Thanks but I can manage." He tried to push past her but Celeste stood her ground. "I was told by my lady to take over from here. Your master needs you in the formal dining room—apparently there's some kind of trouble with the other guests."

"Why the hell didn't you say so in the first place?" The tracker shoved Laurent at her and ran back the other way. When Rousard Montcrieve said jump, his servants obeyed and with good reason.

"Quickly." Celeste took Laurent's arm and pulled him past the master bedroom and into the back part of the house. "We haven't much time."

"Where are you taking me?" he mumbled. They weren't making very good time. Celeste was strong but he was leaning on her heavily and she was fumbling with his wrists and a small golden key as they walked.

"To the garage. Hurry, that great idiot will be back all too soon when he finds I have lied."

"You lied? Why?" Laurent stumbled and almost fell but then Celeste got the first silver bracelet off his wrist and he began to feel stronger. She began working on the other at once.

"For your mother's sake. She doesn't want you dead—I felt it through our bond."

"Your bond?" Laurent frowned as she freed his other wrist and tossed the silver bracelet aside. "But your bond is dead—long dead. You and my mother haven't been lovers for —"

"Well over two hundred years," she finished for him. "But it doesn't matter. Even when a blood bond has died, there is still a glimmer—a very faint spark—especially when the person you were bonded to was very dear to you. I loved your mother more than my own life—even though we can no longer communicate through our link, I can still feel what she feels. It's very faint—more like an echo of emotion than the real thing. But it's enough to let me know now that she doesn't wish you dead."

"I thank you for trying to save me then," Laurent said dully. "But I think I would rather die. My beloved has severed our bond—I have no further reason to go on living."

Celeste slapped him lightly across the cheek. "How can you speak such foolishness? Your *Coeur de Sang* may yet live. You must go to him!"

"I...you..." Laurent blinked in surprise. "You believe in the legend of the *Coeur de Sang*?"

"Of course I do—I was your mother's *Coeur de Sang*."

"What? Are you certain?" Laurent could barely believe it. His own mother had found her Heart's Blood? And then lost her? "I don't understand," he said as Celeste pulled him into the wide triple garage that served the main house.

"We were going to run away together. You see, she found me after she was already wed to your father. But...he discovered our plans and forced your mother to break our bond." Tears glimmered in Celeste's large eyes. "She was allowed to turn me and keep me with her as a companion and I have stayed with her all these years for the memory of our love. Our friendship now is but a pale echo of the burning passion we once had but it is still better than anything else I could have with another."

"Forgive me. I-I had no idea."

"Of course you didn't." Celeste swiped hastily at her eyes and then went to the pegboard where around six different sets of keys were hung. "Here." She took down a set and threw it to him. "Take mine—it's the silver Jaguar and it has the best tinting."

Laurent snatched the keys out of the air easily. Now that the silver restraint bracelets were gone, his strength and reflexes were returning. But he still didn't know how long he would last in the sun, despite the tinted windows in the Jaguar. He couldn't help remembering his last foray into daylight and he hadn't even been driving then.

"Hurry." Celeste twisted her fingers together nervously. "I hear them coming."

"Thank you." Laurent nodded at her. "I gravely misjudged you."

"That doesn't matter. Go to your beloved—save him if you can. Heal what was broken."

Laurent shook his head sadly. "I fear I cannot. Once broken the bond is gone forever. Nana told me so."

Celeste frowned. "Your nurse is a very wise woman but even the wisest among us don't know everything. There was a time when I thought your mother and I might have

healed the rift between us, but she was too frightened of your father to try. Go and do what you can, Laurent. Where there is life, there is hope."

"Maybe you are right." Laurent unlocked the silver Jaguar and slid behind the wheel.

"I know I am." Celeste gave him a last smile and then pressed the garage door opener. "Good luck, Laurent. Feel for the spark and let it lead you to your love." Then, as the wide rectangular door opened and the deadly sunlight began creeping across the concrete floor, she ducked quickly out of the garage.

*Feel for the spark.* Laurent started the car, squinting against the blinding rays of the sun. Hanging from the rearview mirror he saw a pair of large, mirrored D&G sunglasses he recognized as his mother's. She probably left them here for the times she had to drive Celeste's car instead of her own. Laurent put them on and put the car into drive just as the back door flew open again. He heard angry shouting that sounded like his father but he didn't wait to see if he was right. Instead he hit the gas and flew blindly out onto the curving, white gravel drive.

Despite the tinted windows, the sun was cruelly bright and this time he had no coat with a hood to cover his face. Laurent could feel the ball of fire in the sky squeezing him like a giant fist, trying to wring him dry, but he tried not to think about it. Instead, he concentrated on Celeste's last piece of advice. If she was right, he should still be able to feel an echo of Paul somewhere from the remnants of their bond. If, that was, he was still alive. Laurent hadn't been able to feel him earlier but maybe the pain of the severed link had still been too intense. Or maybe Paul had been unconscious?

Laurent was almost afraid to try but he knew he had to. If there was a chance, any chance at all that Paul was still alive then he had to save him. Even if the bond between them was dead and there was no hope of reviving it, Paul was still the love of his life. *I promised him I would come to him – I must fulfill that promise no matter what.*

He couldn't afford to close his eyes since he was driving through Miami traffic but he took a deep breath and reached inside himself, probing carefully for the remains of their bond. He could feel the empty place where Paul's half of the bond had been—more like a bloody socket than a hole where a plant has been uprooted. There was nothing there.

Laurent almost gave up in despair but then he thought to feel for his own half of the bond. The silver tree was there but it hung limply, its branches drooping and apparently dead. Still, when Laurent touched it, he felt something. A tiny jolt—like something had shocked him. Could this be the spark Celeste had spoken of? He felt it again and this time it came with a faint buzzing sensation that somehow turned into... *Pain...despair...weariness...* As Celeste had said, it was more an echo of emotion than a true emotion but Laurent was sure he felt it and it was coming from Paul.

*He's alive. I'm sure of it!* Yes, Paul was most definitely alive, but for how long? *I must get to him.* The sun stabbed at his eyes through the dark glasses like knives and he could feel the daylight sapping his strength already but Laurent didn't care. Squinting his

eyes against the sunlight, he floored the accelerator and pushed the silver Jaguar to the limit.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I think everybody's gone now. We can probably go out." Angel helped Paul to his feet.

"Okay, sure." Paul stretched experimentally and was cautiously glad to see that he was feeling slightly better—physically, anyway. Inside he still ached and throbbed, missing Laurent. But at least now that the silver was gone his were metabolism was beginning to kick in.

"You're looking better." Angel nodded at him approvingly. "I mean, your face still looks like raw hamburger but you know, not much change there. You always were an ugly *hijo de puta*." He laughed and Paul tried to laugh with him but he couldn't manage much more than a weak chuckle. Now that he was healing on the outside, it seemed the pain inside, the pain of the broken bond, was growing worse. It was as though his outer aches had distracted him and now that they were lessening he had nothing to keep his mind off his inner agony.

"Come on." Straightening up with an effort, he forced himself to walk toward the door. "We need to get going."

"Yeah? What's your hurry? Got somewhere else to go get the shit kicked out of you?" Angel sauntered along behind him, hands stuffed deep in the pockets of his baggy jean shorts like nothing had ever happened. Now that Paul was obviously going to be all right he seemed to think that everything could go back to normal somehow.

*No, I have a lover to save*, Paul thought of saying as he turned the knob and stepped out onto the sagging porch. But he didn't need to get Angel riled up again and besides, he didn't even know if that was the right word for Laurent—not anymore. Not now that their bond was broken. But if—

"Hold it right there." Someone grabbed him from behind in a chokehold and twisted his arms behind his back.

"I told you he wasn't dead! I knew it!" Mercedes was suddenly standing in front of him with an evil grin on her face. "I knew Angel wouldn't really kill him."

"Yeah, you were right." The voice behind him had to be Chulo. "You got it just right, baby."

"What the fuck?" Angel stepped out onto the porch, glaring. "What the fuck are you two still doing here?"

"Exposing you, *packleader*." Mercedes spat the title sarcastically. "We've been suspecting there was something going on between you and Skulls for a while now. Why else would you favor him over your own flesh and blood?" She nodded at Chulo who was still holding Paul in a grip so tight he could barely breathe, let alone fight back in his weakened state.

"I favored Paul over my own flesh and blood because my own flesh and blood is a fucking numbnuts *pendejo*. Now let him go—he's been fucked with enough today."

"I don't think so." Mercedes' eyes gleamed. "And don't come another step closer, Angel," she added when the packleader started to advance on her. "I have enough Wolf's Bane under my nails to put down a whole pack, let alone one *maricon*, has-been packleader."

"*Pinche puta*—you're going to pay for this," Angel snarled but held his ground.

"No she's not. She's going to become the pack's official *bruja* and my mate. Just as soon as you turn over leadership of the *Locas* to me." Chulo squeezed Paul's throat harder, his elbow cutting off Paul's air for a long moment.

"Give *you* the leadership?" Angel laughed angrily. "Now why the fuck would I do that?"

Mercedes answered for him. "Because if you don't Chulo and I are going to tell the rest of the pack how you and Skulls have been sucking each other's *pingas* for years."

Angel's eyes darkened. "That's a fucking lie."

Mercedes shrugged. "It might be. But it's close enough to the truth that the pack will believe it. And you're not going to have your second wolf around anymore to back you up. I'm going to make sure of that right now." Grinning evilly, she reached for Paul. "How about a little love scratch, *papi*? Something you can remember me by. And this time you don't have any fucking pet vampire around to suck out the poison."

"Get away from me, witch!" Paul managed to rasp out. But though he struggled, he couldn't break Chulo's iron grip on his throat. He was too weak, too hurt. Mercedes small hand came toward him, the poisoned nails filed to talons and there was no way he could get away...

"Step back from him right now, you bitch!" A new voice made all their heads turn, even Paul's—as much as he was able. He was startled to see his stepmother standing on the bottom step of the sagging front porch with a gun in her hand.

It was his dad's twenty-gauge double-barreled shotgun—the one he took on his infrequent hunting trips to the Everglades—and Lucia handled it like she knew how to use it.

"What the fuck?" Angel demanded. "Uh, what are you doing here, Mrs. Kraskowski?"

"I'm here for Paul." She climbed the steps slowly and her aim never wavered. "I'm taking him home and none of the rest of you *cabrons* is ever going to bother him again. Are we clear on that?"

"You're fucking with the wrong pack, lady," Mercedes sneered at her. "Stop bluffing and leave before you get hurt."

"Oh I'm not bluffing, little girl. This gun is loaded with silver slugs." Lucia waved the gun in Mercedes' direction. "Now let him go."

"No!" Mercedes shouted when Chulo started to loosen his grip. She turned to face Lucia. "I don't believe you and anyway, I'm not afraid of silver. I'm not a wolf."

"But *I* am." Lucia's eyes suddenly went wolf-gold and she growled, deep in her throat. "You know what they say about animals in the wild? How you should never fuck with a bear cub or a wolf pup because the mother is probably around somewhere waiting to tear you up? Well that's how I feel about Paul. He might be my stepson but he is still *mine*. So step away right now, you little *puta*, unless you want me to blow a hole the size of a doorway through your skinny ass."

Mercedes went suddenly pale. "Well fuck, Skulls never said he had a crazy-ass bitch for a stepmom." She looked at Chulo. "Let him go. We'll finish this later."

"Fuck!" Chulo sounded pissed but even he wasn't stupid enough to argue with Lucia's gun. He let Paul go and vaulted over the porch rail in one swift movement.

"Hey, wait for me!" Not having a were's grace, Mercedes had to sidle down the steps, keeping a wary eye on Lucia as she went. Paul wasn't sure if she was more frightened of his stepmother or the gun. He would have laughed if he didn't still ache so badly inside.

"Whoa, that was fucking close, *'mano*. Didn't know your mom was so crazy." Angel grinned and stepped forward – only to be stopped by the muzzle of the shotgun poking him in the chest. "Hey!" He looked down at the gun and then up at Lucia. "What's going on?"

"Back off." Lucia prodded him with the gun. "I don't trust you any more than the other two."

"But Mrs. Kraskowski –"

"Back...off...now." Lucia glared at him fiercely, her eyes still gold. "I'm not kidding you, Angel, anymore than I was kidding that skinny little *puta* who poisoned Paul in the first place. Leave now or I *will* shoot you."

"But Paul and I are best friends!"

"Not anymore." She cocked the gun. "Leave."

Muttering something under his breath, Angel walked stiffly down the steps and headed for his car. Paul watched him go with a mixture of sorrow and relief. For so many years Angel and the *Lunas Locas* pack had been his life but now that was over. He was free. He knew he would have been feeling completely elated if only he still had his bond with Laurent. But as it was, he didn't even know where the vampire was or if he was okay. *At least now I can find out, though.*

"Thanks, Mom." He went to her and Lucia grabbed him and hugged him tight enough to make him groan. "Take it easy!"

"What happened to you anyway?" she asked bluntly, pulling back to stare at him. "You look like shit."

"*Language*, Mom. Look, I don't really have time to talk about it right now. I have to find Laurent—he might be in trouble." He started down the steps to get to where she'd



parked her car. For a moment his heart jumped when he saw it was the Spyder. Then Lucia spoke behind him.

"I hope your friend won't mind—it's faster than my car and I thought we might need to get away from here quick. I've actually been looking for you for ages—I knew your pack's place was somewhere around here but I didn't know exactly where."

"Uh, sure—no problem." Paul's shoulders sagged. For a moment he'd actually expected to see Laurent through the tinted windows of the little sports car. Had actually thought he would open the door and see the man he loved sitting there saying,

*"Mon amour. At last I have found you."*

At first Paul couldn't believe his ears. But then he looked up and saw a silver Jaguar pulling up to the curb. The window was down and the driver's eyes were obscured by mirrored sunglasses. But there was no doubt it was Laurent.

"Laurent!" Paul ran over to him, forgetting his pain, both inner and outer in his eagerness to see the man he loved.

"Paul." Laurent's skin was even paler than usual and he looked terrible. "Tried to get here in time. So glad...you are still alive. I..." He trailed off and slumped down behind the wheel of the car.

"Laurent? Babe?" Reaching in through the open window, Paul grabbed his shoulders and shook him anxiously.

But no matter what he did or said, Laurent wouldn't wake up.

## Chapter Seventeen

"*Madre de Dios*, a vampire out in the day—I never thought to see such a thing." Lucia ran over to where Paul was still cradling his lover through the driver's-side window. "What's wrong with him, Paul? Is he sick?"

"It's the sun." Paul spared a quick glance overhead. Florida wasn't called the sunshine state for nothing—it probably wasn't even nine in morning yet and the sun was already broiling. "He's not really supposed to be out in it," he explained to Lucia. "He can stand it for a little while but it makes him really sick. He probably drove all the way here from Coconut Grove."

Lucia whistled. "In morning traffic that's a long drive. What can we do for him? What does he need?"

"He needs blood and he needs to be inside someplace dark, fast. But not here." Paul glanced over his shoulder at the pack's bungalow in distaste. "The rest of the *Locas* might come back any time."

"There's a motel on the corner of Hibiscus and Grand," Lucia offered. "I passed it while I was looking for you. It's not very nice but—"

"Yeah, I know the place." It was a fleabag that rented rooms by the hour but it would do. He opened the door and started to slide into the Jag but Lucia touched his arm to stop him.

"Wait, you're still a mess. I'll drive you—but not in this."

"What? Why not?"

"He's got a flat." She nodded at the Jag's left front tire. "And it looks like he was driving on it for a while. That rim is almost ruined."

Paul looked at the flat and cursed. What else could go wrong? Laurent was going to die if he didn't get him someplace dark quickly. "All right, you open the passenger side door of the Spyder and I'll carry him over as quick as I can." He hated to take the vamp out into the direct sunlight but he didn't know what else to do.

Lucia nodded and ran to open the door. Paul pulled off his shirt—it was bloody and stained but he had nothing else to use—and draped it over Laurent's pale, still face. Then with a silent prayer, he lifted the vampire and walked as quickly as he could to the other car.

It was a good thing that Laurent wasn't very heavy because Paul was still pretty weak himself. But love gave him strength and it wasn't long before he was crammed into the tiny front seat of the Spyder with the vampire draped across his lap.

"Ready?" Lucia asked and when he nodded, she put the car into gear and hit the gas.

Despite the jolting ride, Laurent didn't even stir. Worried, Paul stroked his face and tried to reach him. *Laurent? Babe? Can you hear me?* But though he was touching the other man physically, mentally it was like talking to a blank wall. He couldn't reach Laurent at all, couldn't even feel inside to see if he was all right. It was incredibly frustrating.

A sudden stop made him look up and realize they were at their destination. Lucia put the car in park. "I'll get a room." She was back in no time holding a tarnished brass key attached to a large plastic rectangle with the number *forty-two* printed on it in faded black. "I got you one on the bottom floor. I'll drive around so you can go right in." She put the car into gear and pulled around the U-shaped building to the shadowed side where no sunlight fell. Then she ran around and opened the car door so Paul could get out while holding Laurent, who was still completely limp.

He breathed a sigh of relief as he deposited the other man gently on the cheap polyester bedspread in the darkened room. Now maybe Laurent could begin to recover—as soon as he got what he needed, that was. Paul turned to Lucia who was standing by the bed and looking at Laurent worriedly. "Do you still have that little pocket knife—the one you always keep on your keychain?"

"Oh, of course." She pulled it out at once and detached it from the rest of the keys. "You said he needs blood but you've already lost a lot by the looks of you. Would you...do you want me to give him some of mine?"

Paul was grateful for her offer but the idea of Lucia feeding Laurent was wrong...just wrong. "Uh, no, Mom. Thanks anyway." He gave her a crooked smile. "The blood thing is...well, it's about more than just blood if you get me."

"Oh...oh yes. I see." She blushed and nodded. "Well, will the two of you be all right?"

"I think so." Paul looked down at Laurent who still hadn't moved. "I *hope* so."

"I'll leave you alone then. Here." She put the keys to the Spyder on the flimsy wooden dresser. "I'll get a cab home. I, uh, rented the room for the rest of the day and most of the night. So you should have plenty of time to...to heal him." Her cheeks were pink again. "I love you, *Paulito*."

"Love you too, Mom." He gave her a quick, hard hug. "Thanks for coming to save my ass."

"Anytime." She grinned and headed for the door. "Do what you have to do. I'll talk to you later."

As soon as the door shut behind her, Paul opened the pocket knife and made a small slit in one of his wrists. He barely felt the small, sharp pain as the blood began to well up from the shallow cut. Cradling Laurent's head in one arm, he pressed the wound to the vampire's pale lips, willing him to drink. *Come on, come on, babe...please...*

At first there was no response but then, to Paul's immense relief, he felt a gentle suction and knew that Laurent was taking some nourishment. "That's right," he

murmured, holding the other man close. "Take what you need, babe. Just take what you need."

At last the vampire stopped sucking and Paul pulled his wrist away. Laurent's eyes fluttered open and he looked up. "*Mon amour.*"

"Hey." Paul tried to smile at him but looking into those beautiful pale green eyes and not knowing what was going on behind them was killing him. Would Laurent hate him now? Would he despise him for breaking their bond?

"I could never hate you, Paul. I know why you did what you did."

"You heard that?" Paul frowned. "But how? The bond —"

"I felt what you were feeling—a pale shadow of your emotions." Laurent sighed and sat up. "And the bond is broken on your end—my end still remains, though I fear it is dying rapidly."

"*Dios*, Laurent, I'm so sorry. I thought they were going to kill me and I didn't want you to die too."

"I appreciate that you were trying to save my life. Though I would rather be dead than live without you." Laurent smiled sadly. "I came to you as quickly as I could but it seems you were the one to save me and not the other way around."

Paul laughed ruefully. "Actually my stepmom saved both our sorry asses. If it wasn't for her I'd be half dead of Wolf's Bane poisoning again and you'd probably be a crispy critter."

"Then she is a valiant lady and I must thank her."

"Yeah, she's pretty great." Paul nodded, feeling awkward. He wanted to reach out to Laurent, wanted to touch the other man, to take him in his arms. But now that Laurent was awake, he felt somehow constrained. It was like they were old lovers who hadn't seen each other for ages, people who had a lot of good memories in the past, but nothing in the here and now to tie them together. *It's because I broke the bond*, he realized. *That's why we have no connection.* "So, uh..." He cleared his throat. "So you can kind of still *feel* me? Because I don't get anything from you at all."

Laurent looked down at his hands. "Possibly because it was your side of the bond that was destroyed and not mine. I do not think it can be helped."

"Oh. I, uh, guess not." Feeling frustrated, Paul stood up and began to pace. He wanted to do something but there was nothing he could do. They couldn't just *sit* around talking like strangers. He had to get out of the room, even for a little while, or he was going to go crazy. He started to strip off his jeans. "I hope this fleabag has hot water. I need a shower."

"Of course." Laurent watched him undress for a moment and then looked away.

*He can't even stand to look at me anymore.* Paul felt tears rising inside and blinked them away. He had brought this on himself. He was the one who had ruined everything between them. And even though he'd done it to save Laurent's life, he still hated himself for it.

Paul walked into the tiny bathroom and turned the shower on full blast. In no time steam was rising and he slid into the hot water with a feeling of relief. At least he could wash away the blood and sweat from the past few hours. It was a small consolation to be clean again but standing in the shower and letting the heated water pound his bruised and aching muscles was better than staring across the bed at the man he couldn't have anymore.

He soaped himself up and then rinsed off but he was reluctant to get out. What could he possibly say if he went back out into the bedroom? What could he do to penetrate the invisible barrier between them? *Nothing. I can't do a fucking thing. We might as well end it here and now because it's never going to be the same again – ever.*

"Paul?" The soft voice startled him. He turned to see Laurent standing on the other side of the flimsy white plastic shower curtain.

"Yeah?"

Laurent's silhouette was elegant and graceful behind the curtain. The sight filled Paul with the dull ache of longing. *Dios, want him so bad.* But he could never have him again.

"I..." Laurent hesitated. "May I join you?"

It was the last thing Paul had expected. "Uh, sure. Of course." He held open the shower curtain and Laurent stripped hastily and climbed in.

"Thank you." He stood awkwardly with his arms around himself at the far end of the small bathtub.

"Here, you're not getting any water that way." Paul moved to switch their positions but the tub was tiny and there was no way to pass each other without touching. Before he knew it Laurent was in his arms with his head on Paul's shoulder.

"*Mon amour,*" he whispered softly in Paul's ear. "I understand if you wish to end what we have here and now—I know in many ways it will be less painful for you if we do not see each other anymore."

Paul felt as if an iron fist were squeezing his heart. "Less painful. Yeah, I guess so since we can never get the bond back again." He knew he should let Laurent go since the other man was practically telling him it was time to end things but somehow he just couldn't. "Babe." He pulled Laurent closer, molding their bodies together under the warm wet spray. "Sorry...so sorry," he whispered. "I've been such an idiot. Such a fucking *pendejo*." Tears stung his eyes and this time he couldn't blink them away.

"Don't speak so of yourself. You did what you felt was necessary," Laurent murmured soothingly.

"That's not what I'm talking about—or not all of it." Paul took a deep breath. "I've...all this time we've been together I've been lying to you and to myself. I told myself I wasn't gay, that I didn't really want to be with you and I was only experimenting. It wasn't until they had me down on the floor with my hands taped behind my back and I thought they were gonna kill me that I realized how I felt—how much I needed you—how much I *still* need you."

"I need you too." Laurent nuzzled his neck. "So much so that even now when our bond is broken, I still desire you."

Paul's breath caught in his throat. "I want you too, babe." Pulling back a little, he cupped Laurent's cheek and looked at him. The vampire's thick black lashes were matted with water or tears—he couldn't tell which—and his pale green eyes were filled with misery and need. "*Dios*, you're so fucking beautiful," Paul whispered hoarsely.

"As are you—though I find myself concerned by your bruises." Laurent brushed his cheek gently. "I could feel them beating you. I was so worried, so frightened but my father wouldn't let me come to you until I had renounced my family name and title in front of the Council." He smiled ruefully. "Then he couldn't get rid of me fast enough—he ordered me thrown out into the sunlight to die."

"*Madre de Dios*." Paul stroked his hair, loving the way the wet curls felt against his fingers. "I'm so fucking sorry, babe. You gave up everything for me and I ruined it all."

"Don't." Laurent turned his head and kissed Paul's palm tenderly. "I regret nothing of our time together."

"Which is over now, I guess."

"Yes." Laurent looked down.

"I guess it's better this way," Paul said roughly. "I mean, I guess our lifespans wouldn't match up without the bond. You'd be eternally young and you'd be stuck watching me get old and die. That's no fucking good."

"Do you really think I care about such things?" Laurent looked up at him and this time Paul was sure the moisture in his eyes was tears. "*Mon Dieu*, Paul, you mean so much more than that to me."

"Well if you don't care, you should. *I* care. You need to be free." It was Paul's turn to look away. "I mean, maybe there's somebody else out there for you. Another *Coeur de Sang*. If you want to try to find him—"

Laurent's eyes flashed. "I want nothing of the sort! If our time together has to end please don't believe it is because I would rather be with another. You are the one I want, Paul—never doubt that for a single second."

Paul smiled sadly. "All right then, babe. I believe you." He slanted his mouth over Laurent's full lips and gave him a gentle kiss. Laurent kissed him back with surprising passion—almost with desperation.

"Paul," he whispered. "*Mon amour*. I know I should let you go but I cannot bear the thought of never touching you again, never holding you in my arms."

"I feel the same way." Paul hugged him tightly and then nipped gently along the shelf of his jaw. "I know it won't be the same without the link but I want you...need you so bad. Maybe one last time we could—?"

"Yes," Laurent breathed, before he could even finish the question. "Yes, I would like that above all things."

"Good." Paul kissed him again, more urgently this time. "The water's getting cold. What do you say we move this to the bed?"

"Please." Laurent kissed him back and Paul could almost feel the longing coming from the other man. *If we were still linked I would know exactly what he was feeling, know what he wanted, what he needed...* No, have to stop thinking like that. Yet it was hard to forget the deeper intimacy they had shared before, hard to suppress the yearning he felt to have it again.

They dried off and moved to the bed, clinging together and kissing frantically as their passion grew. But along with the passion, Paul could also feel his frustration rising. It was maddening, the feeling of being as close as they could get and yet still not being close enough. He and Laurent were chest to chest and groin to groin—he could feel the other man's slender, erect shaft rubbing against his own hard cock as Laurent arched up under him, inviting him to enter. And yet...it was still as though they were just barely scratching the surface. The physical intimacy didn't seem like enough, not without the emotional and mental link to take them deeper.

At last they broke apart, gasping. "We need more," Paul balled his hands into fists. "Need to get deeper somehow, damn it!"

Laurent shook his head. "I feel the same way, *mon amour*, but this is all there is now. We must make the best of it."

"I know but it's like there's an invisible wall between us that I can't get through. I can't help feeling that...that I need to be *closer* to you somehow."

"You can be." Laurent spread his legs invitingly until Paul's hips were nestled between his thighs. "You can be as close as you want to be."

"Physically, yeah. But it's not...it's just not the same." Paul shook his head in frustration. "I want to feel you, Laurent—feel you *inside* me. The way it used to be."

Laurent looked sad. "I am afraid there is no going back to that time, Paul."

"Maybe not. But there *is* a way to get closer."

"As I said—take me. We cannot be closer than that."

"No." Paul looked at him directly. "I said I wanted *you* inside *me*."

Laurent frowned. "Surely you are joking. You told me yourself several times that you would never consent to such a thing. I even remember hearing you think that death was preferable to being penetrated by another man."

"That was before." Paul kissed him again. "When I was lying to myself. Laurent..." He cupped Laurent's cheek and kissed him again. "If this is going to be our last time together, I want it to be special. I want to remember it forever."

Laurent looked doubtful. "I do not know if now is the best time to be searching for novelty."

"It's not just that—not just about doing something new." Paul looked into his eyes. "It's because I want us to be as close as we can be, even if we don't have the bond. I

want...I want to give you something I've never given anyone else. Please, babe...I want you inside me, taking me. *Fucking me.*"

Laurent groaned softly. "When you speak such words to me how can I refuse you? But are you certain?"

"Absolutely." To prove he meant what he said, Paul turned over and lay on his stomach with his legs spread. Looking over his shoulder, he met Laurent's eyes. "C'mon, babe. Fuck me."

"Paul..." His name came from Laurent's lips like a prayer and suddenly the vampire was on him, covering him from behind.

Paul had a moment of panic until he realized that Laurent wasn't trying to penetrate him, not yet. Instead he was kissing a slow, hot, ticklish trail down Paul's spine, licking and nipping at the sensitive skin of his back until Paul thought he was going to go crazy.

"What are you doing?" he rasped as Laurent reached the top swells of his buttocks and lingered there, nibbling and kissing.

Laurent looked up. "Preparing you. You have never done this before, correct?"

"Yeah, like I told you." Paul nodded.

"Well then, if I am to take your virginity from you, I must take things slowly."

Paul barked a laugh. "*Dios*, Laurent, you don't have to make me sound like such a *girl.*"

"There is nothing shameful in surrendering yourself fully to a lover for the first time." Laurent kissed him again, nipping lightly until Paul jumped and growled. "Opening yourself, allowing yourself to be penetrated is a brave and difficult thing. I simply want to make it as pleasurable as possible for you."

"You're doing a great job so far." Paul jumped again as Laurent kissed lower and began to knead the globes of his ass. "*Dios*, that feels good."

"It will feel even better if you relax," Laurent promised. "Close your eyes and let me work on you."

"Anything you say—you're the boss." Obliging, Paul grabbed a pillow and bunched it up under his head and arms. Then he closed his eyes and tried to remember to breathe as Laurent continued to tease him down below.

All the nipping and nibbling and kissing was great but it wasn't until Laurent spread his thighs and something hot and wet connected with the back of his balls that he gasped and looked around.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

"Tasting you." Laurent smiled from his place at the foot of the bed. "Relax and enjoy it, *mon amour.*"

"I'm trying. I've just never, uh, been *tasted* there before," Paul admitted.



"Or here either, I suppose." Without warning, Laurent spread him completely open and planted a hot, wet kiss directly on his rosebud.

"What the *fuck*?" It was an intense sensation and the sight of Laurent doing that, actually kissing him *there*... It was almost too much to handle.

"Relax," Laurent murmured soothingly. "Relax and let me taste you."

"Kissing and tasting are two different things," Paul pointed out breathlessly. "Exactly how far do you want to take this?"

"All the way," Laurent assured him. Dipping his head again, he used the tip of his tongue to penetrate Paul's hidden entrance.

"*Madre di Dios!*" Paul nearly jumped out of his skin.

Laurent looked up again. "You agreed to let me penetrate you, Paul. Are you regretting your request?"

"I thought you were just going to fuck me with your cock," Paul protested weakly. "I had no idea you wanted to, uh, use your tongue too."

"Why should I not? I want to taste all of you—want to carry the memory of you with me always." Laurent's gaze was intense as he lowered his head once more and lapped gently at Paul's rosebud. Then, without warning, he drilled his tongue deep into the tight ring of muscle, making Paul gasp and moan before he could stop himself.

"*Dios*, babe—you do that so fucking well."

"I am glad you appreciate my talents." Laurent gave him a half smile and then went back to nibbling and licking at the sensitive area. It seemed to take forever. He bathed Paul's balls gently with his tongue and sucked each one into his mouth before moving back up and drilling deeply into Paul's vulnerable entrance with the tip of his tongue. Finally Paul thought he was going to scream.

"Laurent, come on, you're driving me *crazy*."

"That is the general idea." But at last Laurent stopped his oral assault and got up to retrieve his discarded pants. Back on his knees behind Paul, taking a small bottle from his pants pocket, he urged Paul's legs apart even farther.

"*Dios*." Paul wanted to laugh but his mouth was suddenly dry. "You carry lube with you everywhere you go?"

Laurent shrugged. "It was in the pocket of the clothing I was wearing when we drove in last night. When I was forced to change for the ceremony I kept it with me. It...reminded me of you and I didn't know when we would see each other again."

"Aw, babe..." There was suddenly a lump in Paul's throat. "That seems like days ago. Can't believe it's only been hours."

"Hush, *mon amour*. No sadness now, even if this is to be our last time together." Laurent stroked the small of his back soothingly. "Relax and let me prepare you to receive me."

"All right." Paul laid his head back on his arms and closed his eyes. Soon enough he felt something wet and cool and slippery against his rosebud. Then Laurent was slipping what felt like a single finger into his virgin ass.

"So tight," Laurent murmured as he fucked gently in and out. "So hot and ready to receive me."

"You got that right." The thorough tongue-fucking his lover had given him had made Paul more than ready to be fucked with something considerably bigger. "Don't take too long, babe," he murmured, spreading his thighs as Laurent added another finger. "Want you inside me."

"And I long to be there as well." Laurent stroked in and out, scissoring gently with his fingers. He seemed to be searching for something. When his seeking fingertips brushed over a spot deep inside Paul that made him groan and jump, it appeared he had found it. "Do you like that, *mon amour*?" he murmured, stroking over the spot again.

"God, *yes*!" Paul jumped again. Every time Laurent touched him there it felt like he was being electrocuted by pleasure.

"Good." Laurent withdrew his fingers slowly. "Because I am going to aim for that particular spot with every thrust of my cock inside you." He nudged Paul's hip. "Turn over."

"What? Why?" Paul did as he said though he was confused. "Wouldn't it be easier to do it with me face down?"

"Possibly but I wish to look into your eyes while I fill you with my cock." Laurent positioned a pillow under Paul's hips and spread his thighs. "Are you ready for me now, *mon amour*? Ready to feel me inside you? Fucking you?"

And though this had once been his biggest nightmare—or maybe his most shameful dream—Paul didn't hesitate. "You know I am. What are you waiting for, babe?" he growled breathlessly. "Fuck me already. I want you in me *now*."

"As you wish." Laurent lined up the head of his cock with Paul's entrance and in one slow, smooth thrust, he entered.

"*Fuck!*" Paul felt himself clamp down, his muscles clenching around the unfamiliar invader. "*Dios*, wait a minute, Laurent. Just wait a minute."

"It's all right." Laurent stroked his stomach soothingly and then cupped Paul's half-hard cock into one hand. "It's not easy the first time," he murmured, caressing the aching shaft gently. "To be opened by another man's cock, to be penetrated...it is incredibly difficult."

"You got that right." Paul winced but at last he felt the spasm passing. He was still stretched tight down there where Laurent was piercing him but at least he didn't feel as if he were going to die of a muscle cramp in a very awkward place anymore. "Feelin' a little better now," he admitted. "But it's still not great."

"It will be," Laurent assured him softly. "If you can open yourself enough to me to enjoy it. Are you ready for me to thrust now?"

*Dios, poor guy – he's probably dying to move but he won't do it until he's sure he won't hurt me.* Paul felt a surge of love and hoped that Laurent could feel it through the remnants of their bond. "Yeah, you can thrust now, babe. Just...take it slow."

"With pleasure." Moving carefully, Laurent withdrew all but the tip of his cock. Then he slid back in but at an angle this time.

Paul jumped and gasped as the plum-shaped head of the other man's shaft bumped over that special spot again, sending shockwaves of pleasure through his entire body. Still moving slowly and deliberately, Laurent pulled almost all the way out and thrust in again. And again.

Suddenly any pain Paul had was completely forgotten and he just wanted more – more of that incredible sharp pleasure. More of Laurent inside him. "Babe, please." He grasped the other man's forearms, holding on tight, begging for more.

"Yes, Paul?" From the look on Laurent's face he knew exactly how he was affecting his wolf. Paul was glad some of his own pleasure was finding its way through the mostly broken link. "Yes, *mon amour*?" Laurent murmured again when he didn't answer right away. "What is it you want? What is it you need?"

"More," Paul rasped, arching his back, impaling himself on his lover's slender shaft. "More of you, babe. I can take it – need you to really fuck me now. Deep and hard."

"As deep and as hard as you wish, *mon amour*," Laurent promised him, his pale green eyes half lidded with lust. "I will fill you with my cock and come deep in your tight ass."

"*Dios, yes!*" Paul moaned. "Fill me up – fuck me!"

"As you wish." Pulling back, Laurent thrust in again, much harder and so deep it felt as if he were reaching for Paul's heart with the tip of his cock. Then he did it again and again, filling Paul completely until he moaned and bucked his hips up for more.

*God, so good. So fucking good!* his mind babbled incoherently. Paul could still feel the invisible wall between himself and Laurent but somehow it seemed to be growing thinner – or maybe it was just that it didn't bother him as much. He'd never had this pleasure before – the sensation of being helpless beneath his lover. But he was finding that he liked it, liked it a hell of a lot. Being opened, being penetrated by the man he loved was unlike anything he'd ever experienced but at the same time, he couldn't get enough of it. And with each thrust Laurent stroked Paul's cock, keeping the rhythm they had established together and pushing Paul higher and higher, harder and harder.

"Gonna come soon, babe. Can't help it," Paul groaned as his lover pounded into him.

"I am close as well. Close to filling you with my cum." Laurent's eyes gleamed and his fangs were fully extended. Suddenly Paul knew what he needed to make their love-making complete.

"Bite me." He arched his neck, exposing his throat to his lover's fangs. "Do it when you come – when we both come."

"Are you sure?" Laurent looked doubtful. "You already gave me blood earlier."

"Fucking do it!" Paul demanded. "Want to feel your fangs and cock in me at the same time. Feel you in me everywhere."

"Very well." With a final lunge, Laurent thrust hard and deep into Paul's body. At the same time, he gathered Paul to him and struck, his needle-sharp fangs sinking into the tender, vulnerable flesh of Paul's throat.

Paul gasped at the sweet pleasure-pain of the double penetration. He felt opened as he never had before and closer to Laurent than he had ever felt to anyone in his life. His back arched and his cock pulsed in Laurent's fist, spurting at the exact moment he felt the other man's shaft filling him with cum.

*That's right, babe. Fill me up. Fuck me, take me – make me yours. Even if we can never be together again I'll never forget this. Never forget how much I love you, how much I love having you inside me.*

*So beautiful when you open for me. So perfect when you let me fill you, mon amour. I will love you always, even if you feel that we have to be apart. I will never forget the gift you have given me. The gift of yourself.*

Paul heard the words loud and clear and not with his ears. His eyes, which had been clenched shut with pleasure, flew open. "Wait a minute. What did...did you just say something?"

Laurent pulled his mouth away from Paul's throat, his lips still slightly red. "I said nothing. I was drinking from you."

"But I thought I heard...you were saying that I was uh, beautiful and that you would never forget the gift I was giving you."

Laurent's eyes widened. "I did not say that...but I *did* think it." *I love you, mon amour.*

*I love you too,* Paul sent back automatically. For a long moment both of them froze, looking at each other.

*Is it...can it be?* Laurent was obviously afraid to hope. Paul felt the same way but he couldn't help himself – still, he tried to be cautious.

"I don't know," he said aloud. "Let me..." Closing his eyes, he felt inside himself, probing carefully in the spot where he and Laurent had been joined for such a brief, beautiful time. He found the silver tree at once – Laurent's half of the bond – but at first he could find no evidence of his own golden tree, which he had uprooted and destroyed earlier.

Then he saw it.

In his mind's eye he saw a tiny golden sprout. It looked more like a vine than a tree and it was so slender and vulnerable it nearly took his breath away. It grew out of the ground of his heart, from the empty pit where his half of the bond had been before he

had killed it. Grew and curled and reached out until just the tiny, threadlike tip of it was wrapped carefully around one of the roots of the silver tree.

Their bond was restored.

Paul opened his eyes and could tell from the expression on Laurent's face that his lover had seen the same thing.

"I do not believe it," Laurent breathed. "The bond...it's growing again. It is still tiny and fragile but it will grow."

"You better fucking believe it's gonna grow." Paul pulled him down and kissed him hard on the mouth. "It's going to grow because we're never getting separated again."

Laurent's face was radiant. "I would like that, *mon amour*. I never wanted us to go our separate ways in the first place."

"Me either," Paul admitted. "But I thought it wouldn't be fair to you to ask you to stay."

"And I thought you didn't wish to be with me anymore and deal with the frustration of being bondless."

"Crazy vampire." Paul nipped his lover's lush lower lip affectionately. "You should know I'd put up with a hell of a lot more than that to be with you."

"And I with you." Laurent returned his kiss and smiled but there were tears in his eyes. "To think how close we came to saying goodbye. And all because we had no bond to help us communicate. All I could feel was your pain and irritation—I didn't know you still wished to be with me despite it."

"Well now you know. And I think we need to work on more effective communication—verbal and *non-verbal*, if you get what I mean." Paul rolled his hips to remind his lover that they were still joined and Laurent groaned.

"Indeed, *mon amour*. I believe that is the best kind of communication."

"You're fucking right." Paul did it again and kissed him. "Come on, babe. Fuck me some more. Fill me up and make me yours forever."

"Forever," Laurent echoed, smiling through his tears. "And this time I will never let you go, my wolf."

Paul's only answer was a kiss. But as they began to make love, he felt the tiny tendril within him begin to grow and knew that he would never be alone again.

## Epilogue

"That is quite a story, *mein lieblich*. I assume you know how very fortunate you are." Nana cocked her head to the side and arched an eyebrow at him.

"Of course." Laurent took Paul's hand and squeezed it. His wolf squeezed back and smiled at him.

They were sitting side by side on Nana's uncomfortable red brocade sofa as they had less than a month ago the first time they had come to visit her. They would be staying in the lovely old antebellum mansion in the guest suite for an indefinite amount of time. Miami was no good for either of them anymore and they hadn't decided where to settle yet although they were still leaning toward California. Laurent wanted to be near the beach and, after a lifetime of living in the flatlands, Paul craved the mountains. There were several places that fit the bill on the west coast and most of them were fairly tolerant. Until they decided, though, Nana had said they were welcome to stay with her. She liked the company and missed Laurent and he found he had missed her as well.

"We don't know why the bond regenerated," Paul said, breaking his train of thought. "But we know we're very fucking lucky it did. Uh, sorry. I meant freaking—really *freaking* lucky."

Nana smiled. "I've told you before you don't have to watch your language with me, Paul. In this case I happen to agree with you. I have never heard of a blood bond regenerating like yours did—I would have said it couldn't be done."

"We did not think it possible either." Laurent leaned forward anxiously. "And it seems different from before—deeper...richer somehow. I do not understand how that can be."

"Maybe because it isn't your old bond that has regrown. Maybe it is an entirely new bond—at least on Paul's side." Nana studied the were but spoke to Laurent. "If I understand what you're telling me correctly, it sounds like Paul was willing to open himself to you in ways he wasn't before, when your first bond was formed."

"Uh..." Paul's cheeks went red and he coughed into his hand. "I guess you could say that."

"So since you opened a different part of your heart—a deeper part—the new bond that took root and grew there was also different and deeper." Nana nodded with satisfaction. "That must be it."

"It is nice to have an explanation," Laurent murmured. "Although we weren't really looking for one. Just being bonded again is enough for both of us—isn't it, *mon amour*?"

"Yeah, babe." Paul squeezed his hand again and gave him a smile. "You got that right."

"So you are severing all ties to the past? Leaving everyone in your old lives behind?" Nana asked. "I know your parents treated you horribly, Laurent, but I do believe that deep down your mother loves you."

"Celeste thought so as well," Laurent said quietly. "After we are settled someplace safe I may consider sending word to my mother through her. As for my father, though—he is as dead to me as I am to him."

"I don't think I'll be having any family reunions with my old man either," Paul said. "He was pretty fucking upset when he found out I was with Laurent. I don't know what bothered him more—the vampire thing or the gay thing. My mom, though—she's a different story."

"Yes, Laurent told me how she rescued you and helped get him to a safe place during the sunlight hours. She sounds like a courageous woman."

Paul nodded. "Yeah, she is. She's working on my dad too, trying to get him to reconsider the whole I-have-no-son routine. But I dunno." He shrugged. "Dad's pretty set in his ways. I don't think he's ever going to be ready to accept a gay vamp-lover as a son."

"And what about your old pack?" Nana asked. "I know before you left me the last time Laurent was worried about the effect your packleader might have on you."

"Oh yeah, Angel." Paul sighed. "Last I heard he gave up the *Locas* and went to work for his uncle. Chulo is running the pack now and word is their street cred has gone down to fucking zero. He's Angel's cousin but he's such a *pendejo* he couldn't lead a pack of puppies without getting them killed, much less a pack of wolves."

"I hope he and that witch Mercedes both get what is coming to them," Laurent said fiercely. "I have never forgiven her for trying to poison you."

"But if she hadn't, we never would've gotten together in the first place," Paul pointed out. "I never would have gone back to find you again if I hadn't needed you to suck out the poison. We should send her a fucking thank-you card."

"Hmmpf." Laurent lifted his chin. "The only thank-you she will receive from me is the fact that I do not choose to go back to Miami and drain her dry while she sleeps."

"*Dios*, listen to you." Paul laughed. "Getting all tough."

Laurent gave him a mock glare. "You are not the only one who can be fierce and protective, *mon amour*. I would kill anyone who tried to harm you, no matter what benefit ultimately came to us through the attempt."

"Paul has a point though, *mein liebbling*," Nana said. "If the witch hadn't infected Paul with the Wolf's Bane, you never would have found your Heart's Blood. I know you had to swim through deep waters and endure many trials to be together but that is the way it always is when you find your *Coeur de Sang*."

"Yes, Nana, so you have told me many times." Laurent smiled at her and squeezed Paul's hand again. "And I am more than happy that you have been proven right. For now that I have my wolf, I will never let him go."

"You don't have to worry about that, babe. I'm not going anywhere." Paul leaned over and gave him a kiss that Laurent couldn't help returning with passion.

Nana laughed and rose from the highbacked chair she'd been sitting in. "And on that note perhaps the two of you ought to retire to the guest suite downstairs. I've had the black satin sheets put on for you again, although I would ask you to be mindful of my lace bedspread."

"We are going." Laurent stood and pulled Paul to his feet. "We cannot get there fast enough. Come, my wolf."

"Right behind you, babe." Paul grinned at Nana. "Thanks again for letting us stay. I guess we'll see you later."

She cocked an eyebrow at him. "*Much* later I assume."

Laurent smiled. "I believe you assume correctly, Nana. Good day." And he led his lover down the stairs to the room and the bed that was waiting for them.



## About the Author

Evangeline Anderson is a registered MRI tech who would rather be writing. And she is nerdy enough to have a bumper sticker that says “I’d rather be writing.” Honk if you see her! She is thirty-something and lives in Florida with a husband, a son and two cats. She had been writing erotic fiction for her own gratification for a number of years before it occurred to her to try to get paid for it. To her delight, she found that it was actually possible to get money for having a dirty mind and she has been writing paranormal and sci-fi erotica steadily ever since.

Evangeline welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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