



ROUGAROUX SOCIAL CLUB

*Bayou
Dreams*

LYNN LORENZ

LooseId

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Bayou Dreams

Lynn Lorenz



www.loose-id.com

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Dedication

To all my readers. Hope you enjoy the men of the Rougaroux.

Chapter One

“Hail Mary, full of grace...” The old woman’s voice rose above the incessant chirps and croaks of the nocturnal creatures surrounding her. Alone in the swamp, she knelt next to the fallen cypress trunk, hands clasped, eyes closed as she prayed.

Her knees hurt, so prying open her left eye, she checked her watch.

Three minutes past midnight.

She screwed her eyes shut and continued to chant, forming a vision in her head as she entreated the Virgin Mother and all the saints to listen and answer her prayers.

Especially St. Jude, the patron saint of lost causes. She never asked for much, so she really needed him to come through for her this time.

Putting ads in the newspaper’s personal section hadn’t helped, neither had the novenas, so she’d taken a hands-on approach.

Each full moon for the last four months she’d been to the clearing in the woods near the bayou to work the spell. In truth, she’d never thought of it as casting a spell. She was a good Catholic. If anyone had questioned her, she would just tell them that this wasn’t really voodoo, just the old ways, taught to her by her *grandmère*.

Certainly, they had to respect tradition.

Soon, if her prayers were answered, she’d have a swarm of grandchildren, enough to see her through her old age.

She’d already buried the dead cat and the small gris-gris bag containing her son’s lock of hair. Digging the shallow grave had been hard, sweaty work, and she hoped he’d appreciate all she’d done for him, but knowing that fool boy, he’d call it interfering.

She called it taking matters into her own hands. Somebody had to do it.

The holy candle she’d bought at the dollar store with the image of Mary, Mother of God, printed on its side, gave off a soft yellow halo in the darkness. She opened her right eye and glanced at the little altar perched on the log.

Everything looked right. Still, you never knew with these things.

She sighed and shifted her weight, trying to ease the ache. This’d better work and soon. She was running out of Scott’s personal things, not to mention dead animals.

Sure, she saw possums and armadillos all the time on the side of the road, but finding a good dead cat? *Mon dieu*. With as many homeless cats the news claimed were loose on the streets, would it be asking for a miracle if a few of them ended up dead on a regular basis?

Knees now throbbing, she opened her eyes, made the sign of the cross, and then pushed herself up using the shovel. Looking down at her favorite pair of house slippers, the pink ones with *Princess* embroidered across the tops, she shook her head. Merde. Her feet had swollen again.

After picking up the old flowered cotton pillowcase she'd carried the cat carcass in, she made her way through the woods back to her small cottage. The light from the full moon filtered through the tree canopy, illuminating the worn path.

As she climbed the porch steps, she glared at the old black cat curled up on the swing.

"Why can't you make yourself useful every now and then and get hit by a truck?" she grumbled at him as she opened the screen door.

He jumped down and followed her inside, tail held high as he wove between her legs in a feline attempt at murder.

* * *

Ted Canedo knew it was a dream. In fact, it was the same dream he'd had for the last four months. He was driving down a smooth two-lane blacktop in the country, a place he'd never been before except in this dream. He passed a now familiar huge oak tree, Spanish moss hanging from its thick, undulating branches.

Very picturesque, very south Louisiana.

Beyond the tree, a gravel road. He turned off, bumping and jarring his way down it. Passing a metal sign nailed to a wire and post fence, he strained to read it. Just like the times before, it went by in a blur.

Ted sighed and drove on. He came to a wooden bridge, slowed, and took it carefully. The boards shuddered under the weight of his SUV, but he knew it would hold. Knew he would be home soon.

That's not right.

Home was a small second-floor apartment in the heart of New Orleans' French Quarter.

He pulled in front of the raised wooden house and parked. Like most homes along the bayous and waterways, it stood on stilt legs, high enough to stay out of the occasional floodwater. A set of stairs zigzagged up the front, leading to a screened porch.

He climbed the stairs and opened the screen door, its musical creak sounding both familiar and new. He pushed through the front door and entered the house as if he'd always lived there. The surroundings blurred, and his vision focused on a door across the room, pulling him toward whatever lay behind it.

Without him touching it, the door opened, and he passed through into a bedroom, gliding as if he floated. Covered in one of those white cotton chenille spreads from his childhood, a large bed with a high headboard stood against the far wall.

He stopped in front of a dresser, its top covered with an old lace antimacassar; silver stars danced over the lace as if they'd fallen from the night sky to land there. Ted glanced up into the mirror.

Naked, as always. Did he ever have a dream where he had clothes on?

His pale body glowed in the odd light that filled the room, a sharp contrast to his blue-black hair. Other than the hair on his head and the dark curls at the base of his cock, his skin was smooth.

He turned to the window and looked out. Time must have passed, because the reflection of the full moon played on the still waters of the bayou.

Someone moved behind him, but Ted didn't flinch or whirl around. Didn't jerk away when the man put his long arms around Ted. Instead, Ted leaned back into the embrace, feeling safe, protected, loved. Feelings Ted hadn't felt in so long, they washed over him like cool water in the desert.

As Ted looked down at the man's tanned arms, Ted's skin gleamed pale against them. Soft blond hair sprouted everywhere, even across the knuckles of the strong hands holding him. Did his lover have an equally hairy chest? Yes, a lover. Another thing he hadn't had in a long time. Ted didn't count the guys he picked up in bars for a quick handjob or blowjob.

Those large hands caressed his belly, ran over his abs, and descended to wind fingers in the hair surrounding Ted's stirring cock. Turning in his arms, Ted tried to glimpse his face.

And woke.

Frustrated, he let out his breath. "Jesus, Joseph, and Mary, I *never* get to see his face."

He rolled over, punched his pillow into a new shape, and glanced at the clock. A little after midnight.

Weird. Same time as the other dreams. If he wasn't so fascinated by it, he'd be creaped out.

He just knew this dream meant something. Maybe he should go see the old woman at the voodoo shop, have his palm read, or toss the bones and see what his future held.

Not that he believed in any of that crap. Ted called himself a practical man, with his head squarely on his shoulders, his feet planted firmly on the ground, and his 9mm SIG held tight in his hand.

But this recurring dream was driving him nuts, and in New Orleans, well, just about anything could happen.

Each time, he'd lain in bed afterward deciding what it was trying to tell him, or if it was just the spicy food he loved to eat.

It could mean he would get lost on his upcoming trip and find the man of his dreams. No way. First, that was too simple, there had to be more. Second, he didn't really have a "man of his dreams." His men were more "man of the moment." He'd given up dreams about three years ago.

Maybe the tree stood for something else. Family? Or maybe the bridge meant something. Transitions? He groaned and buried his fingers in his hair and pulled. This stupid dream had to stop. If he kept thinking about it, he'd go batshit crazy.

He rolled over onto his back and tried to relax using the trick his therapist had taught him for getting his panic attacks under control. Deep breaths in through his nose, then long exhalations through his mouth.

He refused to do the stupid chant. That was just silly, but this usually worked, calmed him down. After a few minutes, the thrumming in his dick replaced the noise in his head.

He groaned and rolled over, the thick weight of his growing cock pressing against his thigh.

His sexual urges had ramped up over the last few months, oddly around the time the dream had started. Normally, he didn't have sex dreams. If he wanted sex, he'd just go find a fuck at a bar or phone a friend with benefits.

No friends. He'd have to play nice, talk, maybe even, God forbid, share his feelings.

What he needed was a good, nameless, mindless, no-strings-attached fuck, to be exact. He threw back the tangled covers and stood, his erection pointing straight ahead.

Early still. He'd hit Lafitte's and pick up the first pretty twink he found. Get a blowjob and get back home in time to catch a few more hours of sleep.

* * *

"Now, *Maman*, let's not get into that again." Scott Dupree shook his head as he pulled out a chair and sat at the table with his coffee. Breakfast with his mother once a week was a tradition. Painful, at times, but a tradition, nonetheless.

Plopping his sheriff's hat down on the table, he leaned back in the chair and stretched long khaki-covered legs under the table. Her black cat wound its way around him, shedding hair all over his pants. He nudged it away with his foot, and it strolled over to lie on the floor behind his mother standing at the stove.

"Don't give me any back talk, son." She waved her spatula at him as she talked around a cigarette dangling from her lips. "You're getting old. You're the alpha. Time to take a mate, settle down, and give me a grandchild."

Same song, same verse, same spatula.

Scott groaned. This wasn't going to end if he didn't say something, humor the old woman. Merde, he didn't want kids, didn't even want a mate. How many times

had he told her that? She never listened to him, just kept on blathering away about how his life should be, according to her and the laws of their small wolf pack.

He hated to admit it, but she was right, and he'd felt the pull of his need to mate strengthen every year since he'd turned thirty, and every year he fought against it.

Tooth and nail, so to speak.

"Maman, thirty-five isn't old. As soon as the right woman comes along, I'm there. Promise." He took a sip of her thick, scalding black coffee laced with chicory.

"Right woman?" She snorted. "If she's alive and breathing, she's right. If she'd put up with your big hulking body, she's right. If she's tough as nails, can throw you to the ground and make you cry 'uncle', she'd really be right," she muttered at the frying pan as she cooked.

"Sure, that'll work. This hellcat you got picked out for me, can she be pretty too?" He grinned at her as she placed a platter of sausages on the table.

She turned without looking down and stumbled over the cat. It hissed at her, black hair standing on end.

"Merde, that cat will be the death of me." She kicked at it, but missed as it trotted out of the room, tail held high. She pulled out a chair from the table and sat, dropping her cigarette in an ashtray.

Scott waved the smoke away, picked up the tray, and moved it to the counter. "Forget the cat. The smokes will get you long before it does."

She scowled, but ignored him. "Oh, yeah, she'd have to want to be married to a cop and a werewolf."

"That's sheriff, Maman, not cop. Just because I'm of mating age doesn't mean I'm going to find my mate any time soon." Scott speared a link of sausage with his fork, careful not to stain his sheriff's uniform. The cat hair was bad enough, but sausage grease on his shirt wouldn't help inspire confidence in his ability to serve and protect, and besides, he'd smell it all day.

"You have to look for something in order to find it," she snapped.

"I'm busy. I just got elected sheriff two years ago after Sheriff Cotteau retired, and I'm trying to focus on my career."

She snorted. "Same old excuse. Never mind, I been working on getting her here for you," she said with a sly smile.

"Not that voodoo crap again?" Scott shook his head and inwardly cringed. "What would Father Francis say if he knew?"

"It's not voodoo." She shrugged and looked insulted. "I just say a little prayer to Mary, that's all."

Scott leaned his elbow on the table and stared at her, the sausage halfway to his lips. "Was there a dead cat?"

She looked down at her eggs as if searching for something interesting in them, like the image of Mary. He hoped this time they were just regular eggs, because he didn't have the manpower for *another* sighting of the Virgin Mother.

She didn't answer.

"There was a full moon last night." He chewed and took a swallow of the coffee to wash it down. "Perfect night for a love spell." He raised his eyebrow.

"It's not a spell, I tell you. I'm a practicing Catholic, and you know it." She jerked her chin up.

"Yeah, you're practicing, all right. But I'm not sure it's kosher." He grinned. Despite her craziness, he loved her.

"Kosher?" She grimaced. "I don't know about kosher, but it wasn't voodoo." She picked up her plate and moved to the sink.

"I just hope she's pretty, is all," Scott said as she rattled and banged the pots and pans in the sink.

He finished his breakfast, got up, pecked her on the cheek, and slipped out the back door. He'd laugh about the spell if he didn't have a sneaking suspicion it might work.

His mother came from a long line of women with powers—women who could see the future in dreams, or know a person's fate just by looking at them.

Scott shook off a chill that skittered down his spine as he got behind the wheel of his patrol car. He drove along the uneven road back to the main highway, refusing to think about a mate.

He just wasn't ready to settle down, that's all.

The radio crackled, and the dispatcher announced a wreck at the nearby interstate exit involving one of his deputies. He leaned forward, hit his lights and siren, and headed to the scene, forgetting all about the urges that had been wracking his body over the last few months, especially during the full moons.

Mating moons, the others in the pack called it.

He called it a big pain in the ass.

Some of his pack worked for him as deputies, and the three days of the full moon each month were spent wrangling them into some semblance of order. Most of the time, it was like nailing Jell-O to a tree. All they wanted was to fuck, run in the swamp, and howl. Damn fool Cajuns.

But lately, it was like they'd become hormone-driven teenagers again, and it was his job to keep them focused on their work, showing up on time, and not scaring the hell out of the tourists.

Sure, the legend of the *Rugarou*, a half man, half wolf bloodthirsty beast that prowled the local swamps, bolstered their parish's tourist trade, filled the area's hotels, B and Bs, and restaurants, but it was a big headache nonetheless, especially for law enforcement.

Extra traffic and strangers made for a troublesome combination, especially for their small police force, most of which kept the legend alive by prowling the woods and swamps.

He pulled in behind a cruiser with its lights flashing, and parked.

One of his younger deputies, Billy Trosclair, trotted over to him, his face pale and his upper lip sweat-soaked.

"What's up, Billy?" Scott asked as he got out.

"Frank Commeaux lost control of his cruiser and rear-ended a truck." Frank was another of his deputies and a pack member.

"Is he hurt? The other driver okay?"

"No, Frank's just shaken up. The other guy is fine too."

"What the fuck happened?" Scott looked over the head of the younger man toward the accident scene. Frank stood to the side with two other officers as they took notes. The nose of the cruiser sat crumpled under the tail end of a large delivery van. The van's driver leaned against the side of the van, shaking his head.

Billy glanced at Frank, exhaled, and hooked his thumbs in his utility belt. "He had his eyes on Marissa Waters. She was walking on the side of the road. Hitchhiking over to Beau Bridge." He shrugged. "She's awful cute, you know."

As if that was a good enough excuse.

Scott slapped his hand over his face and slid it down, biting back the words bubbling up from his throat in a low growl.

Billy stepped back. "Sorry, sir." He leaned in. "It's that time of month."

Scott stared at him. "Time of month? What are we, a pack of women?" He pushed Billy to the side and headed straight for Frank, determined to make an example of the deputy.

The other men saw him coming and faded into the background, leaving Frank alone as their boss and alpha descended.

"Frank, you're suspended from duty for a week without pay, and on desk duty for two more weeks." He pointed to the man, who nodded, accepting his punishment. If Frank had been in wolf form, he'd have his head down and his tail between his legs.

Scott spun to face the others, all young men of his pack. "Y'all? I don't care what the damn moon is doing, get a grip on yourselves. This is not the way law officers behave. I want a full report written up and on my desk in two hours, get it?"

"Yessir!"

"And get this mess cleared up, ASAP! The Pasqual funeral is scheduled for this afternoon, and they'll be passing this way."

Scott spun and headed back to his car, fists clenched and fighting more than just his anger.

The moon's pull had hit him hard too, dammit, but he'd been man enough not to succumb to it. Couldn't the others get some control of their bodies, like he did?

Despite his urges over the last two nights, he'd kept it in check, jerked off alone in his bedroom each morning and night, and concentrated on his work, not his needs.

As alpha, he had to set an example, and hell, he'd managed to control himself for the last five years, why couldn't they?

Damn horny wolves.

He slammed the door shut, threw the car in gear, and turned it around. Frustration surged, and for a moment, his wolf whined to get out, the soft noise filling the cabin of the cruiser. As he drove to the station, he rolled down the window, gulping air in an effort to quell his anger and subdue his wolf before he lost it.

He pulled through a fast-food place, got a cup of coffee, and headed in to his office. After the first few sips of the hot black java, he felt almost human again.

Chapter Two

Ted crossed the street toward the bar. This was the second night in a row he'd woken up from that damn dream and gone in search of a quick fuck. What the hell was up with him? He was as horny as a sixteen-year-old.

"Canedo," a sharp, hard voice called out to him. Ted spun, reaching for the gun tucked under his armpit as he squinted into the darkness.

A cop stepped under the street light. *Dougherty*.

Shit. This was not what he fucking needed and especially not from this homophobic bastard.

"What is it, Dougherty?" Ted waited for the cop to get closer, making him come to Ted, keeping the upper hand.

"Where you headed?"

"Since when are my whereabouts of any interest to NOPD?" Ted continued the movement of his hand up to brush the straight bangs out of his eyes.

"Since you got your partner killed and we kicked your sorry ass off the force." The cop shrugged, a mean snarl on his face.

Ted's stomach cramped, but he hid any reaction. He'd gotten good at that over the last two years. He didn't bother defending himself; everyone on the force in the Quarter knew the facts of the story.

Or at least they thought they did.

They knew Ted and his partner of three years, Douglas French, known as "Frenchie" to his friends and coworkers, had stopped at approximately eleven p.m. at the Quick Mart on Dumaine Street to get a couple cups of coffee.

They knew Douglas had gone in ahead of Ted. Ted had stopped to check out a car parked illegally across the sidewalk.

They knew that Craig Morris, a career criminal with a rap sheet filled with dozens of robberies and breaking and entering, was in the midst of robbing the place at gunpoint when Douglas walked in.

They knew Morris panicked, opened fire, wounding the owner and shooting Douglas, and that Ted burst through the door when he heard the shots, returned fire, and killed Morris.

They knew Douglas died in Ted's arms, bleeding out of a clean hit to an artery, soaking the floor and Ted in his blood before the ambulance could get to him.

They knew Douglas left behind a wife and three kids.

What they didn't know was that Douglas hadn't stopped just to pick up coffee, but to pick up that week's protection money the Vietnamese owner had been paying him.

They didn't know Douglas was a dirty cop. His wife didn't know it, not even Ted had known it, but Ted had taken the heat for it instead of Douglas's reputation. It had been the least he could do for his partner's widow and kids.

They also didn't know that Ted had been in love with Douglas from the moment he'd met the man on their first day of patrol.

Not even Douglas had known that.

"You got a point? Because if all you wanted was to say hello, consider it done." Ted turned away.

"Looking for some action, faggot?" Dougherty sneered.

Ted hesitated, just a fraction of a second, then continued on.

"I'm watching you, Canedo," the cop called after him.

Great. Watch this.

Without turning around or breaking stride, Ted held up his hand and gave Dougherty the finger.

* * *

Ted slid onto the barstool and ordered a Jack and Coke. One of the bartenders, Derek, winked at him, and fixed the drink.

He sauntered over to Ted, giving him the clear signal he'd be willing to leave the other bartender for as long as it took to make both Ted and he happy men.

"What are you looking for tonight?" Derek asked as he set the highball glass in front of Ted.

Ted scanned the bar. Lots of available action for a Wednesday night. The real crowds were on Fridays and Saturdays, but you could find a pickup any night of the week in most of the gay bars.

"Something young. Eager and willing." Ted gave Derek a quick smile.

"Well, that leaves me out. I'm way too old for eager and willing." Derek laughed and nodded toward the back wall where several young rent boys lounged. "Take your pick."

Ted got off his stool, downed his drink, and gave the guys the opportunity to see him. He'd worn his tightest jeans, and they emphasized his package to perfection. Then he headed to the bathroom.

He pushed through the door and stood at the sink, washing his hands. Like clockwork, one of the young men entered. With a fast glance in the mirror, Ted got a nod from the guy, then headed to the large stall and stepped inside.

The guy followed.

Ted locked the door and leaned against it.

"Sit on the toilet," he ordered.

The twink sat with his legs on either side of the commode. Ted moved within reaching distance and unfastened his belt, unzipped his pants, and pulled out his meat.

"Suck me."

He nodded, grabbed the base of Ted's shaft, and swallowed it down. All the way to the root.

Ted groaned. "Damn that's good." The rent boy's hot, wet mouth, soft tongue, and firm grip worked Ted up and down, back and forth, until his balls drew up.

"Gonna come," Ted whispered as he threaded both hands into the guy's hair, spiked with some stiffening product. He didn't try to pull away, so Ted held him down as he shot his load down the guy's throat.

The door to the bathroom opened.

Ted froze. Listened. Inhaled.

Heavy breathing.

A cop. He'd know the stink of cheap cologne anywhere.

Shit.

He pulled the kid off, clamped his hand over the guy's mouth, and signaled for silence with a finger to his lips.

Wide-eyed, the guy nodded. Ted motioned for him to climb up on the toilet. Then Ted zipped up, flushed, and left, closing the door behind him.

Dougherty stood against the door of the bathroom, blocking his exit.

"Had to take a piss, Dougherty?" Ted went to the sink and washed his hands clean of the kid's sticky hair product.

"You in here alone?" Dougherty's gaze darted at the three stalls, as if Ted couldn't tell he was looking for something.

"Yeah. Why? You want to lock the door?" Ted grinned at him in the mirror. "Get a taste of what you know you want?"

Dougherty narrowed his eyes. "Fuck no, you queer. I'm not a faggot. Just thinking you might be doing something illegal, that's all."

"Well, if taking a dump and a piss are illegal now, call me guilty." He hit the air dryer with his elbow, and it roared to life as he held his hands under it, taking his sweet time.

Dougherty snorted. "I guess Frenchie shoulda known having a fag for a partner instead of a real man would get him killed. You saw the car, knew Morris was in there, and let him go in first, didn't you?"

Ah yes, the old chickenshit fag story was still making the rounds. Ted's anger burned, but he'd never let anyone see the truth, not in his expression and never in his eyes.

"If you're not going to get on your knees and suck my dick, then get out of my way." Ted advanced on the cop.

Dougherty's gaze fell to Ted's crotch, jumped up to Ted's face, and with a "Fuck you!" he spun, jerked open the door, and fled.

The door shut.

"You can come out now," Ted called.

The twink opened the stall door and peeked around it. "Sure?" He stepped out, paler and still wide-eyed, with his hand over his heart.

"Yeah. Thanks, babe." Ted gave the guy a twenty and left, the door shutting behind him.

As he strode through the bar, Ted glared at the bartender, who shrugged and mouthed, *Sorry*. Ted exited, glanced up and down the street, and turned toward home, ignoring Dougherty standing in the shadows of a doorway.

Stupid beat cop.

A part of Ted missed that world, but a bigger part of him refused to ever go back into it. He'd willingly sacrificed his career and his reputation, so he had no reason to bitch about it or feel sorry for himself.

It had been the right thing to do. He'd have taken that bullet for Douglas if he could and would never have thought twice about it. But he'd failed.

The least he could do was take the blame.

* * *

The next day, Ted surveyed his bags piled in the living room of his apartment. He'd packed everything he'd need for his next PI job; all that was left was to load up his SUV, and head out on the highway.

After he'd taken the assignment two weeks ago, he'd signed up online for the art workshop in Bayou Loup where he and a dozen other students would be painting 'en plein aire', the fancy French words for 'outdoors', for an entire week with famous landscape artist Darcy Wentworth. Their subject matter would be antebellum mansions, cottages, quaint townscapes, quiet cemeteries, deep woods, and of course, the bayous of south Louisiana.

The job was simple, keep an eye on the young wife of Judge Malcolm Charbonnet, one of the richest and most powerful men in New Orleans, and report back, preferably with photos. Kirsten was Charbonnet's trophy wife, and the judge didn't trust her as far as he could throw her.

Trust? It had become a huge issue for Ted. He'd trusted Douglas as a stand-up cop, and Ted's faith had been shaken to the core by Douglas's betrayal.

So Ted could understand not trusting someone, especially if you'd taken on a wife young enough to be your daughter and more beautiful than a man like Charbonnet could ever attract without the scent of money.

Well, if Ted were married to that old bastard, he'd cheat too. The man looked like a bulldog, jowls and all, including the short, bowed legs. It wouldn't surprise Ted if he heard the man bark.

Charbonnet had really creeped him out when they'd met, and it took a lot to do that. Ted had seen a lot in his line of work, both as a PI and as a cop, from mafia types to crazed gangbangers, but there was something inherently odd about Charbonnet.

Ted didn't know much, but he did know Judge Charbonnet was not what he seemed, not by a long shot, and frankly, he really didn't want to know what it was.

However, Charbonnet had money, old money, and in New Orleans, that's as close to royalty as you can get. So Ted fought down the urge to pass on the job since he needed the money, and took it. Besides, Charbonnet had paid half the sizeable fee, in cash, up front.

Ted didn't get so much work he could let five grand walk past him, let alone the full ten thousand once the job was done.

The wife would be attending the art workshop in the bayou country, which is why Ted had signed up for it also. It would be far easier to keep her in plain sight than to sneak around, sitting in a hot car all day and all night, trying not to get spotted by his subject.

Or the local police.

Besides, he'd get to break the rust off his once-upon-a-time talent, oil painting.

Ted ran down the list of supplies for the course for the last time, checking off the items on the list sent to him by Wentworth's assistant when he'd registered.

Hauling it all down to his SUV took him three trips. The duffle bag, folding easel, and all the art supplies hadn't looked like much until he had to carry it down the straight stairs to the tiny backyard, through the narrow alley back toward the street, and to his car. Emergency blinkers flashing, it sat parked between two NO PARKING signs, half on and half off the miniscule sidewalk on St. Ann.

He went all the way to the back, locked the door to his apartment, then walked down the alley to the street, locked that door behind him, and climbed into the car.

At last, sweating like a stevedore in the liquid humidity that made May in New Orleans feel as if it were August anywhere else, he maneuvered between the two signposts and pulled away, air conditioning blasting.

Chapter Three

Scott took the measure of the men gathered in the conference room of the small office building where the pack held its meetings. Someone, years ago, created a charity organization called the Rougaroux Social Club, to help the members and families of their fire and sheriff departments in the small parish.

The play on the name always gave Scott a chuckle. Every kid in bayou country knew of the rugarou, the legendary werewolf of the swamp. But the founders of the society changed the spelling from rugarou to rougaroux, added the *x* on the end in deference to the roux that every good Cajun chef seems born knowing how to make. What better place to hide a pack of werewolves than in plain sight?

Since most of the pack's men were firefighters, EMS, or deputies, it also worked well as a cover for their meetings. The group did charity work, held cook-offs, sold raffle tickets to raise money, and every October, sponsored the annual Rugarou Festival, in honor of the legend of the swamp. Three days of dancing, Cajun music, and food, including a contest for the best rugarou costume.

But tonight, it was pack business.

"I understand we have some celebrating to do." Scott nodded to Clancy Delacroix. "Clancy's found his mate, and the wedding is going to be in June."

Applause broke out, along with a few howls, and the men nearest Clancy did some backslapping, all of which Clancy took with good grace.

"Clancy, I need to speak with you, afterward," Scott added. A few of the guys made noises, and warned Clancy he was in trouble, but Scott shook his head and winked.

His gaze met the cool blue eyes of Bobby Cotteau, former sheriff and their pack's previous alpha, who lifted a gray bushy eyebrow at him, giving him a small wink. More than any man there, Scott respected Bobby, especially since he'd thrown his support behind Scott as both sheriff and pack alpha.

"The rest of you? Seriously. Get a grip on yourselves." Frank had the good sense to look sheepish. "I know the moon's pull, trust me I feel it just as bad as you. But you don't see me chasing after every piece of tail that walks down the street, do you?"

Some of the men shook their heads in answer.

"Yeah, Scott." Wyatt Boudreau stood, hitching his belt up. "Why are you so good at resisting temptation? Getting kinda old, aren't you?" He drawled out the

words in a thick Cajun accent. "You sure you got what it takes to lead the pack?" He scratched his balls and sneered at Scott.

Scott bristled, his hackles rising at the insinuation. Of course, Wyatt would be the one to try to take him down a peg. Nothing Wyatt wanted more than to be alpha, but Scott didn't plan on stepping aside anytime soon.

"Anytime you want to challenge me for my spot, just name it. Place and time, Wyatt." Scott folded his arms over his broad chest as muscles honed by hours in the sheriff department's weight room pulled his T-shirt tight. He cocked his head at Wyatt, who just stood there, glaring in open defiance.

"Didn't think so." Scott looked around the room, checking his pack's support. As far as he could see and feel, they were firmly behind him, not Wyatt. Only one or two held his gaze, the rest lowered theirs in submission.

Even Bobby Cotteau.

"Now, Fire Chief Hawkins and I want you men to be on time and paying attention to your jobs. He can't run the fire department, and I can't run the sheriff's without y'all. We need each of you to pull your weight. Got it?" Scott surveyed the group. They all, to a man, nodded, even Wyatt, a firefighter.

"This month, running wild is in designated areas only. No one leaves the pack territory," Scott added. "That's all. Dismissed." He rapped his knuckles on the desk, and the group stood and shuffled out.

Mike Hawkins, one of Scott's high school buddies and his beta, hung back. "Good job putting Wyatt in his place, Scott." He slapped him on the back. "He just isn't alpha material."

"Glad you feel that way." Scott shook Mike's hand.

"He's a good man, a good firefighter; don't get me wrong, but the thought of Wyatt running this pack puts my hackles up. But really, how the hell *do* you keep away from the ladies?" Hawkins leaned in and asked. Mike had married three years ago.

"Clean living, Mike." Scott winked.

"Your mama still on you to settle down?" Mike landed one hip on the desk and grinned at Scott.

"If you mean is she casting spells and trying her hardest to find me a mate, yeah."

"Not spells?" Mike gasped and paled. "She ain't seeing the Virgin Mother again is she, 'cause parish funds can't afford another one of those, you know."

Scott held out his hands to calm his friend down. "No. Don't worry. Whatever she's got up her sleeve, it's just about me."

"Mon Dieu." Mike sighed, then glanced over to Clancy, waiting off to the side. "Looks like you got business."

"Yeah." Scott nodded, and Mike headed out, leaving Scott and Clancy alone.

"Sit down, Clancy."

Clancy took a seat and cast his eyes down in submission.

This was the part of being alpha Scott hated—vetting their mates. He alone gave permission for the pack members to marry. If he did, the wedding was on; if not, the member could either leave the pack, fight the alpha for his mate, or find another mate.

Leaving the pack meant leaving the territory, and without a safe place to change and run, that was incredibly dangerous. Fighting the alpha rarely worked, due to the alpha's size and strength, and in the past, there had been some "to the death" fights. Scott had no intention of ever forcing one of those, not if he could help it. Killing someone for being in love just wasn't in his makeup. No way could he live with himself.

But separating mates could be just as dangerous, leaving the wolf without a way to vent his need to protect and to procreate. If a mate couldn't be found, the wolf's irrational behavior could put the entire pack at risk, and eventually the wolf would sicken and die. There was no such thing as an old bachelor wolf.

It was mate or die. But he'd cross that bridge when he absolutely had to.

Scott's only comfort was that in all his time as alpha, he'd never had to refuse a chosen mate.

"I understand your fiancée is not from around here."

"She's from Lafayette, sir. We met at college."

"She know about you? About the wolf?"

Clancy nodded. "Yeah. I told her before I asked her to marry me."

"Kind of dangerous, that."

"I know, but she's the one. My mate. It's just like they say, sir. You know it. You can't think of anyone else, don't want to fuck anyone else, or even look at another woman." He shook his head and leaned closer to Scott. "I can't even watch porn anymore," he confessed.

Scott wasn't sure what to say about that. "The longing of a werewolf for his mate is supposed to be overpowering."

"It is. I can feel it in my bones, smell it all over her. She's mine. Deep, deep inside me I know she's the one, you know?" The young man, probably just thirty, looked up into Scott's eyes in expectation.

No, Scott didn't know. He'd never felt that with anyone, ever. That surety. That unshakable knowledge that some person was the one he'd been meant to be with for the rest of his life.

"Sure, Clancy, I know. But as alpha, I need to know if she'll sign the papers."

The papers. Nothing more than a prenup stating that if children were born during their marriage, the sons would stay with their father should the couple divorce. An absolute necessity for any males born, since they'd need to be raised in a pack, taught their ways and laws, and what they needed to survive the change. Divorces were nonexistent in the pack, and Scott thought it wasn't a bad idea at all.

“Yessir!” He nodded. “She understands completely.”

“Good.” Scott slapped his hands together. “She’s the one, right?”

“She’s the one.” Clancy seemed so sure in his heart. For a second, Scott wanted to feel the same way, ached with the loneliness of his life. He shook his regret off, like raindrops from his fur.

“I’ll have to meet her first, of course. Once that’s done, I’ll schedule the ceremony for two weeks before the wedding.” She’d have to sign the papers prior to the marriage and be brought before the rest of the pack to be introduced to the members and the other wives. She’d need all the support she could get to deal with being mated to a werewolf.

“She’s ready. Any time is fine with us. Thank you, sir.” Clancy stuck out his hand, and they shook. “And sir, for what it’s worth, I’d stand by you, no matter what.” His sharp, clear gaze met Scott’s for a second, then dropped, but it was just enough for Scott to read the sincerity in it.

“It’s worth a lot, Clancy.” Scott let his hand drop and motioned for Clancy to be on his way. After locking up, Scott headed for his truck and climbed in.

Between the moon and his mother, maybe there was someone out there just for him. But he wasn’t sure he really believed it.

Or really wanted it.

Chapter Four

Ted entered his destination into the onboard nav system. The route was easy, just follow the I-10 to the turnoff, then head south. The group would meet at the Bayou End Bed and Breakfast, check in, and then spend the first afternoon getting to know each other and understand what the week would be about.

He'd driven from the French Quarter to the Garden District home of Judge Charbonnet. Thanks to the judge, Ted knew the exact time Kirsten would leave. He waited until Kirsten had pulled out of the drive and then followed her. Blending into the ebb and flow of St. Charles Avenue, he realized it wouldn't be hard to keep tabs on her, not in the bright red Escalade she drove.

She got on the highway, heading west. Ted plugged his MP3 player into the car's stereo system, and music filled the cabin. He'd created a special playlist to drive with filled with great old classics and some new stuff, all of it upbeat, to keep him alert.

And hour later, they passed through Baton Rouge. He glanced at the display on his console, calculated the time, and figured they'd get to the B and B in about two hours. If she didn't make any stops, that is.

While the car ate up the miles, Ted thought about the dream again. He'd skipped the fortune teller at the voodoo shop, deciding that was just too touristy. And it went in direct opposition of his stand that such things were nothing more than hocus-pocus made up for the benefit of the paying customer.

But something niggled at the corner of his brain. Cops were a superstitious breed, and in New Orleans, everything took on an air of the mysterious. He knew lots of cops that believed in voodoo, magic, and their powers.

Ahead, Kirsten motored along at just the exact speed limit, and he'd had to set his cruise control to keep from passing her. Bad enough all the other cars passed them, but he didn't want to look as if he was following her, even if he was.

However, with nearly a dozen people in the painting course, he figured most of them would be coming from nearby. It wouldn't draw attention even if she noticed. He had his cover. He was just another artist, like her, taking a class.

But the vision of a faceless lover, covered in curling blond hair, just wouldn't leave him alone, and before too long, he had to shift in his seat to arrange the hard-on making his jeans far too tight.

He'd packed a box of condoms and a tube of lube, just on principle. You never knew who you might meet, and there might be other artists, like him, interested in exploring the beauty and pleasures of the male body.

Still, hooking up with someone taking the course had its risks. Would he be expected to spend every night with whoever he fucked? Or worse, would he expect Ted to be there in the morning too? Or that everyone would know about their liaison?

Oh hell, no. He didn't do mornings, didn't do anyone more than once, unless it was strictly understood there was no relationship.

Ted groaned and rubbed his cock. "Looks like no action for you, buddy. Sorry."

Ted didn't do the big *R. Relationships*. He shuddered at the thought of it. His last one, with his patrol partner, Douglas, if you could call unrequited love a relationship, had nearly killed him.

How could he have been so stupid to fall in love with a straight man? A straight man with a wife he adored. And kids. A man firmly entrenched in the heterosexual life, a man who never once gave Ted the idea that there could be any chance for them.

What a fucking disaster.

Never again. He'd taken the cure, and it had been hard and cold and painful. Hell, it'd taken nearly a year and a half of therapy just to get the image of Douglas lying in his arms, bleeding to death, out of his mind every time he closed his eyes. The complete sense of helplessness, the overpowering knowledge that he'd failed the man he loved, that he should have been first through the doors of that store, not Douglas.

Now he only saw it in his nightmares. Red blood covering everything—his hands, Douglas's shirt, the floor of the store. Douglas gasping for air, groaning in pain, struggling to stay alive, and then the goddamn utter stillness that had destroyed Ted's heart.

If he had to spend the rest of his life never caring for another person, then so be it. Anything would be better than going through that pain again.

The B and B came into view, sited between two massive oaks, thick arms undulating down to brush the ground and then bending upward to the sky. They were similar to the ones in his dream, but not quite the same ones.

Ted pulled in, right behind Kirsten, and parked in the small lot. He kept his sunglasses on and took a deep breath. *Showtime*.

He got out of the car and waved to some of the others standing around on the wide porch. "Hi! Is this the place for the artists' retreat?"

"Sure is!" One gray-haired lady sang out, as the others motioned him up to them. "You must be"—she scanned a clipboard—"Ted?"

"That's right. Ted Canedo." He shook hands, then turned to watch as Kirsten came up the steps, pulling a wheeled suitcase behind her.

"Hi, I'm Kirsten." She gave them all a million-dollar smile, displaying gleaming white teeth, baby blue eyes, and an adorably crinkled turned-up nose. Oh, she was a trophy; just dip her in gold, put her on a pedestal, and call her done.

There was just something so wholesome about her, he couldn't imagine her cheating, but then again, he couldn't imagine her marrying Charbonnet.

"Hi, Kirsten." Ted greeted her, along with the others. He turned to the lady who seemed to be in charge. "What's the plan? Check in, then bags?"

The older woman nodded and motioned him inside. "Most of the others are here, and we're still waiting for the artist himself to arrive." She went behind the counter. "I'm Marie, one of the owners of Bayou End. My husband, Maurice, is getting the appetizers ready out in the kitchen."

She pushed some papers across the desk at him, and he took them, signed, and gave them back. She handed him an honest-to-God old-fashioned key to his room. "You're in the Pelican room. Upstairs, on the right, third door. The men will share a bath, hope you don't mind. With only three of you, it shouldn't be too hard, should it?"

"No, I'll manage." Ted had thought there would be more men, but if she counted the "artist himself," that left only one more man, and the likelihood either of them were gay dwindled. The prospects for hooking up didn't look good.

Kirsten rolled her bag up to the counter and checked in. As Ted left to go back to his car and get his bags, he heard her say, "I hope all the women don't have to share one bathroom?"

Marie's reassuring answer followed him out the door, but he never heard Kirsten's reply. From what he remembered of the Web site for the B and B, it had several full baths upstairs and even one or two down.

Ted grabbed his bags, left his art supplies in the car, locked it, and headed back to the lobby, which had been a large living and dining space converted into several seating areas filled with overstuffed chairs and sofas.

He went upstairs, counted the rooms, and came to his. After fumbling with the lock, Ted opened the door, and stepped inside.

It was lovely, much better than he'd thought when Marie had said "*Pelican Room*." Done in browns and rustic reds, picking up the colors of the brown pelican prints on the wall, the room felt warm and cozy. The large queen bed, covered in a lovely old quilt, screamed comfort.

He ran his hand over it and pushed, sinking into what had to be a feather bed.

"Good Lord." He sighed in appreciation and turned to put his things away. He took his kit out of the bag and placed it on his nightstand, then hung up his clothes in a tall French armoire against the wall. Through the window he could see out over the parking lot on the side of the house.

Excellent vantage point to watch everyone who came and went. He was a lucky duck. Or pelican, as it were.

He chuckled.

Best to get back down and scope out the others. Maybe the “artist himself” had shown. If not, Ted didn’t want to miss the fanfare, confetti, or whatever accompanied the maestro’s arrival.

He trotted down the stairs and strolled over to a gathering of people in the living room. Everyone smiled at him. Most of them were ladies in their late forties and fifties, with a few younger women sprinkled in.

If he’d been straight, and fifty, this would have been a happy hunting ground. But he wasn’t, so it was neither happy nor a hunting ground.

“Is Darcy here yet?” Kirsten joined the group. She’d freshened up, put on a coat of lipstick, and pulled her hair into a loose ponytail of cascading blonde curls. She looked even younger than before.

“Do you know him?” Ted cocked an eyebrow upward, curious to see what she’d say.

“No, we’ve never met, but I just love his work,” she gushed. As she talked, her hands moved, and her huge diamond wedding set flashed like a revolving lighthouse beam. “How about you?”

So she wasn’t hiding the fact she was married.

“I didn’t really know who he was, I just wanted to get away somewhere and paint. When I found the course online, then checked him out, I liked what I saw.” Ted shrugged.

“We all come to Darcy in our own way,” intoned an older woman with short dark hair who sprawled in a high-backed green velvet chair.

The room of women twittered and giggled, and if he hadn’t been standing right there looking at them, he’d have sworn they were a group of thirteen-year-olds sighing over the latest teen heartthrob.

“So do most of you know him?” Ted asked as he sat on one of the couches.

“I’ve studied with him twice before. He’s brilliant, but temperamental,” a short plump redhead with close-cropped hair and glasses warned him. “He’s British,” she said, as if that told him all he needed to know.

“Well, shouldn’t hold that against him.” Ted smiled. He’d done a thorough search on the Internet about their instructor. Wentworth had studied art in England and France and had made a name for himself with his impressionist landscapes. Now at almost fifty, he was doing the North American tour, teaching classes all over the country. And for what Ted had paid for the one-week course, Wentworth was making a bundle.

If the man was as charming as the ladies made him out to be, then perhaps he was the one Kirsten was hooking up with, despite her claim never to have met him.

If she was cheating with anyone. He was beginning to have his doubts about it. There were only three possibilities here at the hotel, and it certainly wasn’t Ted. That only left the missing guy, and Maurice, the owner of the place. As since Marie looked to be in her early sixties, Ted figured Maurice was not his man.

A woman rushed into the house and skidded to a stop.

“He’s here! He’s here!”

Everyone, except the woman in the chair and Ted, bolted for the door. Ted glanced at her, she shrugged, and jerked her head toward the doorway.

“I suppose we should attend the official arrival,” she intoned as she stood.

“As long as I don’t have to curtsey.” Ted offered her his arm, and she took it as he led her out the door and onto the porch. “It seems he’s made quite an impression on everyone.”

“Darcy tends to do that.” She gave his arm a squeeze. “His appearance is striking, and he has this way about him.” She winked at him. “Sort of a cross between Fabio and Andy Warhol.”

Andy Warhol with a long flowing mane of white-blond hair and Fabio’s muscle-bound body?

Now, this Ted had to see.

Chapter Five

Darcy Wentworth was indeed a sight to see. He drove up in a huge black SUV and took his time getting out, probably for maximum effect.

The women of the group certainly hung on his every movement. Ted, not so much, although he'd hate to admit his curiosity was piqued.

But the door opened, and a tall man with a Fabio-worthy mane falling to just below his shoulders, and piercing blue eyes stepped out. He wore faded jeans, not too tight, but not hanging off, and a cream silk shirt open at the throat. Blond hair curled over his muscular, tanned chest.

For a moment, Ted's heart thudded. Could this be the man in his dreams? Blond, tanned.

No way. No fucking way. An artist? Named Darcy? And with all that hair? He didn't like guys with long hair. He preferred his men more butch, short-haired, well-built.

But despite his denial, he couldn't deny his interest, whether this was the man or not.

Darcy gave everyone a nod and came up to the steps, carrying his bags. At least he didn't expect anyone to take them for him.

"Afternoon, all. I hope I haven't made everyone wait too long, but the drive took longer than I thought." His teeth were so white against the brown of his skin Ted expected to see a little glint off them like in a cartoon.

"Of course not!" Marie stepped forward and ushered him inside. The women closed ranks around them as Ted stepped aside. "Everyone is here, except Peter Graham. He's running late also."

Peter must be the other guy signed up for the course.

"Good. I'm glad I didn't put anyone out." At least the man seemed genuine, but Ted would wait before forming any opinions.

Once inside, Darcy signed in, got his key, and turned to the crowd. "Give me a few minutes to settle in, then I'll be down and we can go over the course objectives and schedule." Another smile, and off he went, still toting his own bags.

The group mingled a bit, Marie disappeared to get refreshments, and Ted wandered into the living area and took a seat on the couch.

He watched as the ladies drifted toward the seating areas, putting pairs and friends together. Many of the women were here with friends, and only a few stood out as loners, like him.

Marie arrived with a few trays of finger sandwiches and cheese, placed them on the tables around the room, and disappeared again.

Ted picked up what looked like a crustless triangle of egg salad and took a bite. Delicious. His hopes for some good food rose. Perhaps Maurice was a whiz in the kitchen after all.

Darcy arrived and stood next to the fireplace. He didn't need to clear his throat to get everyone's attention.

"All right. Let's get started." He told them about his expectations, the schedule of lectures and of painting times, and then asked everyone to introduce themselves and explain why they were here.

Ted groaned. He hated this part. He decided to keep to as much of the truth as possible, nothing anyone couldn't verify.

They went around the circle, with each of them telling basically the same story. Always wanted to study with Darcy, took the chance, saved up for it, that sort of thing, until it was Ted's turn.

"Well, I'm sort of in between careers, and wanted to see if I still had any talent left. I didn't really know Darcy, but the workshop fell into the 'right place, right time' sort of thing." He shrugged. "But I did research your work, and have to say, I liked what I saw of it."

"Thank you." Darcy gave him a killer smile. Had Ted been younger and less experienced, he'd have fallen into those blue eyes.

A few more people spoke, then it went back to Darcy.

"Now, tomorrow, we'll meet at breakfast, then go outside. I'll begin the first canvas, demonstrating and lecturing as I paint. We'll break for lunch at eleven, and at one, we drive to the first location."

"Where are we headed?" One woman asked, as if she were on the edge of her seat.

"That will be a surprise." He winked at her, and she practically passed out.

Darcy clapped his hands, signaling the end of his talk, and everyone stood.

Marie came in. "Like it said on the Web site, we serve breakfast only, but your lunches and dinners will be in some of our best local restaurants. Tonight we've booked a table for you at Pastille's Seafood, in town."

Ted smiled. A local seafood place should be good, and he moved along with the crowd toward the parking lot.

Darcy stood on the porch, slapped his back pocket and said, "Damn. Forgot my car keys."

Ted moved over to him. "You can ride with me." He held up his keys. "If you want."

Darcy smiled. "Thanks. I'd like that." And again Ted had to wonder about his dream.

Darcy followed him to his car and got into the passenger side. "Do you know where this place is?"

"No, I'm going to follow the gang. Hopefully it's not far and we won't get lost." He started the car and backed out of his spot, waiting for Kirsten to pull out. He followed her down the drive to the street.

"Right. I'm famished. I haven't had anything since I left Houston." Darcy sat back against the seat and gazed out the window.

"Houston? I came from New Orleans." Ted decided to keep the talk general and nonsexual. For now.

"I did a workshop last weekend in the Hill Country. Gorgeous. Then two days in Houston and now here." Darcy sighed as if exhausted, but he didn't mention if he'd ever been to New Orleans, where he might have met Kirsten.

"Must be a grind, in a way. All the driving."

"And the workshops. Oh, don't get me wrong, I love teaching, and the money is good, but life on the road is hard. Living out of a suitcase. Some days I wake up and can't remember where I am." He gave a wry laugh.

"Like being a rock star, only without the tour bus."

"Right you are." Darcy winked at him. "But I still have the groupies."

"The ladies? Oh, yes. Quite a few fans you've got there."

"But not you?" Darcy turned to face Ted, his eyebrows scrunched together.

"I didn't say that." Ted swallowed. "I said I didn't sign up for you, but once I saw your work, I was glad I had."

"Just teasing. I'm not a prima donna." Darcy laughed and put his hand on Ted's knee.

"I wondered about that." Ted also wondered why Darcy's hand was still on his knee.

Darcy gave him a squeeze, then let go, and they drove on in silence until they hit town.

"Here it is. Can't miss it." Ted nodded at the restaurant. They pulled into the parking lot behind Kirsten and found a place near where she'd parked. The others were pulling in all around them, but Ted, Darcy, and Kirsten were the first ones to the door.

Darcy spoke to the young lady at the front desk, and she led the way to a long table set for twelve at the side of the room.

Ted went around the table to sit with his back to the wall, and Darcy followed. He pulled out a chair next to Ted and sat. Kirsten managed to snag the seat on the other side of Darcy.

She leaned over and grinned at Ted. "You snooze, you lose." The rest of the group wandered in.

Several of the other ladies practically fought each other for the chairs across from Darcy, who seemed not to even notice the skirmishes, or at least had the good grace not to notice.

Despite Ted's reluctance, he had to give the artist points.

The hostess said, "I'll have your waiter over shortly," as she passed out the menus after everyone had found a place to sit.

From the looks on the women's faces, all they wanted was a big heaping helping of Darcy Wentworth.

Ted, however, hadn't made up his mind.

Chapter Six

Scott looked up at the clock on the wall of his office and groaned. He'd worked late again. After he stood, he stretched, twisting from side to side to work out the kinks in his back.

What he needed was a good run. The pull to change had been strong ever since the full moon had come up two days ago, and now he knew if he didn't change soon, free the wolf inside him, it might just escape. He might lose control of it, and that was just not an option.

Not for Scott.

Tonight, he'd go home, have dinner, and then go for a run in the swamp. Maybe he could talk Mike into going with him, if Mike's wife would let him.

He shook his head. Being single wasn't so bad. He didn't have to ask anyone's permission to do a damn thing. And he liked it like that, most of the time.

But there were times when he missed the company of others, missed having someone who cared about whether he was gone or not, or when he'd return.

He shook it off. The full moon, and now Clancy's wedding and pack ceremony coming up had just messed with his mind, that's all.

His stomach rumbled as he gathered up his files, put them away, and shut down his computer. He put on his hat and stepped out of his office.

"Going home, Terri." His secretary looked up from her work.

"Right, Sheriff. I'm closing up soon, too." She smiled at him. "You're going to get something to eat, aren't you? I could hear that rumble a mile away."

Terri was more like a mother to him and all the men on the force. She worried about all of them. Her little cubs, she called them, including Scott. Her husband and sons belonged to the pack.

He rubbed his stomach. "Guess I'll stop and pick up something before I go home."

"You do that. Have a good night. And a good run." She winked.

"Night, Terri. Be careful." Scott left and headed to his cruiser.

Once he pulled onto the main street, he thought about where to grab a bite. He'd been in the mood for seafood for a few days, but had never had the chance to get some.

"Fried catfish," he said aloud.

There was only one place for catfish in town, and that was Pastille's. No one cut it thinner or fried it better than they did.

His mouth watered at the thought of the golden crispy fillets, their spicy coleslaw, and those incredible, melt-in-your-mouth hushpuppies.

The sign for Pastille's shone like a beacon in the night, calling the hungry home. He pulled into the parking lot and had to search for a space. Unusual for a Monday night.

Scott walked through the doors and went to the bar to order his take-out meal. The bartender handed him the menu, and he opened it, then closed it, and handed it back with a chuckle.

"No need to look. I know what I want." He ordered the catfish dinner and then leaned against the bar.

A cold beer would sure be good right now, but he was still in his uniform and to him, that meant on duty, and that meant no drinking. He'd have one at home with his dinner.

Loud laughter jerked his attention to a party of people against the wall. Mostly women. Mostly older.

A beautiful blonde woman captured his attention. Her adorable button nose crinkled as she laughed at something the man next to her said.

Scott's gaze fell on the man, and he froze. Dark hair, dark eyes, good-looking, well-built; the man stirred something in Scott that shouldn't have been touched by another man. His wolf whimpered, and the first telltale signs of change, sprouting hairs, tingled as they pushed through the skin on his chest.

Scott coughed, choking on his spit.

"Well, hell." Nothing like that had ever happened before. Never. Scott growled low in his throat. And if it were up to him, nothing ever would.

He pushed the wolf down.

The man, as if he knew Scott watched him, looked up and caught Scott's gaze.

For a long, uncomfortable moment, they stared at each other, and no matter what Scott denied, something sexual passed between them. Something that made his wolf howl as if declaring itself to Scott and everyone around him what it wanted.

The stranger's eyebrows rose, as comprehension dawned.

Scott tore his gaze away and turned back to the bar.

Where the hell was his order?

The need to flee came over him so fast, he nearly bolted. He grabbed the bar and blinked in disbelief as blond hair sprouted across his knuckles. His chest and legs itched.

And oh my God, his cock stiffened.

This was *not* happening.

Hunched over, straining to keep his sanity and his wolf in check, Scott barely heard the bartender speaking.

“Sheriff, here’s your order.”

Scott looked up. He fumbled in his back pocket for his wallet, then pushed a twenty, more than enough to pay for the meal, to the bartender. “Keep the change.”

Meal in hand, he turned to leave.

The man at the table still stared at him. As Scott took his first step toward the door, the man stood and pushed back his chair, intent burning in his eyes.

Panic swelled in Scott’s chest as he gave a small shake of his head to warn away the stranger. He wasn’t a coward, far from it, but this was a confrontation he didn’t want to face. Head down, he made for the door.

Cool air rushed over him as he went through the doors to the outside and hurried to his cruiser.

Ted nearly tripped in his rush to get to the man in the sheriff’s uniform.

What the hell had just happened? What had the man done to him? He’d never felt a connection like that before, as if there had been a taut rope stretched between himself and this stranger, humming, sending a signal through the length of it straight to his cock.

Every atom in his body wanted the sheriff. Not just wanted him, but wanted to be fucked by him.

Ted *never* let anyone fuck him. He topped. Always.

A blowjob or a handjob was one thing, but he’d never let anyone take his ass.

With a whimper, he knew he’d let that man do it to him, and he knew he’d beg for more.

It wasn’t right. He’d been in lust before, seen someone at a bar and knew he wanted to fuck him. Hell, he was a healthy guy, just thirty-one; he wanted to fuck just about anyone.

But something was so wrong about this, like he’d been hypnotized, or drugged. Maybe some kind of crazy spell. The last thing Ted did was trust this feeling.

Had someone put something in his drink?

That idea was even crazier, but if it killed Ted, he was going to find out what the hell was going on. What if Charbonnet had sent someone after Ted? Why?

Nothing made any sense.

The sheriff had better have some answers, that’s all he knew.

He followed the sheriff out the door. The man was almost to his police car. Ted broke into a jog.

“Hey, you!” he called out. “Sheriff!”

The big man froze, one hand on the door handle of the black-and-white. His back hunched as if Ted had landed a blow across that broad expanse.

Ted skidded to a stop, panting hard. "Hey."

Scott turned around, raising his gaze to meet the man's, his hand white-knuckled on the handle, his stomach filled with butterflies, and his cock half-hard.

"Do you need something?" he managed to croak out.

"Need something? Look, what the hell was that back there?" Dark eyes, furious and confused, demanded an answer. Beautiful eyes. Eyes he shouldn't be thinking about like that.

Scott didn't know what to say. *Deny it*, his mind screamed.

"What? Back where?" He tried his most innocent look.

"Oh no. Hell no. You're not saying you didn't feel that." The man kicked the gravel of the parking lot, sending small rocks flying.

Scott's mouth dried up. He opened and closed it like a perch stranded on the bank of a bayou.

"I know you felt it too. What the hell is going on?" The man shook, hands in fists, and for the first time, Scott wondered if he was in danger.

"Step away from me, please." Scott placed his hand on his gun. "Just calm down."

The man put up his hands in surrender. "Okay, okay. I'm cool. I just want to know why I...what I felt...what I feel," he stumbled over his words.

Just as shaky as Scott felt. Maybe neither of them knew what was going on.

"Has that ever happened to you before?" Scott dared to ask. He couldn't yet describe what had taken place.

"Never." The guy shrugged. "Look, I'm gay. I don't know about you, but I've had insta-lust for someone, but this went way beyond that."

"You're gay?" Scott took a step back.

"Yeah, and you don't have to do that, you jerk." The guy frowned. "I'm not contagious, or HIV positive. Fuck." He kicked the ground again.

"Sorry, I..." Again Scott couldn't get his brain or his mouth to work. It was still happening—that feeling of desire, of uncontrollable wanting, rose up in him again. "I should go. My dinner's getting cold." That was about the stupidest thing he'd ever said, but it was better than what he wanted to do to the guy up against the side of his car.

Ho-ly shit.

"Right. You're just going to walk away?" The guy ran his hand through his dark hair, hair that looked to Scott to be soft and silky, and oh no, good Lord, he needed to stop that line of thinking right now.

"I'm not gay." Scott turned and yanked open the door to the cruiser. He put his dinner on the passenger seat and got in. Just as he was about to close the door, the guy lunged forward and grabbed it.

“You’re not gay?” Disbelief burned in that dark gaze. “Bullshit.”

“Nope. Never have been. Straight as an arrow.” Scott pulled on the door.

The guy tugged back, refusing to let him go. Tug of war with a gay guy over being gay. This was just fucking weird, and when anything weird happened to him, there was only one person to blame. *Maman*.

“Then what just happened?” the guy shouted.

“I don’t know, but I think I know how to find out.” He closed the door at last. After a second thought, he rolled down the window, lowering his voice. “Look. I’ve never had gay thoughts about anyone. I’ve never, never, *never* checked out another guy, I swear.”

“You’re straight.” The guy’s shoulders slumped, and he ran his hand over his face. “Holy shit.” Shaking his head, he backed away.

“Sorry.” Scott didn’t know what else to say as he turned the key and the cruiser came to life. He put it in gear, backed out of the spot, and flung gravel getting the hell out of there. He needed answers, and fast.

He didn’t know who the hell that man was, but he planned never to see him again.

Chapter Seven

Ted stood in the parking lot, watching the red taillights of the cruiser disappear around a corner in the distance.

He exhaled, releasing his pent-up anger and lust, pulling him out tighter than a guitar string. One pluck and he would surely break.

His cock went limp, disappointed, he supposed. "Forget it. You heard the man. He's not gay. And I'm never going there again, no matter what *you* want."

He headed back inside and slipped into his seat between Kirsten and Darcy.

Are you all right? Kirsten leaned over and mouthed.

He gave her a smile and a nod.

Darcy put his hand on Ted's leg and gave it a squeeze.

"Everything fine?"

"Uh, yeah. Just thought I knew someone." He picked up his beer and finished it off.

"And did you?" Darcy cocked an eyebrow at him.

"No. Wrong guy."

"I'm glad." Darcy winked. "The way you bolted out of here, I thought it might have been something I said."

"No." Ted shook his head. Darcy played it so cool, Ted didn't know what to think about the man. Instead, he focused on the real reason he was here and watched Darcy's interaction with Kirsten to see if he could pick up anything going on between them.

The rest of the dinner proved uneventful.

Kirsten talked with almost everyone at the table, including Ted. Darcy spoke with his admirers and Ted. So far, the only thing the two of them had in common was Ted.

As Ted drove Darcy back to Bayou End, he remembered they were still one man short.

Peter Graham.

* * *

Scott drove faster than usual down the uneven asphalt and gravel road, then came to a car-rocking stop outside the little cottage.

He jumped out, hood-slid across the car, took the steps in one leap, crossed the lit porch, and banged on the screen door.

"Mom! Open up!"

A light came on behind the door, curtains parted, and then his mother opened the door.

"What the hell you makin' all that racket for, boy? You tryin' to wake the dead?" She glared at him, but he glared right back.

Scott jerked open the screen door and pushed inside.

"I need to talk to you about that fucking spell you cast." He headed straight to the kitchen where he knew she'd have a pot of coffee on.

"Watch your language. What spell?" she asked, padding behind him in her pink slippers.

"I want to know what you did. What you said. Just exactly what was in that spell"—she frowned at him—"that prayer you did the other night in the woods." He grabbed a cup from the cabinet and poured his coffee.

"Oh, that old thing. That was just a prayer to Mary."

"I know that, Mom, but what did you ask for?" He took a sip of the thick black steaming liquid.

"The usual. A mate for you. Been asking for four months, every full moon. I'm about to give up." She shrugged and picked up her own cup. A newspaper had been spread out on the kitchen table, telling him that he'd interrupted her reading.

"Tell. Me. Exactly." He growled. Good Lord, sometimes he wanted to strangle her with his bare hands. Anyone who knew her would understand. If the trial stayed here, the worst he'd get would be justifiable homicide.

"I prayed for the Virgin to bring you a mate. The perfect mate meant only for you." She reached out and put her hand on his. "That's all."

"Any particulars?"

"Particulars?" She stared at him.

"Yeah, you know. Height, weight, hair color." *Gender.*

"*Non, cher*, like I told you, I just want someone who'll love you for you. Someone who can hold their own with your alpha, who'd stand by you no matter what."

"Right." Scott groaned. *Like another guy.*

"A good woman." She nodded and took a sip.

"Did you say woman?" He jumped in his seat.

"What kind of question is that?"

"Just asking, that's all. But did you?"

She cast her gaze heavenward, as if divine inspiration would come to her, then shrugged. "Nope. Don't think I said woman at all. As well as I can remember, I just asked for a mate."

“Just a mate?” Scott exhaled and fell back into the chair. He was screwed. Somehow, for once, his mother’s voodoo-hoodoo actually worked, only with a backfire of cosmic proportions.

There was only one answer. He’d been sent a mate. Only it was the wrong fucking sex.

Scott groaned and cupped his head in his hands.

“Oh, Mom. Oh shit.”

“Scott, stop. You’re scaring me.” His mom tried to pull his hands down. “What’s going on, son? Tell me.”

“I can’t. I just can’t. Promise me, you’ll never, *ever* do that again. No more spells, no more prayers.” He dropped his hands and stared into her face. “Please, for my sake.”

“Well, you can’t ask me to just stop praying. I’m a Catholic; it’s what we do best. That and guilt.” She reached into her apron and pulled out her rosary. “See? I pray all the time.”

“The kind of praying I’m talking about is the one with dead cats and candles and is done at midnight.” He growled again.

“Oh.” She cleared her throat. “I’ll stop.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.” She looked at him as if he’d lost his mind.

“Thank you.” Well, that was great for the future, but what was he going to do about now?

She’d called on whatever godforsaken powers of heaven or hell and brought him a mate, only it was a man, not a woman.

A fucking man.

A fucking *gay* man.

Scott had no idea how to make this go away.

“Mom, if I reject my mate, what happens?”

“What? No one does that, cher.” She chided him as if he were a child.

“But what if? As alpha, I can deny a mating, and I know that the male can fight me, leave the pack, or find another mate.”

“That don’t happen very often. Usually a wolf finds another mate if his own mate dies, or the one he would be mated to dies.” She picked up her pack of smokes and tapped one out.

“What if he doesn’t *like* his mate?”

“That’s impossible. Your mate is your mate. You two are bound to each other, destined to be together.”

“But what if someone doesn’t want their mate?”

“They don’t. No one gets a divorce.” She shook her head, flicked her lighter, and lit a cigarette.

"Then why the prenup?"

"It's really just to show the woman how serious this whole werewolf thing is." She sat back and tapped her ashes on the edge of the ashtray. "Scott. Think about it. Who do you know in this pack who's ever been divorced?"

Scott thought. Not a single name came to him.

Oh he was so screwed.

"But for argument's sake, say I don't want my mate. What would happen?"

She closed her eyes. "I'm not sure, cher. I know a wolf without a mate can wither and die, that's for sure. Turning away your mate would be like committing suicide, child. It's crazy, and no one I know of, or ever heard of, has done that."

Suicide.

God, it just might come to that.

How could he...what could he...what would everyone think? They lived in conservative, Catholic bayou country. There were no gay marriages in Louisiana. As far as he knew, there were no gays anywhere around here.

A sheriff with a gay partner? He'd never get reelected, no fucking way.

Oh hell. An alpha with a gay mate? What would Bobby Cotteau say about that? At fifty, he'd stepped down, trusting Scott to lead the pack in his stead. How could he face Bobby?

Wyatt. Wyatt would jump all over this. Push for a pack decision against his mating.

The bastard would pounce on the opportunity to knock Scott out of the alpha spot. Scott's only choices would be to leave the pack, give up his mate and take a chance on not finding another and dying, or stand up to the pack and fight for his mate.

Right. Fight Wyatt to the death for a man Scott barely knew. He could hope Wyatt won, or maybe he'd just let Wyatt kill him.

There had to be a way out of this, but his options looked slim.

Leave his home and career behind.

Be mated to a man.

Or suicide.

Damned if you do, and damned if you don't.

Right now, Scott didn't know which one he'd chose.

* * *

Ted pulled into the parking lot of the B and B and turned off the lights as he rolled to a stop. Still shaken from what had happened at the restaurant, he needed some time to think. He rested his forehead on the steering wheel.

"Hey, you don't look okay." Darcy rubbed Ted's back, his hand gliding gently over his muscles.

Darcy had been so quiet, Ted had forgotten about him.

"Yeah, I'm fine." He straightened, making Darcy move his hand.

Really it had been comforting. Not for the first time Ted thought about hooking up with Darcy.

He turned to look at the man next to him.

Darcy gazed into his eyes, then let his gaze drop to his mouth, and leaned forward.

What the hell.

Ted caught Darcy's mouth with his, taking control and pushing the man back against the seat.

Darcy gave in, opening his mouth, letting Ted take what he wanted.

Usually, this surrendering would turn Ted on, but tonight, nothing.

His cock didn't even twitch.

Shit, what was going on? He must be more out of it than he thought, so he tried harder. He'd force himself, if he had to.

Ted deepened the kiss, grabbing the back of Darcy's head, clutching a handful of hair, stroking the artist's mouth with his tongue.

Still nothing.

He broke the kiss, leaving Darcy panting and gasping for breath.

"Goddamn, man." Darcy put his hand on his chest. "That was intense."

"Sorry." Ted shrugged. "Guess I'm not really in the mood."

"If that's not in the mood, I'd be terrified to see what was. Although, it might be a wild ride." Darcy chuckled.

"Yeah. Wild." Ted snorted.

"Are you sure that guy wasn't the one you knew? It seems like that encounter has upset you."

"Yeah. It has. I can't explain it right now." Nor did he want to tell Darcy about the overpowering lust that hit him at meeting the sheriff's blue eyes.

Ted opened the door and got out. Darcy followed him up the walk and through the front door.

"I'll see you in the morning." Darcy gave him a wave and went up the stairs. Ted was thankful the man didn't push for more, because right now, he just couldn't deal with it.

Marie stood behind the counter and smiled at Ted. He remembered a little unfinished business.

"Oh, by the way, did that other fellow ever show up?" Ted asked.

"As a matter of fact, he did. About an hour after y'all left. I told him where everyone had gone to dinner, but he said he was tired and went straight up to bed." She nodded to a few of the other guests as they came through the door.

“Guess I’ll meet him in the morning.” Ted turned and climbed the stairs. He waited until he was in his room before peeling off his jacket, so no one caught a glimpse of his gun.

Once he’d grabbed his kit, he took off his shoes, and stowed his holster and gun in his luggage, then headed to the bathroom. The door stood open, and he went inside. Either Darcy had gotten there first, or Ted had beaten him to it.

Ted brushed his teeth, washed his face, and decided to shower in the morning. He trod barefooted back to the room. As Ted closed the door, Darcy slipped across the hall to the bath, wearing only his jeans. Ted watched through the crack in the door.

No denying it, the man was fine. Why didn’t Ted’s body think the same thing?

After replacing his kit on the bedside table, Ted undressed down to his briefs and climbed in bed. He sank into the feather bed, groaning with relief.

With everything he’d been through tonight, he doubted he’d have a hard time sleeping.

But an hour later, Ted still lay in bed, thinking about the sheriff.

Blue eyes. A killer body. And Ted couldn’t be certain, but he thought just for a moment, he’d seen light reflect off golden hairs on the man’s hands. Across his knuckles to be exact.

Tanned hands.

Ted closed his eyes as if he could shut out the truth. No fucking way. It couldn’t be the guy from his dream.

That would just be too fucking unreal. Too much of a cosmic joke.

Well, the universe could try to screw Ted Canedo, but Ted wasn’t going to bend over for it. The universe could take a flying fuck, for all he cared.

There was no way he’d get involved with another straight man.

He might as well just pull out his gun and shoot himself right now.

Chapter Eight

Scott parked his cruiser under the carport, picked up his now cold dinner and trudged up the stairs to his house. In a trance, he unlocked the door and made his way to the kitchen, tossing his jacket on the sofa.

He put the food in the fridge and pulled out a beer. Twisted off the cap. Stood there and downed it in one long, throat-gulping pull.

Then he reached for another.

After the second beer, he toed off his work shoes, undid his uniform shirt, and stripped.

This called for a run in the swamp. He'd hunt something down and kill it. That's what he needed. Expend some of his pent-up energy. That's what this was really all about. That's all he needed.

He turned off the porch light and slipped through the front door, pulling it shut behind him. Trotting down the stairs, he let the change begin.

By the time he'd hit the last step, he leaped from it in full wolf form and disappeared into the blackness of the woods that surrounded his secluded home.

* * *

Ted rolled over and looked at his travel clock glowing in the darkness of his room. Two a.m. He hadn't gotten much sleep, and if he had that fucking dream again, he'd lose his mind.

Another straight man? He had the most intense case of the hots for a straight man.

He groaned and rolled back onto his back. The light of the full moon gave an eerie glow to the world outside his window.

Ted sat up, ran his hands through his hair, and went to the window. The parking lot was full. Every car accounted for, and one extra. Must be Peter's. It was a black Camero. Sleek and sexy.

Would Peter be the same? Would he be the one Kirsten had come here to meet, or was she just getting away to do some art?

Charbonnet was nothing more than a creepy, insecure old man. Still, it was early days in the trip. He'd keep his mind open about Kirsten and see what happened.

A movement near the edge of the woods caught his eye, and he leaned over to stare through the glass. A dark shape moved, and for some odd reason, Ted thought it watched him.

At first he thought it was probably a dog. But even at this distance it looked bigger than any dog he'd ever seen.

Then it was gone, faded into the shadows of the oak trees that surrounded the property.

He shrugged and went back to his bed. Crawling under the covers again, he tried his deep-breathing method to relax.

But all it did was fill his dick. With each deep breath in, his cock grew harder, until it dripped a string of precum on his belly and dotted his black briefs.

What the fuck was he supposed to do here? No gay bars to hit in Cajun country, for damn sure. He got up, padded over to his kit, and got his lube.

He'd just get rid of his boner the old-fashioned way. By hand.

Back in bed, he covered his right hand in slick and went to work, sliding up and down on the rigid shaft, bringing up his tried and true jerk-off thoughts, like a parade of strung-together scenes from porn films. Guys going down on each other, guys fucking, guys kissing.

Oddly, it was always the kissing that got him the hottest. Tongues and lips and mouths. Hands buried in hair, gasps and sighs and soft moans.

All the things Ted never allowed himself to do.

He never pictured himself in any of his fantasies. Always good-looking guys, buff and hard-bodied. Just like that sheriff.

Oh shit. He wasn't going there. That was a nonstarter. He readjusted the film playing in his head. *Back to our regularly scheduled broadcast, folks.*

But the sheriff returned, and no matter what Ted did, he couldn't shake him.

Ted gave up and let the images flow as he jerked his meat. The sheriff had him up against the cruiser, his cock pushing its way between Ted's ass cheeks. The sheriff, in the car, legs spread, and Ted going down on him.

Those big hands buried in his hair, pulling him up for a kiss, opening for Ted, surrendering to Ted.

Ted groaned as he spilled over his belly.

Yeah, the kissing always did it for him.

Minutes passed until Ted's breathing steadied, and he leaned over to snatch a T-shirt from the floor and wipe the cum off his stomach.

He rolled over and closed his eyes.

He would *not* have the dream again.

* * *

Scott ran the trails only the wolves knew, killed a rabbit and ate it, then ran them again. As the sun came up over the swamp, he padded back to his house.

Under the carport, still in the shadows, he changed back, and ran up the steps. He rushed inside and shut the door, leaning against it, breathing hard.

Hoping it had been enough.

He'd spilled blood. Torn and bitten and ripped flesh from bone. Ate red, juicy meat, tender organs, as delicious to him as a wolf as the finest food he'd ever eaten as a man.

He needed a shower and then bed.

Exhausted, he ran the water until it got hot, then stepped under the hard spray, sluicing off the sweat, blood, and stink of the swamp.

His cock had been half-hard, even as a wolf. He needed to fuck and needed it bad.

So Scott did what he did every morning since this thing had started. He soaped up his hand and slid it over his cock, pulling and tugging, swiping over the head, at first hard and tight, then loose and fast, as he took himself to the edge of orgasm...

Where he hung, refusing to visualize what he knew would send him over the edge.

No fucking way.

He wouldn't do it. He'd never done it before. Thought of a man to get off.

Not just a man, one man. His mate.

"No!" he shouted. "This isn't the way it's supposed to be!"

His jerking became erratic as he fought the images that loomed just on the edge of his vision.

He wouldn't come that way. Not if he could help it.

He thought of every beautiful woman he'd ever seen in a Playboy magazine, tool calendar, or porno flick.

None of them did it for him. They used to.

"Fuck." Frustrated, he slid to the floor, his hand flying over his cock, his balls burning. If he didn't come soon, he'd probably have a heart attack.

He gave in.

Saw the guy from the restaurant. The dark eyes, dark hair, hard body. Pushed him against his cruiser and captured his mouth, thrust his tongue inside and...

Scott cried out as he came, shooting a string of white cum across the shower to paint the glass wall.

Too weak to get up, he closed his eyes and nodded off, until the water turned icy and he had to get out.

That was never going to happen again.

* * *

Ted had the dream again, waking at the same place he always did. No face, just the tanned arms, blond hair.

It could be anyone.

But the setting? How did he explain that? It was the bayou country, looking exactly like it did right here. The house could be down the road.

If he could just find out where the sheriff lived, saw his house, he'd know at once. Then he could move on, get past this aching from not knowing.

He threw off the covers, willing his boner to go the fuck away, and sat on the edge of the bed until it subsided. The alarm went off, and he slapped it. Seven a.m. He stood, slipped on a pair of navy sweats, gathered his things, and checked to see if the bathroom was clear.

The door stood open.

He made his way there and stepped in.

A young man leaned against the sink, dressed only in plaid boxers. Blond, tanned.

Ted groaned. "I don't fucking believe this."

The guy turned to him and laughed. "Sorry, I'm almost finished." He had brown eyes and very pink nipples. One of them had a silver ring through it.

"It's all right. I wasn't talking about you."

"Right." The guy snickered. "Marie told me we have to share. I'll just bet you're not the sharing type." His gaze swept over Ted as he cocked an eyebrow.

Ted had seen that look a time or two or twenty.

"You got it, kid." Ted could play the gruff guy better than anyone. This young man was Ted's type, the kind of twink he'd pick up for a quick blowjob.

"I'm not a kid. I'm twenty-three."

"Uh-huh. Look, are you finished?" Ted leaned on the doorframe.

"Yeah. I'm done. By the way, my name's Peter Graham." He edged past Ted, brushing up against him.

"Ted Canedo." Ted stepped inside and closed the door.

Okay. Ted's gaydar pinged. This couldn't be Kirsten's meet-up. But he might be an interesting development.

What would Darcy do when he got an eyeful of Peter?

Ted knew exactly what Darcy would do. He'd have Peter down on his knees with Peter's mouth on his cock.

If Ted wasn't so out of sorts, the idea of Peter sucking him off would sound very, very good.

So how come it didn't?

Chapter Nine

Ted joined the others at the breakfast table, arriving before Peter or Darcy. He found a seat across from Kirsten, gave her and the other ladies a smile and a hello, then poured a cup of coffee.

"Mmm. Good brew." He nodded. "So how does this work?"

"What? Breakfast?"

"Yes. It's included, I know that, but do we order or..."

At that moment, Marie backed into the dining room with trays of food. "Just help yourselves to everything. Breakfast is buffet-style."

He laughed, and Kirsten joined in. She had a lovely laugh. Honestly, she seemed perfect, perhaps too perfect. Was it all a front? Could anyone be this...spotless?

Ted remained seated, letting the ladies serve themselves first, and took a biscuit from one of the baskets on the table. He spread butter on it and took a bite. Fluffy and light. Real butter. His estimation of Marie and Maurice rose a little higher.

Darcy strolled in. "Good morning, all." He slipped past Ted's seat and leaned over. "Morning, Ted."

"Morning, Darcy." Ted chewed as Darcy went right for the food.

"I'm famished." Darcy sat a few seats down from Ted. For someone claiming he was hungry, he had very little on his plate. A scoop of scrambled egg, one slice of bacon, and a mound of fruit salad.

Ted stood, went to the end of the line, and as he filled the plate, he hoped the rest of the food was as good as the melt-in-your-mouth biscuits.

When everyone had a plate in front of them, Darcy took a sip of coffee and cleared his throat.

"Today I'll set up my easel outside, block out a painting, and talk my way through it. Then we'll break for lunch, getting it on the way to this afternoon's spot."

"Are you going to tell us where?" one of the ladies asked.

"Yes. I've secured permission for us to paint on the grounds of the Bon Rive plantation." He sat back.

Squeals of excitement erupted around the table. Ted had heard of the place. It was famous and in all the sightseeing books. One of the oldest and most stately

homes, the foundation that owned it gave elaborate period costume galas there each Christmas Eve. Guided tours by appointment only.

"That is a coup," Ted said.

Darcy grinned at him. "Can't take the credit. My assistant set it up. Here's the thing, though. We had to agree to let them take some publicity shots of us, for use in their brochure."

"Oh!" The ladies, like birds on a wire, tittered about it to each other.

Ted's stomach sank. The last thing he wanted was his face splashed all over some brochure.

"What if we're not interested in that," a voice behind him asked.

Ted turned. Peter stood right behind his chair, his hands resting on the back of it. If Ted leaned back, he'd surely trap the young man's hands between his body and the hard wood.

"Well, I expected that. Anyone who wants to be in the photos must sign a release. If you don't, no pics. Simple as that." Darcy smiled at him, his gaze glued to Peter's. "And you are?" Darcy's eyebrow cocked upward.

Ted looked back and forth at them.

He didn't have to be gay to see a connection clicking. He'd expected it. Not seeing it would have surprised him more.

"Darcy, this is Peter Graham." Ted made the necessary introduction.

"Hello, Darcy." Peter gave him a shy smile. He lingered, as if reluctant to leave Ted's side. "Is that seat taken?" he asked.

Ted shook his head. Why would a gorgeous guy like Peter not want to be in a photo shoot? Not being paid for it? Maybe he had an agent? Wouldn't surprise Ted at all. The kid was everyone's wet dream, man or woman.

Peter got a plate of food and returned to it, pulling out the chair with his foot. He sat, tucked one leg up to his chin, and nibbled on a slice of bacon.

Damn, he was sweet. Bed-tussled blond hair, low-slung jeans, faded T-shirt. A rust-colored tribal band tattoo wrapped his upper arm. He played everything for looks, real Abercrombie and Fitch material.

Darcy ate it up. He practically drooled over the kid. Ted would have laughed, if he didn't know he'd have been drooling too just a few days ago.

Before he's seen the sheriff.

Shit.

He didn't even know the man's name. Hell, he was a PI; a name should be easy enough to find out.

If he wanted to, that is. But he didn't. So that was the end of it. If he knew what was good for him, he'd stay far away from the sexy lawman.

Besides, he had a job to do, and it wasn't getting laid. Not by Darcy, Peter, or the damned sheriff.

He took another sip of coffee, trying to wash the image of the man and the cruiser out of his mind.

Since when did cop cars figure into his fantasies?

Since when did a straight man? Oh, yeah. Three years ago, when all he'd thought about had been Douglas.

As they finished their breakfast, Ted watched Kirsten and Peter interact. Just a few words spoken between them; most of Kirsten's conversation had been with a few of the other women.

Maybe she swung that way?

Maybe he was barking up the wrong tree?

He'd never felt so out of sorts, so off balance. It just wasn't like him. He was usually so clear about his work and keeping his personal feelings out of it.

He turned his attention to the women's conversation, picking it up and trying to follow along. He'd become so involved, he didn't notice Peter had spoken until the kid nudged him.

"Are you working in oils or acrylics?" Peter waited, eyebrow raised, for an answer.

"Oh, sorry. Oils."

"I can't stand the smell of linseed oil. It gives me a migraine." Peter frowned.

"So, I guess you better not put your easel too close to mine." Ted grinned and winked.

Darcy watched them, and for a second, his eyes narrowed. Unbecomingly, Ted thought.

"You're right. I'm going to have to make sure I'm far enough away from everyone using oils." He sighed and turned to the others. "Is anyone else using acrylics?"

A few of the ladies raised their hands.

"Oh good. I'd hate to be out there by myself." He smiled at them, a look of genuine relief passing over his face.

"You can ride with us, if you like," one of the ladies offered, patting his hand. "We're carpooling to be 'green'."

"Thanks."

"Or you could ride with me," Darcy drawled. Peter's gaze snapped to their teacher.

"Sounds cool." Peter shrugged, as if it didn't matter who he rode with.

Ted couldn't resist. "But won't the linseed oil on Darcy make you sick? After all, he'll be painting all morning."

Darcy frowned at Ted. "Well, it's not like I'm bathing in the stuff, you know." He turned to Peter. "If it bothers you, I'm sure you can either drive yourself or go

with the ladies.” He gave Ted a nod, proving he could be reasonable and not so grabby.

Ted didn’t blame Darcy a bit for being grabby.

It all seemed settled, and Darcy stood. “Give me a few minutes to get set up outside, and we’ll get started.”

Everyone broke up, some going upstairs, some outside. Ted, a fresh cup of coffee in hand, followed the others out the door.

Some of the ladies were pulling folding chairs out of their vehicles. Ted wandered over, popped open the back of the SUV, and pulled out his Saints folding chair. Tucking it under his arm, he closed up the car and then wandered around to the back of the house where the crowd had gathered.

Kirsten had already found a seat, almost directly behind Darcy’s easel. Everyone else formed a tight semicircle, placed so they could see the master work his magic.

Ted plopped down his chair off to the side and sat. He had a good view of Darcy, Kirsten, and the woods. The scene was picturesque, moss-draped oaks, the morning sun’s glint off the bayou, and the tree line, dark and green.

He didn’t even smile when Peter unfolded his chair next to him. The kid gave him a quick grin, then focused on the scenery.

“It’s lovely here.”

Ted nodded and took another sip of coffee.

Darcy arrived, set up shop, and began the lecture.

Ted listened, keeping one eye on Kirsten, but after a while, he fell into Darcy’s teaching. He had an easy way of speaking, explaining why he’d chosen a particular color or why one brush over another, sometimes serious, sometimes humorous. He entranced all of them, men and women.

He’d make an interesting lover, no doubt about it. As the sun rose higher, Darcy rolled up his sleeves, and golden hair shimmered in the sunlight.

To Ted’s left, a young, golden-haired god sat, a casual leg bent over his knee, his plaid loafer dangled off one foot, and his unshaved chin resting on his fist.

Darcy talked and painted, and on the canvas the bayou behind the little B and B came to life. He really was amazing. Talented, good-looking, the whole package.

Anyone would be lucky to have him for a lover, even if only once.

And yet, no matter how Ted tried, he couldn’t drum up interest in the man. Or in the godlet sitting next to him. So close, in fact, he could smell the kid’s shampoo, feel the heat from his body, the rustle of his clothing.

Nothing.

Shit. Whatever was going on sucked.

Ted didn’t like it, not one fucking bit.

Chapter Ten

Scott sat in his patrol car outside the coffee shop and ran his hand over his face. Man, this morning had been a bitch. He'd woken up incredibly hard, and not even a quick jerk off in the shower had helped eased the tension singing in his body.

If he could just stop having these god-awful thoughts, he'd be fine. But they haunted him, shook him to his core, and made him doubt everything he thought he knew about who he was and what he wanted.

He took a sip of the scalding coffee, wishing it would burn those crazy thoughts right out of his head. Wished he could stop thinking about the guy from the restaurant. Wished he could stop thinking "mate" for one goddamn second.

Mate. His body *craved* his mate. Like an addict craves drugs, an alcoholic craves a drink, or a bored housewife craves chocolate. He had no control over it, and that scared him to death.

Craved. That was a word he'd never understood until his gaze met that man's gaze, and his world shattered.

Urges. Another word that he'd just come to know, a word he usually associated with his wolf. Those urges were animalistic, wild, and feral. The urge to *mate*—oh fuck there it was again—the urge to hold and protect and keep safe, the urge to kiss and be kissed. To love and be loved.

But not with another man. It wasn't supposed to be that way. He wasn't a prude; he believed that who a person loved was their own business. He did. He just never thought of himself as...gay.

"I'm not gay," he said to no one. Maybe he just needed to hear it again, from his own lips, to convince himself of it. Somehow, he knew even if he said it a thousand times, it wouldn't stop the need his body felt for a complete stranger.

He downed the rest of the coffee, turned on the car, and headed back to the station. Along the way, he resolved to talk to someone in the pack, someone older, who might know more about this mating thing. And how to get out of it.

Someone had to know a way. But who could he trust to ask? Even asking the questions would expose him. Who in the pack did he trust implicitly?

Bobby Cotteau? One of the oldest members, and Scott counted him as more than a friend. The man had been like a father to him. But to see disappointment in Bobby's eyes? No, Bobby was the last person he would go to.

That left Mike Hawkins. His best friend, beta, and the most reliable man he knew. Strong and confident in his position as Scott's beta, they'd been together since grammar school. He'd had Mike's back, and Mike had always had his.

Scott decided if there was anyone he could ask about this, it would be Mike. Mike could keep a secret; Scott knew that from their experience as teens, getting into trouble in the small rural parish.

He'd call him tonight and see if he wanted to get a beer after work.

Scott pulled into the station's parking lot, parked, and made his way to his office.

"These are for you. None of them are urgent." Terri handed him six pink slips of memo paper, took his coffee mug in exchange, and waddled off to refill it for him.

He plopped his hat on the hook behind the door and fell into his seat. He picked up the phone and punched in Mike's cell phone number.

On the third ring. Mike answered. "Now, what does the sheriff of St. Jerome Parish want with me?"

"Can't a friend just call a friend?" Scott laughed.

"Not if he wants a favor. That requires paperwork." Mike chuckled. "What's up?"

"Want to get a drink after work?"

"Sure. This pack business?"

"Personal."

Mike's breath whistled over the phone line. "Personal? Shit, I don't think we've talked personal since I told you about finding Sharie."

Scott remembered that phone call, the one telling him his best friend had found his mate. And Sharie had been perfect for Mike. It had been an easy decision to let her into the pack.

"Look, it's nothing major," Scott lied. "I just need to bounce a few things off you, that's all."

"Sure." There was a pause as Mike rustled papers. "How about six at the Rougaroux?"

"The Rougaroux?" Scott hadn't thought about meeting at the pack's hall.

"Well, if I know you, this is going to be something you don't want anyone overhearing."

"How the hell—" Scott exhaled. "Yeah. Six at the Rougaroux."

"See you then. And Scott?"

"Yeah?"

"Relax. Damn, I can feel the tension over the phone line. It can't be that bad." Mike laughed.

"Sure. Later, gator."

Mike hung up, and Scott stared at the receiver.

It can't be that bad.

Ho-ly shit.

* * *

Ted and the others finished lunch at a small café on the road to the plantation. Not bad food, great sweet tea, and they'd managed to push a few tables together for the large party.

Darcy held court. The women hung on his every word. Kirsten seemed interested, but not overly. And Peter's gaze kept dancing from Darcy to Ted.

Peter had taken the ride with Darcy. Ted had driven behind Kirsten, keeping a professional eye on her, and a completely unprofessional one out for the parish police cars.

Hoping to spot the sheriff.

How fucked was that?

Every time the door to the café opened, Ted had to check it out, see who it was, and every time a stranger walked through it, a small piece of him sank. A larger piece of him, the hunger and need to fuck, ratcheted higher.

His body was primed to blow. His cock grew to a hard shaft in his pants. He shifted in his seat to ease the discomfort. If he didn't lose it soon, he'd stand up and give everyone at the café an eyeful.

He'd never been like this before. Something had taken over his body, as if he no longer controlled whether or not he breathed. His body was stuck on hyperdrive, and his mind was stuck on "What the fuck?"

Not a pretty combo.

They paid, and everyone stood and headed for their cars. Peter edged next to him.

"Hey."

"Hey." Ted glanced at the younger man.

"Can I ride with you?" Peter frowned, as if he wasn't sure about asking.

"Sure. But what about Darcy?" Had something happened between them?

"It's the paint thinner and linseed oil. You were right. I've got a killer headache building. If I ride in his car to the plantation, I won't be worth shit." He rubbed his temple, his eyes looking tired and hurting.

"Did you tell Darcy?" Ted wasn't going to get between them. He had no designs on Peter, or Darcy for that matter.

"Not yet. Can I ride with you?"

"Sure." Ted shrugged. "What about the ladies?"

"They talk too much." He wrinkled his nose, looking fucking adorable. Seriously, something was broken inside Ted's body if he didn't want to fuck that sweet, tight ass.

“Okay, tell him and meet me at the truck.”

Peter walked off, and Ted headed to the men’s room. No telling how long they’d be out there, or if they had bathrooms to use. He didn’t mind peeing against a tree; he was a guy, after all, but it might be frowned on by the ladies and the plantation’s people.

After he came out, he bought a soda to go, and went to his SUV. Peter leaned against it with all his stuff in a pile next to him, looking alone and lost.

“I’m ready.”

“How’d Darcy take it?” Ted unlocked the doors, and Peter loaded his equipment in the backseat and then got in.

“Take it?” Peter’s eyebrows rose.

“Look, kid.” Ted exhaled. “Don’t try to play me. I’m not interested in you. Darcy is. Fuck him. Don’t worry about fucking me, ’cause it ain’t gonna happen.”

“What?” Peter’s eyes widened.

“Innocent doesn’t cut it with me, either.”

Peter sat back, his long, delicate fingers playing with the frayed section of his jeans over his knee. Golden hair peeked through.

“Darcy just thinks he can have whatever he wants.”

“He wants you. You want him. What’s the problem?”

“Nothing. Everything.” He huffed and crossed his arms.

Ted drove out of the parking lot, following the others to the plantation.

Damn, he hated being some kid’s counselor. Still.

“Okay, what’s *really* the problem?”

“Promise you won’t tell. Promise you won’t go haywire.”

“I promise.” What could the kid be thinking? That Ted cared enough about him to give a shit about his problems.

“Darcy wants to fuck me.” Peter stared out the window.

“Right.” Ted made it sound like an encouragement.

“Bareback,” Peter whispered.

Ted nearly stomped his foot on the brakes and pulled the SUV over to the side of the road, but he just kept himself together. “What? Are you nuts?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Peter, I don’t know you from Adam. But I do know guys like Darcy. He’s probably fucked every man in his classes, and he’s been on the road for months.” Ted put his arm around Peter’s shoulder. “Look, kid. Tell him no. If he can’t respect that, then tell him to go fuck himself. Bareback.” Ted growled.

“I did. It’s just...” he faded out. “I really like him. As an artist, I mean.”

Ted could tell the guy was torn. “You came here just to study with him, didn’t you? Just to get to meet him?”

“Yeah, I did.” Peter stared out the window again.

“I’m sorry. Really, but you’ve got to know, people aren’t always what they seem. I see it all the time in my line of work.”

“What do you do?” Peter turned to gaze at him.

Shit, he’d said way too much. “Insurance.” He shrugged.

“Oh, yeah, I can see that.”

“Let me tell you, from one gay man to another. No one who asks you to bareback, and isn’t involved with you in a long-term relationship, and can’t prove he’s clean? That’s twisted, man.”

“I know.” Peter smiled at Ted. “Thanks. I mean it.”

“Nada.” Ted nodded.

Peter sank back against the seat, looking way younger than twenty-three and more than a little relieved.

When Ted got a minute with Darcy alone, they were going to have a serious talk.

Deadly serious.

Chapter Eleven

Scott ate a late lunch at the diner. He chatted with a few folks and listened patiently to them complain about whatever bothered them. His job as sheriff meant he had to be open to everyone, even the pains in the ass of this parish.

But when Wyatt Boudreau strolled in, it was Scott's cue to leave. He tossed some bills on the counter and stood, settling his hat on his head.

"Hello, Sheriff." Wyatt nodded at him. Scott nodded back.

"Wyatt." No skin off Scott's nose to be civil. Despite everything, Wyatt was pack, and as such, Scott would fight to defend him if it came down to it.

They gave each other a wide berth as Scott left and Wyatt settled at the counter with another firefighter. Scott recognized him, but he wasn't a pack member.

"Leaving so soon?" Wyatt grinned at Scott.

"Back to work," he replied and edged out the door.

Once on the street, he exhaled. He didn't need a run-in with Wyatt, not with the entire diner looking on. Like Vegas, what happened in the pack, stayed in the pack.

Scott got into the cruiser and fired it up. His radio came on, and the dispatcher called.

"Boss, we just got a call reporting a bunch of cars at the Bon Rive. You're the closest man free."

"I'll check it out," he answered into his mike. He didn't normally patrol, but if there wasn't a closer car and he was available, he took the call, and his dispatcher knew it.

When he reached the plantation, the tall black gates, usually chained shut, were open and half a dozen cars had parked along the gravel road leading to the stately white mansion. Green manicured lawn stretched toward the house, flanked by woods.

He pulled along, driving slowly, taking down license plates to run later.

Several people stood in a group farther down. Probably nothing more than one of the scheduled tours, but he had to make sure they were legit. He parked, got out, and made his way toward them.

As he approached, he recognized the group, stumbled, and caught himself on the hood of one of the cars. When he looked up, it was right into the dark brown eyes of the stranger at the restaurant.

"Ho-ly shit," he muttered. His body split in two, one half needing to run as fast as he could away from there, and the other to run as fast as he could toward the stranger.

Stuck in between, unable to move, he cleared his throat, straightened, and remembered who he was. Sheriff Scott Dupree. *Right.*

"You folks got permission to be here?" He dragged his gaze away and searched the others' faces.

A striking man, with long white-blond hair, a deep tan, and ice blue eyes stepped forward. "I'm Darcy Wentworth, the artist. I have permission from the foundation. We're going to be painting here on the grounds."

"Is someone from the foundation here?"

"No. But the gates were open, and someone was supposed to meet us." He shrugged, his hands buried in the front pockets of paint-splattered jeans.

"Do you have any paperwork?" Scott had to be thorough about this; if he let some trespassers on the grounds and they vandalized the place, he'd never hear the end of it.

"Paperwork?" The man held out his arms. "My assistant set this up. I promise you, we're harmless. Just a troop of artists." He gave Scott a winning smile.

Scott nodded. "All right then. Can you put in a call to your assistant? I'll wait around until someone shows up."

"Of course." Darcy turned away and pulled out his cell phone.

The others watched, their gazes darting back and forth between Scott and Darcy. Everyone except the stranger. His gaze never faltered. It burned Scott with its intensity, demanding he return the look, answer the call.

After a few minutes, Darcy closed his phone and turned back. "She's going to fax it to your station, if that's all right? Now, can we get started? We're on a schedule."

"Sure." Scott nodded. He'd call Terri and confirm it.

"Come on everyone," Darcy called out. "Let's get set up. Choose your spots for the best views, lighting, and colors."

They broke up, carrying chairs, easels, canvases, and paint boxes. The man didn't move. Maybe he didn't even breathe. But he sure as hell stared.

Scott turned away and headed back to his cruiser.

Steps crunching on the gravel told him the man followed him.

"Sheriff!" A deep voice called, and Scott's cock stiffened.

He kept walking. He didn't want to do this. Whatever *this* was going to be, Scott knew it wouldn't be good.

Scott made the cruiser when a strong hand landed on his shoulder. A shudder ripped through him, and he nearly staggered.

The other man groaned, and the grip tightened, almost bringing Scott to his knees. But not in pain. Oh hell, what he felt couldn't be called pain at all, but damn if he'd name it.

Scott spun around, staggering a little. "You! Leave me alone." He shrugged off the guy's hand.

"My name is Ted Canedo."

"I don't want to know your name." Scott shook his head.

"Sure you do. You want to say it when you're jerking off, don't you?" He growled, his brows laced together.

"Merde. I don't know what you're—" The guy cut Scott off by stepping forward, catching his arm by the wrist and holding on. "Let me go."

"Not until you explain this." Ted stared into his eyes. Scott lost himself there, deep in those dark pools.

"I can't. I don't know what the fuck is happening."

"That's a lie. I can smell it on you." Ted leaned closer and inhaled. "Shit. I can smell you in my dreams. Smell you when I touch myself."

Despite himself, Scott inhaled. *Ted*. His mate. The scent overpowered him, sent him reeling. His wolf howled to break free, to claim this man.

He looked around to see if anyone watched them, but couldn't see a soul. "Get in the car." He jerked his head to the cruiser.

Ted nodded and walked around to the passenger side and got in. Scott closed the door and realized this was a big mistake.

Their scents filled the car in seconds, and he was lost. Scott moaned. Ted cursed. They lunged together, lips biting, hands demanding, tongues fighting for dominance.

Scott wouldn't let go, back down, or come up for air, until his chest burned and his lips were cut and bruised. Nothing about this felt weird; his body didn't scream that it was wrong to kiss another man. All he knew was his wolf's desperation to be with this man, to taste him, to hold him, to fuck him.

Then Ted pushed him away, panting, huddled against the doors of the car as far away from Scott as possible without bailing out.

"Fuck." Ted gasped.

"Merde." Scott ran his hand over his face. "That can't *ever* happen again." His fingers touched his swollen lips.

"No. Never," Ted lied.

The only sounds in the cabin were the air rushing in and out of their lungs and a low humming coming from their throats.

"Start talking." Ted clamped his hand around the door handle to keep him on that side of the car. If he let go, he knew he'd fling himself like an eager puppy at the handsome sheriff again.

Scott cleared his throat. "My name is Scott Dupree, and this is all my mother's fault."

Ted stared, then laughed. "You're blaming your mother? Isn't that sort of clichéd?"

"Not for being gay. I'm not gay. I told you that."

"Right. So how did I taste? Want more?" Ted pushed the man, knowing he should just keep his mouth shut, but damn him, he wanted another kiss, another touch.

"No. She cast a spell." He rolled his eyes.

"A spell? Like a voodoo spell?" Ted frowned. "I don't believe in that shit."

"So how do you explain this?" Scott waved his hand back and forth between them.

He had him there. Ted didn't know how to explain it. But if Scott really wasn't gay...?

"You are straight."

"Yes. That's what I've been trying to tell you." Scott's gaze begged Ted to believe him.

"I believe you." He slumped. "I can't do this again. I can't fall for another straight man." He bit his lip, winced, and looked out the window. "It'll kill me, this time."

"This time?" Scott cocked his head. "This has happened to you before?"

"Not *this*. But back in New Orleans I fell for my patrol partner. Straight and married with kids." Ted traced the line of the dashboard with his fingertip, unsure of the wisdom of telling his secrets to a complete stranger. "It didn't turn out well."

"Merde. I would say I didn't believe in spells either, but here we are. And I just kissed a man." He bumped his head against the headrest. "And it gets worse."

"Worse? Than this?" Ted grunted. "Lay it on me."

"You're my mate." Scott closed his eyes.

Ted listened to the change in Scott's breathing, to the way the man's smell changed, wanting to do nothing more than lick his way over every inch of skin.

"Your mate?" Ted swallowed. It sounded weird, yet perfectly right. "I'm your mate? What are we? Tarzan and Jane? 'Cause I'm telling you right now, you might be bigger than me, but I am *not* a bottom."

"Forget it. Forget I said that." Scott shook his head. "What are we going to do?"

"I don't know. I know what I *want* to do." Ted groaned, praying Scott would ask.

A long moment later, Scott whispered, "What do you want to do? To me."

"I want to suck your dick. Take you in my mouth, taste you, lick your balls, make you say my name when you come, and swallow your cum down." Ted looked Scott straight in the eye.

Scott stared back, then his gaze dropped to Ted's crotch, where the evidence of Ted's arousal strained against his jeans.

Ted found Scott's erection answering back.

"Ho-ly shit," Scott whispered. He'd never been so turned on, so hot and primed for sex in his life. Just the thought of Ted's mouth on his cock nearly set him off.

This was so fucking bad he wanted to cry.

"I think I can break the spell," Scott said. "I think I can get my mother to reverse it."

"Can she do that?" Ted looked hopeful, and something about that cut right into Scott's heart.

"I'm not sure. This is some powerful stuff."

"You're telling me. I've been dreaming about you for months, man." Ted ran his hand through his hair, and Scott resisted the urge to push back an escaped lock.

"I just need some time to talk to her and Mike."

"Mike? Who's that?" Ted sat up, bristling as if threatened.

"Whoa! He's my best friend." Scott put his hands out to halt the other man from getting his hackles up. Just like a wolf would.

"What's he know about this?"

Scott exhaled. "There's more."

"More than we're under a voodoo spell? More than you saying I'm your mate? What the hell else could there be?" Ted shouted.

"I'm a werewolf."

Ted froze. His heart beat strong and steady, and just like that, he felt Scott's heart beating in time. Smelled Scott and knew he'd know that scent anywhere and for the rest of his life.

Scott's blue eyes darkened. "I'm a wolf. I'm the alpha of our pack here in St. Jerome."

"Okay, Scott. I've been a cop in New Orleans for ten years, a PI for two years, and I've never heard anything about werewolves being anything but stories." More than anything, Ted wanted to believe Scott was full of shit, but something in the man's attitude, the way he held himself, told Ted it was true. It was all true.

"It's sort of a secret." Scott smiled, and it melted Ted's heart, curled his toes, made him want to reach for the man and pull him down on top of him.

"I would think so." Ted cleared his throat. "So, you think you're a werewolf, and I'm your mate because your mother put a spell on me."

"I don't *think* I am; I *am*. There's a whole pack of us here. Haven't you heard of the legend of the rugarou here in the bayou?"

"I've heard of it. I've also heard of vampires and zombies and little green men from Mars, but that doesn't mean I believe it or that they exist."

"I don't know about the others, but weres exist. I exist." He thumped his chest.

Ted held out his hands to calm the sheriff down. "Okay, for now, let's go with you're a werewolf. And your mother is a voodoo queen."

"No, she's just a crazy old lady with the power to cast a love spell to bring me a mate. You came."

That was quite different from being caught in some trap, and Ted understood the inherent problem.

"She was talking about a female mate, right? You were expecting a woman."

"Right." Scott sighed. "None of my pack is gay, Ted. I'm their leader. I'm supposed to bring a female into the pack, mate with her, and have children."

Ted whistled under his breath. "So I'm guessing this won't go over well with the folks here in St. Jerome, or with the members of your wolf gang."

"It's a pack. And no, it's not going to go over well." Scott looked sick, as if on the verge of throwing up.

"No problem. I go back to New Orleans at the end of the week." Ted shrugged and opened the car door. "Save us both a lot of heartache."

"You can't just go." Scott shook his head.

"Why not? What's going to stop me?"

"You won't be able to leave. The pull between mates is too powerful. I can't leave you any more than you can leave me."

Ted shut the door again and thought about what Scott said. "Okay, if that's what you believe. We just have to get your mother to reverse that spell. Then I'll be free to leave, and you can find your woman."

"Right." Scott nodded, but the look on his face told Ted that the sheriff didn't really believe it.

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Scott held on to the wheel of the cruiser like a life preserver as Ted gathered up his strength and opened the door again. What Scott had said about not being able to leave had proved right. It took everything Ted had to get out of the car and shut the door.

Even more to walk away. Every step stabbed into him as he left Scott behind, but he knew he had to do it.

Spell or no spell, Ted wasn't going to go through that heartbreak again. And this was even worse.

No fucking way was he some werewolf's mate.

Chapter Twelve

Ted stalked back to his car, opened the rear hatch, and pulled out his equipment. None of the other artists were in sight. He turned, exhaled, and brought his attention back to his paid job.

Find out if Kirsten was cheating on old man Charbonnet. Clean, simple, easy.

So unlike his life ever since he'd taken this stupid job. He adjusted the easel, chair, and tackle box in his arms, and started to search for her.

He'd set up his easel near her, within watching, if not hearing distance. But where had she gone?

Ted wandered around to the back of the house, finding several people already set up and painting. They nodded, waved, or said hello as he moved past them. Up ahead, Peter faced not the house, but the woods. Beyond him, Kirsten stood talking to Darcy.

Figures. Wherever Peter was, there would be Darcy, sniffing around. When he got a chance, he was going to have that conversation about safe sex with Darcy Wentworth, whether he liked it or not.

Ted found a place in between the two painters where he could keep an eye on both of them and set up facing the house. The view of the large covered porch stretching across the back of the house looked like it came straight out of a magazine. Picture-perfect, down to the hanging fern baskets, white wicker furniture, and dark green ceiling fans.

This was the view he'd try to capture.

He set up, got out his brushes and paints, and set to work, blocking in the picture like Darcy had shown them.

Darcy moved toward him, done with whatever he'd been discussing with Kirsten.

"Hello. Glad to see you finally made it." Darcy arched an eyebrow at him.

"I had some business to take care of." Ted made a few swipes with his brush to capture the building's shape.

"With the sheriff?"

"Yeah."

"He's the guy from the restaurant, isn't he? The one you thought you knew?"

Darcy was sharp, no doubt about that.

"Yeah. Turns out, he *was* the guy." Ted shrugged.

"Everything settled?" Darcy sure was full of questions. Ted couldn't tell if it was interest or just being polite.

"Sure." He continued to sketch the house in, adding a few hastily drawn details.

Darcy moved around to watch. "You've got a good foundation there. Strong lines. Good perspective. I can't wait to see it once you've laid in some color."

"Thanks."

"I'll be back later." Darcy gave him a nod and moved on to Peter. Ted watched him as he stopped to talk to the younger man, moving in closer, touching Peter's shoulder every now and then, then with a soft laugh, he moved on. Peter continued painting.

Ted looked over to Kirsten, who stood at her easel staring at her painting. She frowned and exhaled.

He put down his brush and strolled over to her. As he approached, she glanced at him and then smiled.

"What's wrong?" Ted asked.

"Something's just not right." She stared at her canvas.

Ted came up beside her and looked at the just blocked in drawing. "It's your perspective. It's just a bit off." He picked up her brush and held it next to the canvas to demonstrate how the lines should be. "See, here, you just need to follow the same lines on the ground."

"Right." She nodded and took the brush from him and quickly made the corrections. "Thanks!"

"No problem. Why didn't Darcy say anything when he was here?" After all, that's what they were paying him the outrageous fee to do.

"He pointed it out to me, just didn't tell me how to fix it. He's really hard, you know." She frowned, and Ted's heart went out to her.

"Yeah. In more ways than that." Darcy clearly wasn't what he seemed. "But I'm sure it'll be fine now." He pointed to the painting.

She nodded. "It will be, thanks to you." She leaned forward and kissed his cheek. It surprised him how much that pleased him, but the feeling set off alarms. He should keep his distance from her. "How's yours coming?"

"Fine. Got it sketched in, just ready to slap on some paint."

"Well, better get to it. By the time Darcy comes back around, we'd better have them almost done. Or else." She wiggled her eyebrows up and down and laughed.

"Gotcha." He headed back to his easel and picked up his brush. Once he started painting, he lost himself in the picture.

After a few hours, he had a nearly complete painting and one he was pretty proud of, if he said so himself.

Darcy called for everyone to pack up and bring their canvases back to the cars for a check in and quick critique.

As the others leaned their paintings against the cars, and they all strolled back and forth looking at them, Ted could see most of the folks had talent, in a wide range of degrees.

Pleased to hear it, Ted listened as Darcy told him that he'd done a superb job of rendering the old plantation house. Peter had true talent, though, and Darcy didn't waste any time fawning over him. Peter's chest swelled a bit under the praise.

As Darcy moved on to the others, Ted couldn't help but think this trip had been a real waste of time. Kirsten wasn't cheating on her husband, and Ted wasn't going to get laid, not by Peter, Darcy, or even Scott.

And that was more than he could stand. Ted sank into a grim mood as they packed up to head to the restaurant for dinner. As he put the last of his stuff in the back of the SUV, Peter appeared at his side.

"Can I ride with you again?" He clutched his equipment under his arm.

"I smell like linseed oil," Ted warned.

"I'd rather go with you than the old ladies."

"What about driving with Darcy?" Ted cast a glance at their teacher, who was helping one of the women load her trunk.

"Nah. I'm in no rush." He put his stuff in the back and turned to Ted. "Besides, I like you better." He looked up into Ted's face from under unbelievably long blond eyelashes.

"And I like you, but kid, I told you, nothing's happening between us."

"Maybe." Peter winked at him and trotted to the passenger door. He got in and buckled up.

"Definitely." Ted put the seatbelt on and turned on the ignition.

"We'll see." Peter smiled. "You look a little tense. I can take care of that you know."

Ted should have said yes. Should have lingered at the plantation, let Peter suck him off, but he didn't. Once again, his lack of interest in sex frightened him.

He could only think of sex with Scott, and that was so not going to happen. The kiss had been one thing, but more with Scott would be out of the question.

Frustrated, he sighed. "I'm fine. Just worried Darcy would rip my painting apart in front of everyone."

"Why would he do that?" Peter asked.

"Cause I turned him down too." Ted chuckled.

"Oh. Yeah, I get your point, but I don't think Darcy's like that."

"Not jealous? Kid, he practically shot daggers with his eyes at me when you were flirting earlier."

“He did?” Peter looked pleased as punch.

“He did.”

“Do you think he cares about me?” Peter really was young.

Ted shrugged. “I don’t know. But I do know he wants to fuck you.”

“I know that too. He told me. No secret there.”

“Look, if you want him, do it, just insist on being safe, that’s all. You’re both adults, and there’s no one in the background, is there?”

“No.”

“Then just do it, get it over with, and move on.”

“That’s what you’d do right?”

“Kid, if I were in my right mind, I’d do you both at the same time. I’d fuck your sweet tight ass and blow Darcy to kingdom come.” Ted laughed.

“But, you’re not in your right mind?” Peter tilted his head at Ted, searching for something.

“Nope. Not anywhere close.” On the verge of going crazy, he’d say. Standing on the ledge of a building and deciding to jump, crazy. Believing the man he wanted was a werewolf, kind of crazy.

“Too bad.” Peter shrugged. “I would have really liked that.”

“Me too, kid, me too.” Ted followed the line of cars to the restaurant.

What he really wanted was to go back to his room at Bayou End and find Scott there, stretched out on his bed with his dick tied up with a big red bow.

Ted sighed.

Never gonna happen.

Chapter Thirteen

Scott pulled into the parking lot of the strip center that housed the Rougaroux Social Club and shut off his engine. Mike wasn't there yet. Good. Gave him time to get his shit together and figure out what the hell he was going to say.

Hey, Mike. Found a mate. She's a he.

Hey, Mike. My mate is a guy.

Hey, Mike. I'm not gay, but my mate is.

Scott groaned and ran his hand over his face. He got out of the car, went to the front door and unlocked it with his key. Both he and Mike had keys to the club, in case one of them had to miss a meeting or get inside for something.

He'd just turned on the light in the back room, when the headlights of a car flashed in the window. He waited as Mike came through the door.

"Hey, Scott."

"Hey, Mike." Scott motioned with his hand for Mike to join him in the small office that held all the file cabinets filled with information about the Rougaroux Club and its charity work. They made sure nothing in the files could ever be linked to or hint at the wolf pack's existence.

Scott dropped into the chair behind his desk as Mike sat in one of the chairs on the other side.

"So what's up?" Mike leaned back and propped a booted foot on the edge of the metal desk.

"I have to talk to someone, and you're the only person I trust." Scott leaned forward, gripping his hands together.

Mike frowned. "Hey, this is serious. Is this about Wyatt? He challenge you?"

"No. Not yet, anyway, but if this comes out, he will."

"Merde, buddy, you're scaring me."

"That makes two of us." Scott took a deep breath and launched himself into a rambling explanation. "You know my mom is all wrapped up in the church and superstitions, right?" Mike nodded. "Well, for the last four months, she's been casting a love spell to bring me a mate. It worked. Only it sort of backfired, and now I'm in deep shit."

Mike laughed, then sobered when he saw Scott wasn't laughing. "What? She's ugly?"

"No, it's worse."

"She can't cook? 'Cause if that's it, it'd be a deal breaker for me."

"No!" Scott shouted. "Look. Just let me get this out, and keep your mouth shut, okay?"

"Sure." Mike frowned.

"My mate showed up in town, and it's not what my mom or me ever expected." Scott leaned close and lowered his voice. "It's a guy."

Mike stared at him, eyebrows laced together. Then he exploded into gales of laughter. "Son of a bitch! You got me that time, buddy!" He whipped his head around. "Where's the fucking camera? Where is it?" Mike leaned down to check under the desk.

"Mike, there's no camera. Goddammit! It's not a fucking joke!" Scott bolted out of his chair and slammed his fist into the wall.

Mike froze, the laugh dying on his lips.

"It's a guy. He's from New Orleans, and he's gay. He said he's taking a painting course here for a week, but he's been having dreams about me for months." He rested his head against the wall.

"How do you know he's your mate?" Mike asked, all humor gone from his voice.

"When I first saw him, it was like lightning struck me. For him too. I can't get him out of my mind." Scott closed his eyes. "I kissed him."

"What the fuck!" Mike exploded out of his seat. "You kissed him?"

"God forgive me. I couldn't help it, couldn't stop myself." Scott groaned. "You have a mate. You know what the pull is like, don't you?"

"Yeah, but Sharie is a woman."

"So. I don't think it matters to my wolf." Scott went back to his chair and sat. Mike sat down also, and they faced each other across the desk.

"What the hell am I going to do?" Scott whispered, dragging his gaze up to meet his beta's.

"I have no fucking idea, boss. But whatever you do, you better do it fast, 'cause when Wyatt finds out, the shit is going to hit the fan." Mike ran his hands through his hair.

"I'm going to see if my mom can reverse the spell. Break the connection between us."

"Hell, has that ever been done?"

"That's what I wanted to ask you. What happens if a wolf denies his mate?"

Mike thought for a minute. "He either finds another or sickens and dies. That's all I've ever been told. And I've never heard of anyone breaking the connection between mates."

"Neither have I, but then, I've never heard of gay werewolves."

"Are you gay, Scott?" Mike frowned, and for once the look in his eyes shook Scott's belief that his best friend would stand by him no matter what.

"No. But what if I were? What if this doesn't work, and I have to take him as my mate?" Scott knew what he was asking. Would Mike stand by him in a fight, if it came to that.

"Scott. We've been friends for most of our lives. Merde, man, we ran together as kids, did our first change together. There's no one I love more than you, and that's the truth."

"But..." Scott could hear the 'but', even if Mike didn't.

"But nothing." Mike stood. "I'll stand by you. No matter what. You're my alpha, Scott. I love you, and I'll fight for you if it comes to it. I don't want Wyatt leading this pack way more than if gays are in it."

"Thank you. You don't know how much that means to me. Really, you don't care about having gays in the pack?"

"Look. This is 2011. Gays are everywhere, even here in St. Jerome." Scott's eyebrows shot upward. "Not naming names, but I don't let who a person loves come between me and them. It's not my business what goes on in someone's bed."

"Right." Scott cleared his throat, uncomfortable with the talk about beds and love. He didn't love Ted. He just wanted him sexually. Deeply, insanely, wanted him. That wasn't love. That was just wolf chemistry and hormones.

Scott held his hand out for Mike to shake. Mike took it, gave him a hard squeeze, and then slapped him on the back.

"Kissed a guy, right?" Mike's eyes gleamed.

"Uh, yeah." Scott shuffled his feet.

"Was it hot?"

"Fuck, yeah." Scott groaned. "I've got to find a way out of this, Mike. If my mother can't undo the spell, I'm fucked."

"Well, I thought alphas always topped." Mike snorted as he held back a laugh.

"Shut the fuck up." Scott snickered. "Damn straight I'm topping."

"He's gay, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Bet he gives a goddamn fantastic blowjob."

Mike and Scott groaned, then laughed. "I don't intend on finding out."

"Really? Thought you might want to try it out, see what you're missing?" Mike teased.

"Shut up and go home to your woman." Scott moved around the desk, and he and Mike walked through the conference room to the front door.

"Really, Mike, thank you. For everything."

Mike slapped him on the shoulder. "It's nada, man. I got your back."

Scott locked up as Mike got into his truck and drove off. Now all Scott had to do was to find his mom and get her to undo the spell.

He glanced up into the night sky. Tomorrow was the last night of the full moon. Would she have to do the spell now or wait until the next month?

One thing he did know. He didn't want to wait another month. No way could his resistance hold out against the pull of the need to claim his mate.

He might have kissed him, but no way was he fucking a man.

Chapter Fourteen

During dinner, Ted made sure he sat among the ladies, keeping his distance from both Peter and Darcy. The looks he got from the two of them almost made him want to laugh, if he weren't feeling so screwed.

This just wasn't normal, but damn, he could still feel Scott's mouth on his, smell his scent. Both their scents had permeated the air in the cruiser's cabin, robbing his brain of oxygen. That had to be the only explanation.

His brain was oxygen starved.

Well, tonight, when they got home, he'd take Peter up on his offer of a blowjob, and prove to himself this was all in his mind, not in his dick.

Dinner broke up, and Ted strolled over to Peter. "Riding with me?" Ted didn't wait for an answer, but moved toward the door of the building.

Peter nodded, turned to Darcy, and whispered something in his ear. He trotted up behind Ted and caught his arm.

"Wait up!" His breathless voice tickled Ted's ear.

"Get in." Ted opened his door and slid inside, not waiting for Peter.

Peter jumped in and slammed his door shut, fastening his seatbelt like a good boy. Ted just bet he was a very good boy, and at the end of this drive, he'd find out how good.

"Darcy asked to come to my room tonight," Peter said.

"What did you tell him?"

"No glove, no love. And that was my final offer."

"And?"

"He agreed."

"Good. Don't accept anything less, Peter. Not from him and not from anyone." Ted drove to Bayou End, but this time, as he pulled into the parking lot, he took a space at the end of the row, under the big oak tree where it was dark.

He switched off the truck and didn't move to get out.

Peter sat back, watching him, then slowly moved toward him, gliding his hand over Ted's leg.

"I guess you changed your mind, huh?" Peter's eyes held hope and excitement. Ted wished he could feel the same.

"Come here." Peter pulled on Ted's hips, angling him toward the passenger seat, then undid his belt. He ran his hand over Ted's cock, and it twitched in response.

Ted knew it was purely physical, nothing more. He leaned back and closed his eyes, thinking, physical was good enough for him. Good enough to prove he could do whatever he wanted; he wasn't tied to Scott, spell or no spell.

Peter unzipped Ted's jeans, wrapped his hand around the semihard shaft, and pulled it free of his briefs.

Without a word from either of them, Peter took Ted in his mouth. Warm, wet, and heated, Peter's mouth surrounded his dick, sucking and laving the shaft, until he sported a fairly good hard-on.

Peter knew what he was doing, and it felt good, it did, but the entire time Peter's blond head bobbed up and down, his hand twisted around Ted's shaft, his tongue flicked the bundle of nerves under the head, Ted fought to keep Scott's face, mouth, and hands out of his mind.

What the fuck? Peter was hot. Damned hot, and any other time, if he'd been in a bar, he'd have Peter on his knees in the bathroom stall before you could say *blow me*.

His body responded, but he just felt empty.

Like something was missing, something that would put the pleasure back into it, something that Ted knew but didn't want to name.

Scott.

His mate.

Ted groaned. Peter must have thought it was for him, because he moved faster up and down, working his hand, trying to bring Ted off.

But Ted wasn't going to come. He knew it. No matter how good Peter was, or how his cock responded, he couldn't come without Scott.

"Shit." Ted grabbed Peter's head and pulled him off his dick with a *pop*.

Wet-mouthed, swollen-lipped, Peter stared at him. "What's wrong?"

"This is." Ted shoved his already deflating cock back into his pants and zipped up. "It's not you, it's me."

"Are you serious?" Peter gaped at him, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I don't believe this."

"Look. I told you my head is messed up right now. I can't do this, that's all." Ted got out of the truck and waited for Peter to exit.

"That is fucked, man."

"Yeah, I know." Ted shrugged, trying to keep his anger in check and not wanting the kid to think it was directed at him.

Peter stormed off as Ted leaned against his truck.

"Shit."

His hand curled into a fist, and he stopped himself just before he punched his truck's fender. Inhaling deeply, he held it, then let it out slowly, using his technique for calming down.

Once his anger had passed, he headed to the house. Maybe a good night's sleep would help.

* * *

Scott parked in front of his mother's house, got out, and climbed the steps to her front door.

On the porch, her cat jumped down from its perch on the railing, wandered over to the door, sat, and waited with him as he knocked.

She opened the door, then held the screen for him to come in. The cat trotted past them.

"Damn cat!" she muttered, kicking at it but missing. "Thinks it lives here."

"Right, Maman. Like you don't feed it every day."

"I don't. But it won't go away."

The cat jumped onto the back of the couch and curled up, paws tucked and eyes closed as if it had every right to be there.

"We need to talk." Scott went into the kitchen and pulled out a chair for her. "Sit down."

She sat. "What's up?"

"I need you to reverse that spell."

"What spell?" At Scott's glare she added, "Oh. That spell. Yeah, sure. I think I can." But her mouth twisted.

"Are you sure?" His heart thudded in his chest.

"Pretty sure." She cast her gaze upward and pulled out her rosary, her fingers moving over it. "Seventy-five percent sure. Maybe fifty." She shrugged.

"I need you to do it. Break the spell. It's important, you understand?"

"Not really." She looked at him with a questioning gaze.

"It worked. You brought my mate. Only it's a *guy*. A *gay* guy, Maman."

She stared at him and shook her head. "Well, hell, son, I didn't know you were gay. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm not gay!" he shouted. "But my wolf thinks it is, and I can't have a gay mate. I just can't. It's not supposed to be that way." Scott buried his face in his hands and searched for some control.

His mother patted him on the back. "Son, the wolf wants what it wants. Even without the spell, which I'm not even sure worked, he'd be your mate. These things are never wrong."

"What?" He stared at her, not believing what she said. "No fucking way. Uh-uh. Somehow, the cosmic connections got tangled up. I'm not supposed to have a male mate. Why would you think even that?"

She shrugged, tapped out a cigarette from her pack, and lit it. "Who knows? I didn't think I was that powerful, but look at what I done. Huh!" She looked pleased with herself.

Scott wanted to strangle her, but then the spell would never be broken and he'd be stuck with Ted. His wolf bayed at that thought, but Scott just told it to shut up.

"How do we break the spell?"

"Well, it's the last of the full moon tomorrow. If we don't do it then, we'll have to wait until next month."

"No, I can't wait. It has to be tomorrow." Scott heard the edge of panic in his voice and hated it.

"Okay. We have to do it at midnight." She got up, went to the closet, and pulled out a pillowcase.

"What's that for?" he asked.

"The dead cat."

There was a loud meow from the living room, and the cat hissed and ran out the screen door. It slammed shut, and Scott shook his head.

"Fool cat. Don't *need* a dead cat," she shouted, as if the cat could hear and understand her. "We have to dig one up."

"Oh." Scott exhaled. For a second he thought he'd have to kill a cat, and although his wolf might enjoy that, he wouldn't.

"And this guy? He has to be there."

"Shit." Scott closed his eyes and counted to ten slowly. "Okay, I can get him here."

"Midnight, boy. Don't be late." She blew out a long stream of gray smoke as Scott stood.

He strode to the front door and paused. "Maman, thank you."

She gazed at him. "You sure you want to do this?"

He opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He stepped out and closed the door behind him.

Checking his watch as he got into his car, Scott worried that it would be too late to talk to Ted. First, he had to find Ted, then convince him to go with him into the swamp tomorrow at midnight.

Ted would come. He wanted out of this as badly as Scott did. He'd made that pretty clear.

So why did that hurt so much?

Chapter Fifteen

Ted kicked off his shoes, stretched out on his bed, and took stock of his situation. It didn't look good. Everything was going to hell in a handbasket, and he was carrying it. He had no evidence that Kirsten was cheating on Judge Charbonnet. Peter followed him around like a lovesick puppy, and for some odd reason Ted felt responsible for the kid. Especially when it came to Darcy Wentworth, who oozed charm, but was a snake under that flashy exterior.

And he couldn't forget his biggest problem—Sheriff Scott Dupree, straight guy, werewolf, and his self-proclaimed mate.

Could his life get any worse?

It was like he'd stumbled into some Cajun Twilight Zone episode, and he was the main character searching for a way out of the swamp, but every path had been blocked by gators.

He had a way out. He'd just leave. Fuck Scott and that bullshit about not being able to separate. Come Friday, when the workshop ended, he was driving his ass back to New Orleans.

He'd drop by the judge's office, give him the good news that he could trust his little trophy wife, and collect a cool five grand.

Then he was going to take a trip to Hawaii. Spend some of the money and find a tanned Hawaiian volcano god-boy to fuck for a week or two.

He glanced out the window. The full moon waned, casting a yellow glow over everything in the swamp, making it look like a scene right out of a horror movie.

Yeah, he could see werewolves running around in the swamp.

He sat up. Last night, he'd seen what looked like a big dog near the cars. Could that have been one of them?

Scott, maybe?

No way.

Ted lay back down and stuffed a pillow under his head to get more comfortable. He hadn't undressed yet, still waiting for the other guys to finish in the bathroom.

A soft knock at the door brought him sitting up on the side of the bed. Shit, if this was Peter or Darcy, he just might get his gun and shoot someone.

"Yes?"

The door opened, and Marie stuck her head in. "Ted, Sheriff Dupree is downstairs asking after you."

"What's he want?" Ted stared up at the ceiling to keep the surprise from his expression.

"He says he needs to speak with you." She shrugged, but waited. The last thing he wanted was Scott in his room or any room with a bed. In Ted's current state, there was no telling what he'd let the sheriff do to him.

Ted sighed. "Tell him I'll be down in a minute."

She nodded and backed out, closing the door.

Ted slipped on his sneakers and checked his look in the mirror. He ran his hands through his hair before he caught himself.

He did not just primp for this guy, did he?

Just on purpose, he pulled his shirt out of his jeans, giving him a "just interrupted" sort of look. After locking his door, he went down the stairs to meet Scott.

With each step, his stomach fluttered. Shit, this wasn't his first date, but he practically shook with nerves, and his mind raced over a dozen reasons why the guy would show up here.

Scott stood in the entrance hall, waiting on Ted to come downstairs, as nervous as a teenager on prom night.

And with his first glimpse of Ted's face, those butterflies took flight in his belly and his dick jerked in his jeans. Damn, he wanted this man.

Unashamed, he took in the tall, well-built ex-cop as he descended the stairs. Powerful thighs, narrow hips, flat stomach, wide shoulders. And that face.

Ho-ly shit.

Ted halted on the bottom step, one hand on the carved newel post, one hand stuffed in the pocket of his jeans.

"What do you want?"

You. Scott cleared his throat. "I need to speak to you, Ted. Outside, if you don't mind."

"Sure." Ted shrugged.

Scott led the way outside, across the porch, and out into the yard. He strolled over to a large black Silverado and leaned against it as he gathered his wits and nerve.

Ted sauntered up, hand still in his pocket, next to a noticeable bulge in his jeans. He got about four feet away and stopped.

"What's this about?" he asked.

Scott sniffed the air and caught Ted's scent. It calmed him. Then, a second scent hit him. Another man's scent. Male and musky. Not Ted.

He growled, and in two long strides he was at Ted, had his hands buried in Ted's shirt, swung him around, and slammed him into the side of the truck. "Who's touched you?" Scott growled.

"What the fuck? Get off me." Ted hissed and tried to push him away, but the strength of Scott's wolf held him fast.

Scott stuck his face in Ted's neck and inhaled. Ted shuddered. "Someone's touched you. Some man has had his hands on you." His voice deepened and rasped as he struggled to control the anger surging through him.

"Let go of me. Now." Ted lowered his voice and clamped his hands around Scott's wrists.

"No one touches you but me." Scott knew he'd lost it, but he was helpless to fight his wolf. He sniffed down Ted's body. "You let someone touch your cock, didn't you?"

Ted struggled, then shook him off. Scott stalked around him, trying to pull his wolf back, shocked he'd had such a strong, visceral reaction.

"Okay, I got a blowjob."

"How could you?" Scott's heart hurt at the affirmation of what he didn't want to know. "We're mates," he whispered, not even understanding why he said it.

"That's just it." Ted advanced on him, pushing Scott backward. "I couldn't do it."

"What?" Scott gulped.

Ted, teeth bared, pushed him again. Scott stumbled and fell on his ass. Just that quick, Ted straddled him, pinning his arms to the ground and just that quick, Scott's cock stiffened. His wolf whimpered uncle.

"You heard me. I had a perfectly good twink ready to suck my dick, and all I could think about was that it wasn't you." Ted's eyes grew moist. "Goddammit. This has to stop."

"You couldn't—"

Ted leaned down, his face right in Scott's face. "I couldn't come. He wasn't you. I can't come unless I'm thinking of you, you bastard."

"Me too," Scott whispered, and their gazes locked.

Ted rested his forehead on Scott's, and their hands shifted from fighting holds to interlaced fingers.

"I can't stand this. I can't get involved with you. I won't fall for another straight man who can't return my love, who won't touch me or let me touch him. Who can't acknowledge me in front of other people."

Scott let Ted's hands go, holding his fingers out.

"You're right. I had no right to go off on you. It's the wolf. He wants you."

"But you don't." Ted snorted. "See. I won't have just half a man, even if he is a wolf."

Ted climbed off Scott and stood. Scott got to his feet, dusted off the back of his jeans, and turned away to give them both some time.

"I came to tell you that my mother is going to reverse the spell and set us free." Scott didn't turn around; for whatever reason he didn't want to see the relief on Ted's face.

"When?"

He pointed to the moon. "Tomorrow is the last night of the full moon. It's either then or next month."

Ted seemed to consider the implications. "Tomorrow it is. Let's get this over with."

"We'll take my truck. I'll pick you up at eleven p.m." Scott walked around to the driver's side and got in.

Without asking, Ted climbed in the passenger seat.

"Does she really think this will work?" Ted closed the door, plunging them into their scent-saturated darkness.

"It better." Scott set his jaw, refusing to let another word come out of his mouth. That confession about not being able to come without picturing Ted had been too much honesty. Too much vulnerability for him to admit.

He turned to look at Ted in the darkened cab. Damn, his wolf wanted him. And the more he wanted him, the less it seemed so wrong to Scott.

Ted stared out the window, a mix of emotions on his face. Regret, sadness, hurt. But when he turned to meet Scott's gaze, the undeniable flare of lust burned in his dark eyes.

"Come here," Scott whispered as he reached for Ted. He wrapped his hand around the man's neck and pulled him across the seat.

Ted resisted at first, then gave in. Scott dragged him so close he could feel Ted's breath on his face. Letting his wolf have its way, he slanted his mouth across Ted's and brushed his lips to his mate's.

A shudder started with Scott and ended with Ted. Ted wrapped one hand around Scott's neck and the other landed on Scott's thigh, the weight feeling so right.

Ted moaned as Scott licked at the seam of his lips, then opened, allowing Scott to plunge inside. Scott tasted Ted, kissing, lapping, and at last, capturing Ted's tongue to suck. The arousal built in Scott, his cock stiffened, and his wolf howled for his mate.

Ted ran his hand up Scott's thigh and caressed Scott's erection. Scott surged into the touch with a gasp, breaking their kiss.

"Oh God, Ted." Nothing had felt this good in so long. He couldn't remember being so turned on.

Ted leaned back and made short work of Scott's belt, and had his jeans unbuttoned and unzipped before Scott could whisper *Don't*.

"Lift up." Ted grabbed Scott's clothes.

Scott raised his hips, and Ted yanked the denim down to midthigh, including his briefs. His cock sprang free, snapping to his belly, leaving a splat of precum on his skin.

"Magnificent," Ted whispered, and before Scott could even think to protest, Ted captured the head of his cock in his mouth.

"Fuck!" Scott rocked up, shoving his dick farther into Ted's mouth, but Ted put a steadying hand on his hip and kept his mouth there.

Ted slid down Scott's shaft, licking and painting it with his tongue and spit, and Scott shuddered. No woman had ever given him head like this. None of his girlfriends had been so eager, so willing. So damn good.

He watched as Ted bobbed up and down on his cock. Scott closed his eyes and leaned back. God, he could come to love this, the way Ted's mouth was so warm and wet, how his tongue searched out the slit in his cockhead, how he flicked the bundle of nerves to make Scott moan.

Scott grabbed the steering wheel with one hand and the back of the bench with the other and tried to keep from flying right out of his seat.

Everything Ted did to him was perfect.

"Oh God, Ted." Scott could barely think, and never even thought "this is wrong."

It was so right. So very, very right.

He opened his eyes, looked down and, *ho-ly shit*, Ted gazed up at him as he sucked Scott's meat, those full lips wrapped around him, that tongue working him.

Scott reached down and cupped Ted's face in his hand, brushing Ted's cheek with his thumb in a loving caress.

"Come here," he growled and pulled Ted off him and up to take his lover's mouth.

Ted whimpered as Scott's other hand dove into Ted's hair and held him prisoner as he plundered Ted's mouth. Ted groaned, his body melting into Scott's, grinding their cocks together.

When Scott caught Ted's tongue, sucked it into his mouth hard and fast, then rasped his sharp canines across it, Ted shuddered.

The rich, musky scent of Ted's cum flooded the cabin, and Scott's wolf howled.

Fuck, he'd creamed his jeans. It was the kiss, the goddamned kiss that had done it. Or maybe it had been the tender look in Scott's eyes when he touched Ted's face, or the hunger in his kiss when he hunted down Ted's tongue and took possession.

And Scott knew he'd come, nostrils flaring as he inhaled, as if Ted's scent was life-giving air to him. And that was about the hottest thing Ted had seen.

Scott's wolf wanted him, there was no doubt about that. He just doubted that Scott wanted him; even though he'd let Ted give him a blowjob, he couldn't trust it was Scott, not the wolf.

Scott freed him, releasing his hold on Ted's body.

"Fuck, Ted. Suck me." There was a slight whine to the words, and Ted could hear the wolf's lust loud and clear.

He wrapped his hand around the spike-hard shaft and went down on it again. Time for the wolf to get his.

And he knew just the thing to make the bastard sit up and beg for more.

Ted opened his mouth, relaxed his throat, and took Scott down to the root, his nose resting in those curly blond pubes. He inhaled, loving the heavy, musky scent of Scott's balls, then came up and went down again.

Over and over, as Scott writhed and moaned and begged him not to stop, Ted deep throated his lover, until he heard Scott cry out, "Gonna come, oh fuck gonna come!"

Scott's hips surged up, his cock swelled, and a second later, hot, spicy cum flooded Ted's mouth. He swallowed each shot as his wolf gave Ted his essence.

His wolf.

Chapter Sixteen

Scott shuddered, then collapsed back to the seat as his chest heaved. His heart pounded in his chest as he gasped for air.

He didn't think he'd ever come so hard. It left him weak and boneless. With great effort, he rolled his head to the side to see Ted.

The man lay stretched over the seat, knees on the floorboard, resting on his arms, his back rising up and down as he gulped for air.

"Oh fuck." Ted groaned.

"Merde." Scott chuckled. "Come here." He grabbed Ted by the scruff of the neck and hauled him on top of his chest for yet another kiss.

Once he'd started, he couldn't stop kissing Ted. And as soon as that thought crossed his mind, he saw the problem with thinking that way.

He'd let the wolf out, let it be satisfied with a taste of its mate, but he couldn't let it go any further.

They were going to break the spell tomorrow night, and all this would be over and done. Ted would leave, and Scott could get his life back to the way it was supposed to be. Find the mate he was supposed to have.

Ted pushed away, this time sitting on the seat.

"You taste spicy." He wiped his mouth with his thumb.

"Must be the hot sauce." Scott shrugged. "I put it on everything." He tucked his satisfied and happy cock back into his briefs and pulled up his pants as a wave of embarrassment swamped him.

"It's good. Odd, but good." Ted sat up, licking his lips. "I like it." Scott cringed at the look of affection in Ted's eyes.

"Don't get used to it." Scott frowned. "Look, I lost control of my wolf, let it have its way, but that can't happen again. Once we break the spell, you won't be anything to me." Scott had no idea why he was being such a prick. Ted didn't deserve it, but it was the only way Scott knew to distance himself from Ted and what they'd just done.

Ted's face twisted. "You bastard. You fucking bastard. You used me." The hurt on Ted's face stabbed Scott right through the heart.

"No. It wasn't like that, really. Right now, all my wolf knows is that you're its mate. It's not rational, not thinking, just going on instinct." Scott tried to explain his way out of this, but no matter what, he came off like a prick.

“Well, I’m not a fucking wolf. I’m a man. Don’t play me, Scott.” He opened the truck door and stepped out. “Tomorrow night. Eleven. Can’t wait to be free so I can get my cock sucked by that sweet little twink. Then I’m going to fuck his tight ass until my balls blow.” He slammed the door shut and stormed off.

Scott sat in the truck, barely able to see out of the fogged-up windows, as Ted disappeared into the darkness.

His body quivered, holding his wolf in check. At Ted’s words, it lunged and snapped at the air. The need to strike out, to hunt down the twink, whoever he was, and bring him to ground, took all Scott’s sanity as a man to resist.

Scott pounded the dashboard with his fist as anger and fury took him on an emotional joyride. His knuckles burned from scraping over the hard plastic, and he shook his hand and winced.

Fuck. This had to stop. He was completely out of control, a danger to himself and to the others in the pack. On that alone, he could lose his position as alpha.

He started the truck, pulled out, and drove home.

Once he walked through his front door, exhaustion set in. He stripped, fell into bed naked, and passed out.

* * *

Ted tossed and turned all night, angry and frustrated and so tied up in knots he didn’t think he’d ever relax enough to fall asleep.

When the morning came, he pulled the pillow over his head and ignored his alarm clock. It wasn’t until someone rapped on his door that he got up. After a quick shower, and skipping shaving, he trudged downstairs in time to grab a cup of coffee and join the others outside for the morning instruction.

He fell asleep as Darcy explained the next painting, and only roused when Peter nudged his with his foot.

“Lunch time. You driving?” Peter smiled at him.

Ted scrubbed his hands over his face. “Sure. But that’s all I’m doing, got it?”

“Sure.”

They walked together to Ted’s SUV, got in, and followed the others without speaking. Peter was a good kid. Ted had to give him that. Somehow he’d sensed Ted wasn’t in a mood to chat and kept his mouth shut. Ted appreciated it. One cup of coffee and a nap wasn’t enough to help him feel better.

Maybe after lunch.

Maybe never.

* * *

Scott leaned back in his chair and picked up the phone. He punched in the numbers for the New Orleans Police Department and waited.

After ten minutes of being passed around from station to station and desk to desk, he finally found someone who had the information he needed.

As he sat and listened to the officer on the other end of the phone, Scott's mouth formed a tight, straight line, and a blood vessel on the side of his head throbbed. He didn't like what he heard, and if anything made him even surer he was doing the right thing, this did.

He hung up the phone and sat there, stunned.

Midnight couldn't come soon enough.

* * *

Ted lugged his canvases, easel, and paints to the entrance of the old cemetery. It had an eerie beauty, with its raised tombs adorned with angels, children, weeping women, and an occasional crucified Jesus.

The colors were muted; the gray of the stone and the hanging Spanish moss, the blue of the sky, and the green of the grass and trees.

Picturesque, if a graveyard could be called that.

Everyone had entered and then scattered to find their spots. Ted trudged after Kirsten, keeping an eye on her.

He'd been lucky last night that she'd stayed in and not gone out while he was giving the werewolf head.

What a fool he'd been, falling for Sheriff Scott Dupree. For a while, he thought maybe they had a chance, even if all this spell shit didn't work out. He'd even accepted Scott's wolf, but Scott had made his feelings clear. He'd used Ted to relieve a little frustration, nothing more.

Asshole.

Tonight, once he got free, he'd show Scott his backside, and he'd never have to see him again. In two days, he'd be heading back to New Orleans and his regular life.

He couldn't wait.

For now, he planned on losing himself in this painting. Lunch had done wonders for him; well, that and two aspirin chased with a beer.

He found Kirsten set up in front of a large, dark green marble crypt. Truly impressive, it shone in the sunlight, and it sat under a magnificent spreading oak.

"Perfect place," he commented.

She looked up, smiled, and put her blank canvas on the easel. Then she turned it so it stood tall. "I think so. I'm going to try to capture the tree as the focal point, and have the tomb be sort of a discovery."

"Great idea. I'm sure you'll pull it off." Ted moved past her and set up. "I think I'll try a close up of the tomb itself."

"The colors are so rich." She set out her paints and got started. "Darcy should be around soon, and I want to have some color on before he gets here."

Ted looked up as Darcy came down a narrow path between graves. "Too late. Here he comes."

"Damn." She rolled her eyes. "Yesterday he trashed my picture."

"I wouldn't call that trashing, Kirsten. Seemed to me he really liked it." Ted started to lay in the lines in a pale blue.

"He really liked Peter's." She winked. "I think he really likes Peter."

"Maybe." He moved the brush to his palette and picked up more blue paint.

"For a minute, I thought he liked you." She shot him a knowing look.

"I'm not on the market." He slashed a few lines of the tree. "How about you?"

"On the market? No way." She held up her left hand and wiggled her fingers. "I'm taken." She grinned, as if the idea truly pleased her.

"You look happy. Your husband doesn't mind you coming to this?" Ted tried to keep it as casual as possible.

"No. He respects my talent. Besides, he's older than me, and I suppose he's just more mature, you know. None of those wild fits of jealousy to deal with like guys my age. We both know what we want from our marriage."

"That's unusual."

"I know. I'm really lucky."

"But he's older?"

"Yeah, like twenty-five years." Ted thought it was much more than twenty-five, more like thirty-five.

"Wow!"

"I know. But I can't help it, I love him to death. I've never felt such a strong attraction toward anyone in my life. It was as if lightning struck me, or maybe it was just Cupid's arrow." She giggled, tossed her blonde ponytail, and continued to paint. "I saw him at a fund-raiser, and from that moment on, I couldn't think about anyone but him. My friends think I'm nuts."

Ted froze, his brush poised just inches from his canvas. The description was beyond uncanny. But it couldn't be, could it?

"So, it was like you were mates, huh?" Ted ventured.

"Exactly! That's what he says. I'm his mate." She turned back to her painting.

Ted put his brush down and stared at his painting.

Charbonnet was a werewolf, and Kirsten was his mate?

If that was true, then the old man was as far removed from Scott's werewolf as the moon was from the earth. The judge might be a werewolf, but in no way did he have Scott's honor or dedication to his pack.

Still, he'd seen Scott's possessiveness last night. Had the judge seen or smelled something on Kirsten that made him suspect she'd been with someone else?

If so, why did he think she would meet him at the workshop? Had there been other clues the old man hadn't told him about?

He itched to dig out his cell phone and call Scott, run things over with him like he used to do with Douglas, but he stopped. Scott and he didn't have the same relationship, not by a long shot.

Darcy came up to them. "Nice setting. Well chosen." He walked around Kirsten's easel and nodded. "Very well done, my dear."

"Thank you."

"Your use of color on the tree is stunning. And I love how the tomb just peeks out from under the branches."

She beamed at him, and exhaled, obviously relieved he liked her work. Now it was Ted's turn, and he steeled himself as Darcy approached.

The artist viewed it from several angles as Ted waited. Then he came up to Ted and put his hand on his shoulder.

"This is remarkable, Ted. You've really got talent. Whatever you're doing for a day job, you're wasting your time. You should be painting."

Ted stared at the painting, finding it hard to believe the man's words. First, he wasn't sure he liked Darcy Wentworth, and second, he wasn't sure he could trust a single thing that came out of his mouth.

"Really?" Ted shrugged. "Can't pay the rent painting."

"Not at first. But you keep this up and you'll be selling in no time."

Kirsten came over and looked at his canvas. "Oh, Ted." There was awe in her voice, and he looked at her as if she'd lost her mind. "It's gorgeous. Truly."

"Do you really think so?" Ted thought it looked good, thought his colors were well-placed, and his drawing more than accurate. He just didn't believe their responses to it.

"I do. I could see this in a French Quarter gallery, selling for hundreds." She nodded. "I should know, I have friends who own galleries, and this beats most of the stuff they have in them."

"You're pulling my leg, guys." Ted shook his head.

"Not at all." Darcy chuckled. "And I have to say, the humility looks damn good on you." He ran his finger down Ted's arm, then moved off to the next student.

Ted blushed. No one had ever gushed so much over his work before. Then again, he'd stopped painting when he entered the police academy, giving up his dreams of becoming a famous painter.

When he went to Hawaii with his money, maybe he'd spend the time painting and fucking the volcano god-boy.

For now, he spent the rest of the afternoon working on the painting, forgetting all about Kirsten and her mate, Judge Charbonnet.

Chapter Seventeen

Scott winced as Billy Trosclair told him about another incident with his deputies. Two young men of the pack had argued about who would pay for the coffee, showing off to the young female barista. One thing led to another, and punches were thrown. It took Billy and another deputy to pull them apart and an hour to note the damages they'd done to the coffee shop.

"How did you manage to stay out of it, Billy?" Scott looked the young man over. Although only twenty-seven, over the last four years he'd proven a good officer and more levelheaded than some of his older deputies.

Billy shrugged. "Someone had to. Guess I'm just used to keeping myself under control." He gave a nervous smile.

"Good job." Scott exhaled and leaned back. "What the hell is up with the men? It's like the pack is going crazy."

"Can I speak freely, sir?" Billy shifted from foot to foot.

"Sure."

"It's been building for months. Each full moon has been worse than the last. I've been keeping track of the incidents involving pack members, and they're skyrocketing. If we don't do something soon, we're going to blow our cover."

Scott leaned forward and clasped his hands together. "I think you're right, but damned if I know what's going on."

"It seems to me, it's the men closest to mating age that are involved. It's like they're on hyperdrive, or something."

"But not you." Scott arched an eyebrow at the officer. Billy was a good-looking boy, clean cut, blue-eyed, and had a cleft in his chin, just like his father.

"I didn't say that. Besides, I'm only twenty-seven, a little young for mates." He shook his head. "But I've had my moments, only none of them have been public." He sat down without asking, but Scott let it slide. "It's the urge to mate, sir. It's so damn powerful." The guy actually shuddered.

"I understand, trust me, I do."

"But what are the chances of *all* the men acting like this? Has this ever happened before?"

"Not to my knowledge." Scott had an idea. "But maybe I can ask someone who might remember. Thanks, Billy. You're doing a great job."

"Thank you, sir." He stood to leave, but paused. "And sir, I'll stand by you against Wyatt."

Scott regarded him. "Thanks. Have you heard anything?"

"No, but most of the guys back you. Wyatt's an asshole."

"Yeah, well, thanks for the support."

Billy nodded and left.

Scott wondered if he'd have the men's support if the spell couldn't be broken and he brought Ted before the pack as his mate.

Not fucking likely.

* * *

Ted pushed the crawfish etouffee around on his plate. He knew it smelled great and tasted better, but his stomach felt like a ball of knots trying to unravel itself.

Darcy had pulled Peter away from Ted as soon as they'd walked in the restaurant, and that had been fine with him. From the looks of it, it had been fine with Peter also.

Ted didn't feel jealous, just protective of the kid. Darcy was older, more experienced, and in Ted's opinion, just not right for the younger man.

Peter needed someone his own age. Someone he could fall in love with and experience that first blush of true love.

Ted's chance at the blush of true love had long passed. The closest he'd ever let himself get had been with Douglas. He'd fallen hard for his good-looking, kind, and open-minded patrol partner. And because of all the pain he'd felt when Douglas died, he'd never let anyone else into his heart.

Until now.

Damn Scott Dupree.

"You haven't eaten a thing," Kirsten said. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Just tired. Had a bad night and didn't get much sleep. Now I'm paying for it."

"Well, you can catch up on your sleep tonight." She smiled at him, with what looked like affection in her eyes. Despite the fact she was his subject, he'd grown fond of the young woman.

"Right." He gave her back the smile he trotted out for such occasions. Damn, he might just go back to the Bayou End and take a nap before Scott came by.

And just like that, he was thinking of his wolf.

Stop right there, buddy. He's not my wolf.

And after tonight, both Ted and Scott would be free to go on with their lives, just like before the voodoo spell, the lightning strike, or whatever the hell had possessed them.

And that was fine with Ted. Loving someone just hurt too damn much.

Anonymous bar fucks and blowjobs had been enough before, and they'd be enough again.

Liar.

* * *

Ted lay on the bed watching the hands of his clock move around the dial. He'd tried to sleep, but his mind just kept spinning.

What the hell would happen tonight? He'd heard stories about voodoo ceremonies, seen a few late-night B movies, but all he could remember was a squawking chicken, drums, and a painted voodoo priestess.

Scott didn't seem like the kind of guy who had a voodoo priestess for a mother. He seemed like a straight arrow, pun intended. Honorable, sincere, a natural leader, but that was probably due to his alpha wolf status.

If this had been another time and place, and Scott had been gay, Ted would have been all over him. Scott had the same characteristics he'd believed Douglas had, until Ted had learned the truth about his "hero."

No way could he ever see Scott in that same light. Douglas had been dirty, and it might have been the worst decision Ted had ever made to sacrifice his career for Douglas, but he'd done it for the wife and kids.

They'd deserved more than having a husband and father who was a dirty cop.

And Ted had deserved more than unrequited love.

He deserved the real thing.

And damn it, if he hadn't thought he'd felt it last night with Scott. When Scott took his face in his hands, touched him so tenderly, he could have sworn he'd seen more than lust in Scott's eyes.

He rolled over and groaned.

Just a figment of his imagination, that's all. He was seeing what he wanted to see. Scott didn't care about him, not really.

Oh, Scott's wolf thought he was hot shit; the animal practically drooled all over him, but the man? He'd backed off so fast, it had spun Ted's head around.

He got up, grabbed his clothes and headed to the shower. Might as well get clean and dressed. He'd go downstairs and wait, maybe read a magazine or a book until Scott got there.

He went over the case he was working, what little there was, to keep his mind off Scott while he soaped up in the shower. He didn't let his hands linger on his cock and balls, and quickly slipped over his chest and nipples before he rinsed off.

Once dry, he stared at the mirror. He really needed a shave, so he got to work, taking care not to nick himself. Then he dressed and headed downstairs.

He checked his watch. Ten o'clock. An hour left to go. The living room was empty. He supposed everyone was upstairs sleeping, or maybe they'd gone out. Ted went to the window and looked out, spotted Kirsten's car, and relaxed.

He went back and sat on the couch, picked up the local newspaper and opened it to the hunting and fishing section. Read the tides, read the weather forecast, even read the obituaries, and only another half hour had passed.

Marie came through, carrying a fresh tablecloth in her arms. "Hey, you. Got a date?"

"Just waiting for Sheriff Dupree." He tried to be as nonchalant as possible.

"Scott? Good man. The woman that catches him will be a lucky girl." She went into the dining room and got to work changing the cloths and resetting the table.

"Uh-huh," Ted replied.

"Nice man. Took over after the previous sheriff, Bobby Cotteau, when he retired. How do you know Scott?"

"Mutual friends." Ted kept it vague and it seemed to satisfy her, or maybe she just knew when not to ask questions.

"That's nice. Well, I'm done here. Have a nice night, Ted. If you're back late, the key is under the mat, you can let yourself in. We leave the porch light on all night, by the way."

"Thanks." He waved at her as she headed into the kitchen.

Then he sat back on the couch and counted the minutes until he saw Scott again.

Chapter Eighteen

Ten long minutes later, the front door opened, and Scott stepped inside.

"You're early." Ted stood, unsure what to do or say.

Scott shrugged. "I didn't have your number to call and let you know."

Ted pulled out his cell phone and they swapped numbers.

"Let's go." Scott turned, and Ted followed him out, closing the door behind him.

In the drive, the big black truck sat, engine running. Scott went around to the driver's side, and Ted got in the passenger side.

The cabin filled with their scent, and Ted could smell their arousal, but he grabbed the door handle, and Scott gripped the wheel. Both of them seemed determined not to let what happened last night happen again.

"We need to talk," Scott said between gritted teeth. Ted watched him, and if he didn't know better, he'd say Scott was pissed as hell.

"That's never good." Ted couldn't think of what he'd done to irritate Scott. Well, besides being his mate.

"I did some checking around."

"Oh?"

"About you."

"Oh." Ted waited for the shoe to drop. He had a feeling he knew right where this conversation was headed, the same place shit always flowed—downhill.

"You were kicked off the force three years ago. Implicated in the death of your partner, and the word is you were taking protection money." Scott's grip turned white-knuckled.

Ted tensed. "So?" He didn't owe any explanations to Scott, not now. They were just an hour away from being out of each other's lives for good, and the last thing he wanted was to drag Scott any closer.

"So? What the fuck do you mean, so?" Scott's explosion took Ted by surprise.

"What does it matter to you?"

"It matters." Scott shook his head. "I'm the sheriff. It might be a little one-horse Cajun hick town to you, but I'm respected here. I can't associate with someone like you."

"Like me?" Now Ted's hackles stood on end. "Look you self-righteous prick, I know exactly what you heard from the boys in blue, but I'm telling you, there's two

sides to every story.” He crossed his arms over his chest and set his jaw. He’d kept the truth hidden for years to honor Douglas’s family, buried and festering like an old sore.

“Two sides?” Scott pulled the truck over to the side of the road and faced Ted, eyes blazing. “You were tossed off the force, just escaped jail time, and your partner was killed because of you.”

If Ted had been a cartoon, steam would have been coming out of his ears about now. This guy had no right to look him up, or to confront him about this. But something deep inside Ted wanted Scott to know the truth. As much as he hated it, Ted valued Scott’s opinion of him, and this hurt.

Ted leaned forward and poked Scott’s shoulder with his finger. “Listen to me. My partner was shot because he walked in on a robbery in progress. The perp panicked and shot him and the clerk. I was outside on the sidewalk writing a ticket.” Man, Ted really didn’t want to get into this, but Scott just dragged him there.

“That’s not I was told.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you were told a whole lot of things about me, none of them good.” Ted looked out the window. “Do you believe them?”

Scott ran his hand around the wheel, his fingertips tracing the outer edge. He seemed to deflate as he exhaled a long slow breath. “Okay, tell me your side.”

Ted sighed. “I will, but it can’t go any further, you hear me? No one knows, and that’s how I want it to be.”

“Sure, man.” Now he had Scott’s attention. Swear a man to secrecy, and he was all over it.

“I told you Douglas was my happily married patrol partner in the Quarter for three years, right?”

Scott nodded. “Was he in the closet?”

“No.” Ted shook his head. “Douglas was straight. And he was dirty. He was taking protection money from a Vietnamese shop owner. That night, he suggested we stop for coffee, but he really stopped to pick up his payment. He walked in on the robbery.”

“Did you know?”

“I had no idea he wasn’t on the up-and-up.” Ted ran his hand over his face. “The perp shot the clerk and then shot Douglas. I heard the shots, ran in, shot the perp. Douglas bled out, lying on the floor. He died in my arms.” Ted turned his face away to hide the hurt he knew still showed in his eyes. “I couldn’t stop the bleeding. There was so much blood.” He placed his hand on the door window, and just like that, he saw the thick, sticky red fluid oozing through his fingers as he pressed his hand to Douglas’s chest. Douglas’s eyes looking up at him as he gasped for air.

Scott didn’t say a word, but Ted felt his heart hammering in his chest.

"I was in love with Douglas, but he was straight as they came. He adored his wife and those kids, and they adored him. He was their hero." Ted's voice cracked.

"So you took the fall," Scott whispered.

Ted nodded. "I couldn't let them suffer. They'd have lost not just a husband and father, but all the honor, glory, and benefits. The cop community would have turned their backs on the family, and I couldn't let that happen."

"Damn." Scott rested his head on the wheel and exhaled. "I didn't want to believe it, Ted."

"But you did." He wouldn't admit how much that hurt.

"Yeah. One cop to another, what you gonna believe?"

"Hell, you don't know me, I shouldn't expect anything more. I'm a disgraced ex-cop, a PI, and gay. Three strikes, right?"

Scott looked up into Ted's face. "Come here."

Those two words, more than any of late, had some sort of power over Ted. Maybe it was just Scott's voice, or the tone of command, but he slid across the seat and into Scott's arms. It took everything he had not to bawl like a baby. To let it all out, the anger, the sorrow, the grief he'd held inside for so long.

Strong, safe, comforting, Scott held him tight. "I'm so sorry, cher. Sorry you lost everything. Sorry you fell in love with someone who couldn't give back to you. Sorry no one knows what you did for his family." Scott rubbed Ted's back, soothing him with his touch and voice.

"It's okay. It was my choice." Ted straightened and pulled away, trying to put distance between them. He cleared his throat. "I don't regret it, and I'd do it again for the man I loved."

"Lucky man."

Scott leaned in and kissed Ted, but this time it was so soft and tender it nearly broke Ted's heart. Goddamn fate. Whoever was up there hated him, really hated him.

He just couldn't catch a break.

"No, Scott. Don't. It's just too hard." Ted pulled back, his hand resting on Scott's chest for a moment, and the hard thumps underneath his palm nearly weakened him, nearly drove him back into Scott's arms.

Scott let him go, and pulled the truck back onto the road. "We'll be at my mom's in ten minutes. I have to warn you, she's a little eccentric."

"She cast a love spell on us, so I'd say that pretty much says it all."

"She's my maman, and I love her." Scott shrugged. "But sometimes, I could kill her."

"I completely understand." Ted's own mother had kept in touch with him after he left NOPD, but his father had cut him out completely. Being gay was one thing, but being a dirty cop? Not even his father could get past that sin.

"Look, Ted. I just want to say, I hope you'll understand about the mate thing."

"Don't worry. I understand. You're straight, even if your wolf isn't." Ted shrugged. "You have a career in a small town that might not be too fond of their sheriff having a male partner. Your wolf gang—er, pack—won't like it and might kick you to the curb. I get it. I didn't stand a chance, did I?"

"Not really." Scott sighed. "But my wolf really, really likes you."

"It must. It got you to let a man suck you off."

Scott groaned. "Don't remind him." He rubbed the bulge at his crotch.

"Sure. Keep your cool, wolfman." Ted snorted. "I'm saving it for someone who appreciates it."

Scott growled at the mention of another man.

Ted just laughed. "You can't have it both ways, Scott."

"Tell that to my wolf."

* * *

After they'd turned off the main highway, the truck jostled over a gravel road with only its headlights to guide the way. All around them the darkness was a solid curtain of black, almost like something physical.

Scott pulled up in front of a small raised cottage and parked. "We're here."

"Right. Let's get this over with." Ted got out and waited for Scott to join him.

They walked up the steps, and Scott knocked. The door opened, and a small woman with a cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth stood in the doorway, wearing a flowered housedress and pink fuzzy slippers. The word *Princess* was embroidered across the tops of them.

"That's him?" She eyed Ted, then nodded. "Come on in, cher."

"Thank you, ma'am." Ted nodded and stepped past her into the living room. A black cat stared at him from the back of the sofa.

"So, you're the mate for my Scott, huh?" Her eyes twinkled as if she thought this was the funniest joke ever.

"Not exactly. I think both Scott and I have determined that wouldn't be a good idea." Ted glared at Scott, folding his arms across his chest.

"Maman, please. Just do the ceremony." Scott ran his hand over his face.

She nodded, went into the kitchen, and came back with a flowered pillowcase, a candle, and a box of matches. "Scott, you carry the shovel."

They followed her outside. Scott picked up a shovel leaning against the side of the house. "Here, take my flashlight, Ted." Scott handed it to him.

Ted flicked it on and shone the light on the ground, ahead of the old woman.

The cat padded along, weaving in and out of the light as it danced around Scott's mother's feet, always just one step away from tripping her. They reached the end of the clearing around the small house and stopped.

The cat sat as if waiting for something.

“This has to be done just right, or it won’t work. Even then, I’m not making no promises,” she said, then took a deep drag of her cigarette and flicked it into the damp woods. It hissed as it hit water.

Ted shone the light around. They stood on the edge of the swamp. Here and there, moonlight shimmered off the dark soup.

“Are there alligators?” he asked.

“Sure. Snakes, gators, and mosquitoes big enough to carry off a small child.” She cackled at the joke. “And don’t forget”—she paused for effect—“the rugarou.”

Ted jerked the flashlight to her face, and she cackled.

“He’s a skittish one, Scott. Good-looking, but skittish.”

Then she stepped into the darkness, and Scott motioned for Ted to follow. He played the light on the ground and found the path she took.

The cat didn’t follow them.

Chapter Nineteen

They walked for a few minutes as darkness and the creepy sounds of the swamp surrounded them. Every now and then, Scott's breath would puff across the back of Ted's neck, and he'd relax. Nice, but odd.

She stopped, and Ted nearly ran her over.

"We're here," she announced.

Something big slipped into the water on his left, and Ted shivered.

"Just a gator," Scott said, as if reassuring him.

"Right. You Cajuns are nuts."

"*Mais oui, cher.*" Scott's mother nodded. "That's what makes us so powerful." She winked at Ted, and he couldn't help but grin. Princess, huh? Voodoo queen, maybe.

She wasn't painted, and there wasn't a chicken in sight, or drums pounding, so whatever she had planned wasn't going to be like in the movies.

A fallen log rested on the ground near the water, and in front of it, a small dirt clearing. He shone the light around it, looking for snakes and gators.

"The gators don't like the light." Scott chuckled. "But if you shine it out on the water, you might see their eyes. They reflect the light."

Ted played the light over the darkness and jumped as half a dozen points of light winked under the beam of his flashlight. "Damn! They're everywhere? Is this safe?" Right about now he wished he'd brought his gun.

"Oh, they won't come near us." Mrs. Dupree had knelt by the log, placed the candle with a picture of the Virgin Mary on it on top, and lit it. A soft glow illuminated a small area around the log.

"Where should I start digging?" Scott asked.

She turned and looked around. "Right about here." She pointed to a small mound of earth. "Not too deep."

"Hold the flashlight for me, Ted." Ted angled it at the ground, and Scott put the blade of the shovel in the dirt and pushed with his foot. It sunk easily into the soft clay. He tossed the first load of earth to the side. And the next.

On the third, he struck pay dirt. "Got it."

"Good. Dig it up and put it in the sack." She held the pillowcase open.

Ted stared as Scott brought up the stiff, maggot-covered carcass of a cat on the blade of the shovel, or at least it looked like it was once a cat. Ted nearly puked, and grabbed the tail of his shirt to hold over his nose. It had been a few years since he'd been at a crime scene.

"Merde, Maman, this stinks." Scott cursed a little more, then dumped it in the sack. She closed it, spun it around to close it off, and then knotted it as if she did this all the time. The smell lessened.

"Now, underneath, find the pouch."

Ted leaned over to look in the hole. "A pouch?"

"That's the gris-gris. Scott's hair and a few things of his."

"What things?" Scott asked. "And where the hell did you get my hair?"

"Your brush, last time I visited you."

Scott leaned on the shovel. "You took my hair, what? Six months ago? You've been planning this since then?"

"Hell, boy, you weren't doing a damn thing about finding a mate; someone had to do something," she snarled at him.

Ted snickered. "It's almost as bad as if she'd pimped you out on Match.com."

"You, shut up." Scott pointed at Ted.

"And it worked." She cackled. "About time, too. I used up the last of your hair on this one."

"How many of these did you do?" Ted shone the light around the clearing. It raked over a mound, then another, and another.

"Four months. Each time on the full moon, right at midnight."

"Just like my dreams," Ted whispered, then stared at the old lady. "Holy shit."

"Now, this isn't the place for swearing."

"No, *Mom*," Scott didn't hold back on sarcasm, "It's the place for voodoo and dead cats."

"Hush." She waved at him. "Keep digging."

He dug once more and found the fabric pouch. "Here it is."

"Good. Give it to me. We have to open it up and burn what's in it."

"Good grief." Scott exhaled. "I can't believe I'm doing this."

"I can't believe I'm in the middle of a swamp with a werewolf and his voodoo mama," Ted added. Scott shot him a look, and Ted grinned back.

She took the pouch off the shovel, opened it, and brought it over to the candle. After dumping it on the ground, she picked through it.

"Swore I had some nail clippings," she muttered.

"Eww." Ted groaned. "Toes or fingers?"

"What does it matter," Scott barked. "Look, let's get this over with. It's nearly midnight."

Ted rolled his eyes, and Scott's mom winked at him.

"Here they are." She hunkered over the little pile of debris. "Toes." She held up a big long one.

"Mom!" Scott choked.

Ted snorted trying to hold back his laughter. God, this would be funny if it wasn't so damned crazy.

She separated the heap into smaller piles and then got out her rosary and knelt in front of the little makeshift altar.

"Hail Mary," she started praying. Ted didn't know whether to join her or not. She didn't say, and Scott just stood there watching, so he did the same.

She finished the prayer, then picked up a pile of stuff in her fingers and sprinkled it over the candle. The flame flared as hair ignited and burned in a flash, filling the air with an acrid odor that made Ted's nose itch.

He held his breath.

She added something else, and the candle fluttered again.

When the last of the piles had been burned, she blew out the candle and sat back on her heels. Ted exhaled.

"Damn, my feet are swollen."

"Is that it?" Scott asked.

"No, we have to get rid of the dead cat."

"How do we do that?" Ted asked. She'd put out the candle. What other weird ceremony would this be?

"Like this." She got to her feet, picked up the pillowcase, untied it, and holding on to the ends of it, flung it toward the water. Ted followed with the flashlight as the corpse flew out, arcing through the air. It landed with a huge splash in the dark water.

Ted exhaled. So much for ceremonies.

In the darkness, from farther in the swamp, larger splashes echoed.

"Gators," she explained. "They feed on dead animals."

"Perfect. Just perfect." Ted sighed. Could this get any stranger? No, wait, he didn't want to know, because with his luck, it would.

Chapter Twenty

They followed the path back to his mother's house where the black cat waited for them on the porch railing. Despite her denials it wasn't her cat, it sure looked that way to Scott.

"Shoo!" She waved at the animal, but it just stared at her as she clomped up the steps and across the porch.

It hopped down and slipped between her legs just as she opened the door and stepped back. Her foot came down on its paw. A screech broke the silence of the night, and she cursed as she stumbled backward, arms pinwheeling in the air.

Scott rushed up and steadied her before she fell off the porch. "Maman, I think that cat is trying to kill you." He gave it a hard stare, but it merely sat and licked the wounded paw, claws splayed open.

"Count yourself lucky I'm out of the spell business, cat." She sniffed and opened her door. "You boys coming in for some coffee?"

"No, I think Ted needs to get back, and I need to go home and get some sleep." Scott came down off the porch and walked to the truck. The last thing he wanted was for his mama to get to like Ted. His wolf was bad enough.

Ted had gone around to the passenger side and opened the door. "Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Dupree. I'd like to say it was very nice, but very strange is the best I can do right now."

"Not to worry, Ted. Everything happens the way it should." And with that, she went inside and closed the door. Scott didn't see if the cat made it in or not, but he'd put money on it that it had.

He got in, started up the truck, and turned it around. They rode to the highway in silence. He figured there wasn't much to say.

Earlier, he'd been a jerk, accusing Ted of being a dirty cop. From everything he'd seen, which admittedly wasn't much, Ted was a good guy. He'd felt awful listening to Ted's account of that night, and wondered how he'd feel if the same thing had happened to him. Would he have taken the blame?

He wasn't sure if he would have given up his career.

They passed the town and turned into Bayou End. The parking lot was full, the front porch light on, but most of the windows in the house were dark.

"Is someone up to let you in?" Scott asked as he parked in front of the big house.

"No. But Marie told me where she keeps the key, so I can get in. They lock the doors at midnight."

"I'm surprised they lock the door at all."

"I take it there's not much crime around here." Ted smiled.

"Not if you don't count the shit my own pack members get up to." He chuckled. "Lately they've been going nuts. It's called a mating moon, and the guys who don't have mates get a little stir-crazy."

"You mean horny, don't you?" Ted leered at him.

"Well, yeah."

"Does that happen every month, the mating moon?"

"No, it coincides with the equinox, in the spring and the fall."

"Wow." Ted nodded. "What about the guys with mates?"

"Well, I suppose their wives are a little extra tired around this time, if you know what I mean."

"Right." Ted laughed, then sobered. "What about you? Is this affecting you too? Is this why you kissed me? Why you let me—you know?"

"Yeah, it's been hard these last few months, what with Maman's spell, and my age." Scott shrugged.

"Your age? What's that got to do with it?"

"I'm thirty-five this year. That's much older than a were usually is when he takes a mate. It usually happens around thirty."

"So, you've been putting it off for five years? Damn, it's a wonder you haven't exploded. Have you...well, you know, fucked anyone in that time?"

"Sure." Scott snorted. "I've had girlfriends, but none of them were my mate."

"Just me." Ted smiled.

Scott looked away. "Yeah. But we both know why that was and why it can't work."

"Right. The spell. And now? Is it really broken?"

Scott turned to Ted, his mind and heart determined to make it so. "Yeah. Nothing." He shrugged.

Ted sat there for a moment, then nodded. "Me too. Nothing." He opened the door and got out. "I'd love to say it's been a slice, but I'm ready to get off this ride."

"And I'd like to say, see you around, but I don't think that's going to happen. Good-bye, Ted." Scott gave him a salute.

"Good-bye, wolfman." Ted waved back and headed up the stairs onto the porch. He swatted down, lifted the edge of the welcome mat, and stood. After unlocking the door, he stepped inside, not even looking back.

Scott shifted the truck into gear and drove away.

Deep inside, his wolf whined.

"It's for the best."

* * *

Ted entered his room and left the light off. He rushed to the window and looked down, but all he could see were the taillights of Scott's truck fading in the dark.

His gaze ran over the cars in the parking lot. All accounted for. Good. The chances of Kirsten going out in the three hours or so he'd been gone were slim, but he'd check with Marie in the morning and see if she knew.

Turning away from the window, he told himself he'd narrowly dodged a bullet. He'd like to believe the attraction between Scott and him had been more than just a crazy spell, or the pull of the moon. He'd like to believe Scott had seen something in him that he could care about, but that was a very dangerous idea and not to be entertained at all.

He undressed and got into bed. He was free now. He could enjoy the rest of his workshop, finish his surveillance job, and go back home where he belonged.

Life as usual.

He rolled over, clutching a pillow to his chest. Tonight had been the weirdest night of his life. The swamp, the gators, the voodoo, even that damned cat, were all something right out of a bad movie.

At least he got out alive, right?

"Right," he whispered. "Alive and unscathed."

Even as he closed his eyes, he prayed it was really over and done with, because he was bound to be on the losing end of the situation.

Scott Dupree wouldn't have stood up for him against his town or his pack, no matter how much his wolf wanted Ted. Scott the man was in control, and he was straight as they came.

And face it; no way did Ted deserve a guy like him.

Scott was meant for better things.

* * *

Scott lay in bed running his list of things to do through his head. He needed to get a handle on the men of the pack, get them under control without bringing the glaring light of the media down on them.

Once his pack duties were taken care of, he could concentrate on his own needs and at the top of that list, right below getting laid, was finding his real mate.

He should make himself more available to the right type of mate. A woman. His mother was right; he'd blocked himself off from his duty as alpha and pack leader, hiding behind his newly elected position as sheriff.

This weekend, he'd drive into Lafayette and go bar hopping, see what he could find. None of the available women in St. Jerome were right for him, or he'd have known it by now. His mate would have to come from outside their community.

He really didn't like the idea of dating. Hated it, actually. Getting all dressed up, trying to find the right woman, and playing the usual games.

But being a wolf cut through a lot of that bullshit. He'd know her the minute he saw her, that much he knew. Just like when he'd first seen Ted, there would be that spark, that flash of awareness, and his wolf would call to her.

And she'd respond. Just like Ted had.

Damn his maman. She'd really interfered this time and nearly cost him everything. He knew she was only doing what she thought was best for him, but her meddling had come with a cost.

Poor Ted. He'd been dragged into this mess without any warning and dropped right into the frying pan. But despite everything, he'd handled it well, even dealt with Scott's mom and her craziness. And Scott could tell his mother liked Ted.

It was a close call, that's for sure.

Good thing they'd broken the spell and put his life and Ted's life back in place.

Ted was a nice guy, and he didn't deserve to have his emotions jerked around, not by someone who couldn't return them. Scott had seen the hurt and devastation on Ted's face when he'd talked about Douglas, and he didn't want to be the one to make Ted feel that way again.

The right guy would come along for Ted, and that was how it should be.

He closed his eyes and told his wolf to stop whining. Ted would be gone in two days, and he had no plans to do anything about it.

His wolf fell silent and for the first time that night, Scott believed the spell had truly been broken.

Chapter Twenty-one

Scott's pack was going crazy. That was the only explanation he could come up with.

"Did anyone else see them?" he asked Mike. His best friend sat in the chair on the other side of Scott's desk and shook his head.

"No one. My car was the only one out that late at night, fortunately. I nearly shit a brick when I caught them in the headlights."

"Damn. They were crossing the road? Could you tell who it was?" Scott couldn't believe any of them would take such a stupid risk.

"No, it was too dark, and my lights only hit them for a second. But if something doesn't give soon, it won't be long before one of them is spotted chasing goddamn cars!" Mike's voice rose in pitch. "Seriously, Scott. You need to do something. You're alpha."

Scott leaned back and ran a hand over his face. "Yeah, I know. But what? Lectures aren't working, or threats. I have no idea what's causing this behavior."

"It's like wolf testosterone overdose. Even I'm affected." Mike snorted. "I been hitting on Sharie morning and night, and if I could get away at noon, I'd be on it then too."

"At least you're getting some." Scott rolled his eyes.

"Hey, you know what you can do about that, don't you?" Mike grinned at him. "Claim your mate and get some."

"That isn't going to happen. Ever." Scott leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Look. It's over. Last night we went into the swamp, and Mom reversed the spell." He sat back. "All done."

"Really?" Mike scowled at him. "The spell is broken. That easy?"

"Yeah. That's all it took." Scott gave Mike a happy smile, despite the confusion bouncing around inside him.

"Great." Mike looked relieved.

"Yeah, great." Scott didn't want to think about what he felt or didn't feel.

Mike's gaze didn't leave Scott's for a minute. "So, what are you going to do about this?"

"I'm not sure. Call another pack meeting for tonight."

Mike stood. "Right. Maybe once the full-moon cycle is over, things will calm down."

"We can only hope. But for now, I'm ordering everyone to stay home."

Mike gave him a nod and left.

Scott picked up his cell phone, dialed the pack's number, and texted a message that went out to all the members. *ROUX 8PM 2NITE*

He slumped back in his chair and bit his lip. Whatever was taking over his pack might just be the thing that exposed them all to the world.

As alpha, it was his job to do whatever it took to stop that, no matter what. Scott knew he was up to the job, but the "no matter what" part of it scared him like nothing before.

* * *

Something had been weighing on Ted's mind, and he'd only barely listened to Darcy's lecture that morning. Kirsten's language when she'd spoken about her husband bothered him. It smacked of the familiar, and Ted couldn't shake the nagging feeling that Judge Charbonnet might just be a werewolf.

If that was the case, and Kirsten was the judge's mate, then there was nothing he could or should do about it. From what Scott had told him, they belonged together as mates and to try to end that would prove disastrous for both Kirsten and the judge.

The judge he didn't give a shit about, but he cared what happened to Kirsten.

If only he had more information, but talking to Scott at this point wasn't a good idea. At all. He'd woken that morning hard, thinking about the handsome sheriff, but forced it out of his mind with a cold shower.

The spell had been broken, and nothing other than lust held them together now. Thank God. Lust he knew how to handle. That mate crap? That just scared the shit out of him.

He might not talk to Scott, but he sure as hell could talk to Kirsten. After they'd had lunch, he'd decided to have that chat at their next painting location, a dirt road off the highway that ran along part of the bayou.

After finding a spot next to her as they set up their easels that afternoon, he began chatting, hoping to bring the conversation around to her darling husband.

"So, he's really cool with you doing this? Must be very confident of you." Ted laughed as he sketched.

She laughed. "We're rock solid, Ted. I'm as sure of him as he is of me."

Ted stopped and stared at her. "Seriously. 'Cause you are H.A.W.T. and he's, what? Twenty-five years older than you? If you were mine, I wouldn't *ever* let you off my leash."

She made a face. "Thanks, I think. But I don't even think about the age difference; it's not an issue with us."

"Really? I hope I can find someone who's still got it when I'm that age."

"Oh, trust me, he's still got it." She winked. "He's an animal."

"An animal? Like how?" Ted jumped on her words. Maybe he was getting closer to the truth.

She looked around to see if anyone was close enough to hear. "Yeah. He's all growly and alpha and 'you're mine.'" She shivered and rolled her eyes. "Turns me on."

Ted stared at her, and for the first time he wondered if she even knew her husband might be a werewolf.

"Sounds like he's a real wolf to me." He winked.

Kirsten froze, her eyes wide. Then she licked her lips and turned away to paint. "I suppose."

Well, that had been a guilty look if he'd ever seen one. So she did know, and she was okay with it. That changed things, for sure. She was there knowingly, so that meant she didn't need rescuing.

A small rush of relief raced over him. One less thing to deal with. So if they were mated, according to Scott, they couldn't look at anyone else. Ever.

So why was Charbonnet so sure she'd cheated on him?

"Is he all jealous and possessive?" Ted asked. "Because that's one thing I can't stand in a lover."

"Possessive, definitely. Jealous. No, never." She shook her head, and her ponytail swung back and forth.

"And you. Never jealous or possessive?"

"He's my man. End of story. I trust him completely." She stepped back to get a glimpse of Ted's painting. "Man, you've done it again. Darcy is going to wet himself over this painting."

Ted stared at what he'd been working on as they'd chatted. He hadn't really been thinking about it, just putting paint to canvas, but now that she'd brought his attention to it, he stared at it.

"Yeah, it is good." He couldn't believe it.

"My gallery friend would love to get ahold of your work." Kirsten went back to her painting.

Kirsten had to be just talking. He wasn't art gallery good. Not by a long shot.

They finished working in silence until Darcy made his rounds.

"Ted, good Lord! What are you doing taking my class? You should be teaching it," Darcy raved as he stood back from Ted's easel.

Ted stepped closer to Darcy. "It doesn't matter what you say, I'm not sleeping with you."

Darcy bust out laughing. "Ted, I've given up hope of that ever happening."

"So you really think it's good?" Ted asked.

"I do. Very good." Darcy nodded.

"I told him I could probably get it into a friend's gallery," Kirsten added.

Darcy eyed him. "Listen to her. Take a chance." Then he moved on to the next person.

"Really, Ted. Take a chance." She stepped over, digging in her purse, then pulled out a business card. "Here, take this. If you're interested, call. I'll hook you up with her."

Ted took the card, glanced at it, then shoved it into his wallet. "Thanks."

"I want ten percent. Finder's fee." She laughed and went back to work.

"Sure. Like that's ever going to happen." Ted filed it away, along with the information about her husband.

Judge Charbonnet was a werewolf.

Damn.

Chapter Twenty-two

At dinner, Ted noticed a lot of tension between Darcy and Peter, but he put it down to their constant sexual maneuvering.

But when Peter left his seat, taking his drink, a pissed-off attitude, and his dinner with him and moved down to sit next to Ted, Ted knew something bigger was in play.

"What's up?" Ted didn't want to know, but he couldn't shake the protective feelings he had for the younger man.

"Jerk. Asswipe," Peter muttered.

"That shouldn't be a news flash to you. What's really up? Is Darcy pressuring you again?" Ted's hackles went up.

"No. You were right; I should have expected it. I don't mean anything to him. I'm just another workshop fuck." Peter pushed his food around his plate, then ordered another beer.

"I'm sorry you got hurt, but didn't I tell you?" Ted shook his head. "Darcy's not the settling-down type, kid."

"You either, huh?" The hope flickering in Peter's eyes made Ted wish he were a young man again, innocent and longing for true love.

"Me either. Trust me, neither of us are worth your time."

"Don't give me that crap."

"What crap?"

"The 'you deserve better' crap." Peter stabbed at his fried catfish, breaking up the filet into an inedible mess of white flakes.

"Don't you think so?" Ted asked.

"I'm not so sure anymore." Peter sighed. "I seem to fall for the wrong guy, you know?"

"Oh hell, I know that, kid. Been there myself. But don't worry, when the right one comes along, you'll know it." As soon as Ted said the words, the pain hit him in the chest. He'd thought he'd found the one, twice, but both times had been painful and total fuckups. Who was he to hand out advice?

"Please." Peter rolled his eyes. "Not you too. Darcy said the same thing when he dumped me this morning."

"Ouch." Ted winced.

"He didn't lose any time after fucking me to turn me loose." Peter looked ill. "And I thought we really connected."

"Hey, it doesn't mean you're not a great guy, kid. It just means Darcy's an asshole and an idiot who doesn't know a good thing when he sees it."

Peter looked up and gave Ted a halfhearted smile. "Thanks." He bumped Ted's shoulder with his.

"Nada." Ted decided to have a little talk with Darcy. It might be too late, but maybe Darcy would think twice before he broke the next young heart he came across.

After the meal, as they walked to their cars, Ted called out to Darcy to wait for him.

Darcy leaned against his car. "What's up? Change your mind about spending the night with me?" He spun his car keys around his finger, looking cocky as hell.

Ted gave a fake laugh. "Funny, Darcy, but no." He sobered. "Look, I know Peter's an adult, but shit, man, did you have to fuck him and dump him? Anyone could see he was vulnerable."

"Not that it's any of your business, but he knew what the rules of the game were, and he agreed." Darcy shrugged. "It's not like he was a virgin."

"That's beside the point. He practically worshipped you."

"I can't help that." Darcy frowned.

"But you can keep your dick in your pants. Do you have *any* moral sense of right and wrong?" Ted growled, curling his hands into fists.

"When it comes to tight, young tail? Afraid not." Darcy opened the door of his car.

Ted came up behind him. "Well maybe the next time, think twice before you drag someone's heart through the mud."

"Like you wouldn't have fucked him." Darcy scoffed. "He told me you let him suck you off."

Ted closed his eyes and cursed. "He tried, but I stopped him."

"Congratulations! You're a better homo than I, my friend." Darcy got in and slammed the door shut.

Ted watched as he backed out of the parking space and drove off. Growling, he turned around and found Peter leaning against Ted's car.

"I guess I'm giving you a ride back to the inn, huh?" Ted asked.

"If you don't mind." Peter hopped in.

Ted shook his head at Peter. *Puppy*. Why did he care?

Because Darcy was right. If Ted hadn't been so into Scott, he would have tapped Peter's ass in a heartbeat.

He was just as low as Darcy.

And didn't that just suck.

* * *

Scott made his way to the front of the packed room. He could smell the scent of each of his pack brothers converging into one huge, overpowering hormone bomb.

Mike was right. Something was up with all of them, and Scott had to end it or move to protect the pack.

“Okay, men. Things are getting out of control. Last night Mike spotted two pack members crossing the fucking highway.”

Everyone in the room shifted in their chairs and looked around.

“You know who you are, and I’m not looking for any confessions, but y’all must understand how close that came to creating a shit-storm we might not be able to control.”

Heads nodded.

“As of tonight, I’m suspending all running. No changes. None. No exceptions. And those of you who don’t have work to be at are confined to your homes.”

Some of the men mumbled and grumbled at the pronouncement, but Scott expected it.

“Sorry. But the pack comes first. Each of us is sworn to keep all of us safe, and if that means harsher restrictions, so be it.”

“So what the hell is going on?” Wyatt stood and stared down Scott. “You’re alpha, you tell us.”

“I’m not sure,” Scott admitted. He hated looking like he didn’t have a clue, especially in front of Wyatt. The man wanted his position with a vengeance.

“You don’t know?” Wyatt scoffed. “Some pack leader.” He looked around the room for support, but only a few members met his gaze.

“I’m working on it, but for now, this is the best solution.”

“Hey, I don’t mind it. Most I’ve had in a long time, and my wife’s been really happy!” Mike shouted out, and the men laughed. God bless Mike for trying to help Scott.

Scott laughed too. “So maybe not so bad for some of us.” He motioned for everyone to settle down. “Wyatt, if I had answers, if any of us had answers, we’d share.” Scott spoke not to Wyatt, but to all the men.

“Maybe it’s your crazy mama?” Wyatt sneered. “Everyone knows that old lady’s got powers.”

Scott nearly choked, but covered it in a laugh. “Yeah, she’s really dangerous. If she *had* created Love Potion No. 9, then she isn’t giving me any, ’cause I don’t have a woman.” Scott held out his arms. “And the way that woman wants grandkids, I’d be the first guinea pig.” No way did Scott want Wyatt to know how close to home that comment had hit.

Everyone laughed, and a few men sitting near Wyatt pulled him back down into his chair. Wyatt glared at Scott, with a look that warned it wasn’t over yet.

In the back of the room, Bobby Cotteau, their former pack leader, stood and cleared his throat.

"Now, from what I can see, Scott's doing exactly the right things. Nothing I would have done differently. Y'all listen to him, do what he says, and the pack'll be safe." Bobby gave them all a severe look, then sat back down.

"Thanks, Bobby." Scott nodded, appreciating his support. "Guys, it's just until we figure out what's going on and how to make it stop."

He dismissed the pack and sat on the desk as the men trailed out of the room. The only ones left were Bobby, Mike, and Scott.

Mike made to leave, but Bobby said, "No, you stay, Mike. As beta, you're running this pack too."

The older man joined the two at the front of the room, grabbed a chair, spun it around, and sat straddling it.

"Now, son, you listen." Bobby caught Scott's gaze and held it. "This is your fault."

Scott bolted out of his seat and looked from Bobby to Mike. "What are you talking about, my fault?"

Bobby leaned in, tipping the chair forward, then inhaled deeply. "You're what, thirty-five?"

Scott nodded, afraid to open his mouth.

"I figure that's about four years you been waiting on a mate. And see, the thing is, with us weres it's all about stinky hormones, uh, what do you call those, Mike?" Bobby looked to Scott's best friend, the only other person who knew about Scott's mate being gay.

"Pheromones?" Mike answered.

"Right. Sex smells, Scott. And right now, that smell is pouring off you like water over Niagara Falls."

Scott looked down at his body and then to Mike, raising his eyebrow at him. "Sex smell?"

"You're long past due to find a mate."

"He's not met the right person," Mike interrupted.

Bobby held up his hand to silence Mike. "Maybe. Maybe not. But I know the scent of a wolf in mating season, and you reek of it. Now, here's what I think."

Scott sat down and hoped Bobby had a way out of this, for all their sakes. One that didn't involve claiming his mate.

"I think you've found your mate."

"But—" Scott started, but a low growl from Bobby halted him in midword.

"And for whatever reason, you're denying it. And it's backing up in you, like a bad septic system, spilling over from you onto every member of this pack."

Scott's shoulders slumped as the truth sank in.

"And if you don't stop this, it's going to destroy us all. Scott, I don't know what's wrong with your mate, but goddamnit son, you need to claim her or leave." Bobby stood and pushed the chair, the scrapping sound hurting Scott's ears like nails on a chalkboard.

"Leave?" Mike looked from Bobby to Scott.

"That's right. If Scott won't claim his mate, he'll sicken and die, that's a fact. But in that time, all his mating pheromones will spill over onto us, until we're so out of control there's no telling what we'll be capable of."

"You don't think..." Mike snapped his jaw shut.

"Half the pack carries guns, and all of them have fangs and claws," Bobby grimly stated the facts.

"We could kill? Oh God. Innocents and each other," Mike whispered.

Scott stood again and sighed. He ran a hand over his face and looked into the steady gaze of the man he thought of as his father. "I won't be the cause of that, sir."

"Then you claim your goddamn mate or get the hell out of my pack." Bobby turned to leave.

"Scott can't claim him—" Mike started, but Scott put his hand out to stop him.

Bobby, his brows deeply furrowed, turned around. "I'm listening." He folded his arms and cocked his head.

Scott straightened. He'd tell Bobby, but for some reason he refused to be ashamed by it. Not anymore.

"This shouldn't have happened. My mother did a spell. She brought my mate to me, only it was a gay man. His name is Ted, and he's from New Orleans. An ex-cop turned PI. Nice man." Scott swallowed. "He's my mate."

"But you broke the spell, tell him, Scott," Mike rushed to explain.

"We did. I thought we did. Both of us didn't want..." Scott sighed. "He's leaving tomorrow, and that'll be that. Once he's gone, things will settle down."

Bobby let out a low whistle. "Gay, huh?"

Scott didn't fear much, but he sure was afraid to see what Bobby's eyes held at that moment.

"He is, yes."

"And you?"

"Well, my wolf wants him."

"Remember what I taught you, Scott? We are our wolves." Bobby let his arms drop. "Look at me, Scott." His voice demanded obedience.

Scott pulled his gaze off the floor and up to Bobby's.

"Take your mate or leave."

"It's not that simple." Scott wished with all his might this wasn't happening.

"You are the alpha of this pack by right and by vote. Your mate must have the support of the pack, or else you must leave or fight for him. There is no easy way for this to end, son. It's just up to you how we get there."

Scott nodded. "I've made my decision. We broke the spell, and I'm letting him leave. Once the moon wanes, all of this will be history. I'm staying on as alpha. If I die, so be it."

"I hope so, Scott. I truly do, because I'd hate to back Wyatt and run you out of this town. But I will, to save the pack." Bobby's face looked haggard, as if he'd aged twenty years while they'd been talking.

"If it comes to that, I'll leave on my own. And I understand. I'd do the same thing, sir." Scott nodded.

Bobby sighed and stepped forward to put his hand on Scott's shoulder to pull him close for a hug. "The wolf knows what the wolf wants. Don't deny it," he whispered in Scott's ear, then let him go.

Scott watched as his mentor walked away.

Mike collapsed into a chair and blew out a breath.

"This sucks, man."

Scott turned to face him. "But he's right. If this doesn't stop tomorrow when the moon stage changes, I'm fucked."

"Well, you will be if you let Ted get your ass." Mike rolled his eyes.

Scott straightened a few chairs. "I do understand. You're my beta, Mike, and I'll do what I can to support your move to pack alpha, if it comes to it."

Mike dropped the chair he held. "Shit. Scott, you gotta do something. I'm strictly beta material. Even Sharie bosses me around."

Scott laughed. "Hey, better a beta than Wyatt." He slapped Mike on the shoulder.

"I'm going home to Sharie. All this talk of sex pheromones has got me hard as a fucking rock." Mike rubbed his crotch.

"Go, make your mate happy. Just don't kiss and tell. Too much information." Scott waved good night as they got into their trucks.

Mike left with a quick salute, leaving Scott in the parking lot to think about what Bobby had said.

He didn't have many choices. Let Ted leave, and take a chance on dying. Claim Ted, and be thrown out of the pack or fight to the death for him. Leave the pack, let someone else be alpha, then die.

Ho-ly shit. Why did most of his options end with death? And those were the good ones.

The others ended with him claiming Ted. And if the spell was broken, why the hell was he so hard just thinking about Ted?

Chapter Twenty-three

Scott plopped down his hat and settled into his desk chair at the sheriff's station. He'd done what he could last night with the pack. Now he just had to wait for the sun to set to see if the moon's effects would disappear.

He knew he was taking a chance, but this was the last day of the workshop, and Ted would be leaving.

Scott had made his decision last night, and he'd stand by it, no matter what.

He'd let Ted leave and let wolf nature take its course. All during the sleepless night, he'd tried to think of any of the men he'd known who had died without mates, but no one sprang to mind. Why would he die? As far as he was concerned, it was just an old wolf's story, told by the women to keep the men in check.

Besides, the spell had been broken, and it felt like the longer he'd been away from Ted, the more in control of his desires he'd become.

Out of sight, out of mind.

Good.

Great.

Scott wondered if Ted would forget him this easily.

* * *

"Last day of painting, everyone!" Darcy announced at breakfast. "We're going to skip my lecture, and get right to work. After lunch, we'll do a final critique, then check out, and say good-bye."

Ted and the others dug into their meal. He listened as everyone chatted about the week and about going home.

"So I suppose your husband will be relieved to have you back," Ted said to Kirsten.

"Relieved?" She frowned. "He's excited. He called this morning to tell me he can't wait for me to get back. He's even made special dinner reservations at Antoine's." She beamed at him.

Peter, on the other side of the table, nodded. "That sounds incredible. I've never been to Antoine's."

"It's as good as everyone says," Darcy answered. "I've been several times."

Kirsten agreed. "It's where he proposed to me."

"Wow. That's special. Don't tell us he did the ring in the champagne glass." Peter leaned forward, eager to hear the details.

"No. It was at dessert. He ordered the Bananas Foster, and when they rolled the tray up to the table to prepare it, the chef swept off the domed lid and instead of the dessert, there sat my ring!"

"Guess you couldn't say no, then." Peter laughed. "I'll bet everyone in the place was staring at you."

She nodded. "Yeah. But I wouldn't have said no. I couldn't."

"Mated," Ted mumbled into his orange juice as he sipped.

"What?" Kirsten asked.

"Nothing." Ted shrugged. "Sounds romantic." He smiled. Not for the first time did he wonder if the judge would pay him the rest of the money he owed for the job. He had a sinking feeling he was going to get stiffed, but at least he had the five grand up front.

It might not get him to Hawaii in style, but it'd get him there. The farther away from the bayous, the better.

"So, Ted, what are you going to do when you get home?" Peter asked.

"Hit the bars," Ted shot off before thinking. Peter's face fell, and Ted's rarely used guilt kicked in. "Just joking! I'm going to relax, maybe do some more painting."

"How about you, Peter?" Kirsten turned to the younger man. "More painting?"

"I guess." He gave Darcy a baleful glance, then shrugged. "Maybe I'll show up in New Orleans, Ted." He winked. "We can hit those bars."

Ted groaned. "Kid, you wouldn't be safe."

Kirsten laughed. "He is pretty, isn't he?"

"So pretty!" Peter blushed, but batted his eyes like an ingenue and they all burst into gales of laughter.

Darcy put an end to it when he stood and signaled for everyone to be on their way to the day's location.

He didn't look happy about Peter hitting the bars in New Orleans. Maybe he realized too late Peter was something special.

And for some reason, Ted was glad it had been too late. For Peter's sake.

* * *

"Another good day for you, Ted." Darcy stood back from Ted's painting, propped against his car.

"Thanks. I'm really happy with it." Ted had to agree this painting was good, or maybe he was just learning how to accept praise.

Darcy moved closer. "It's the last day. I'm free until next weekend, when I'm due in Mobile. I could stop over in New Orleans, if you were interested."

Just a week ago, Darcy would be the kind of fuck Ted would go for, no strings attached and on his way out of town. Now he didn't look so good, and that worried Ted. The spell had been broken, right? He'd been aroused thinking of Scott, but that was just lust talking, not that mating shit Scott had ranted about. It was crazy anyway.

Werewolves and mates.

He should take Darcy up on it, just to prove it to himself, but it would be easier to just go to the closest bar once he was home and find a twink to fuck. Besides, he wasn't sure he really liked Darcy.

"No thanks. But don't let me stop you from going to New Orleans. Lots of fun there, even if you're alone."

"Right. Oh well, *c'est la vie!*" Darcy gave a flourish of his hand, and off he went to critique the next person.

Ted might not miss Darcy, that's for sure, but he'd grown fond of Peter and Kirsten.

He packed up his supplies, eased the still-wet painting into the back of his SUV, and waited for Peter to join him for the ride back to the inn.

Once there, he'd pack up his belongings, check out, and head back to town, leaving Bayou End, St. Jerome, and Sheriff Scott Dupree far behind.

"Hey, glad you waited for me!" Peter called out to him as he leaned against the vehicle.

"No problem."

"You packed up fast. Guess you're ready to leave." Peter pointed to Ted's supplies neatly tucked away.

"Well, no point in wasting any time hanging around here." Ted shrugged as he got in. Peter put his things in the backseat and climbed in.

"I bet you won't even think twice about me." Peter sniffed the air as if hurt.

"Kid, you're one of the best memories I have of this place." Ted winked at him.

"Thanks. I'll remember you too. The man I should have listened to." Peter laughed, then ordered, "Home, James."

"As you wish," Ted answered. He pulled out behind Kirsten and followed the line of cars back to the inn.

When they arrived at the inn, and Ted had gone to his room to pack, he discovered Marie and Maurice had special good-bye gifts laid out on his pillow—a small mesh bag holding some of their specially made bath items, like shampoo and body lotion, plus several pralines, and a gift certificate for a free night when you booked two. It was just another example of the friendliness and hospitality of the people of St. Jerome.

Ted could get used to a place like this. He could see himself settling down here, and as he packed the last of his clothing, he had to remember Scott wasn't asking him to stay, so he wouldn't have to make that choice.

So what was he thinking about it for?

Ted zipped up his luggage and made a final check of the room and stepped out into the hall. He shut his door, and rolling his suitcase behind him, made his way downstairs to check out.

Peter called out to him, "Hey, Ted!"

Ted stopped and waited for Peter to catch up. "What's up?"

Peter's eyes shone, his cheeks flushed with excitement. "Darcy asked me to spend the weekend with him."

"Wow. Are you?" Ted wasn't sure it was the best thing for Peter, but he was an adult.

"Yeah. We're going to New Orleans first." Peter blushed a deeper shade of red.

"First?"

"He also wants me to go with him on the rest of his tour."

"Wow." Ted couldn't stop saying that word. "Sort of a sudden change of heart, isn't it? Are you paying for this?"

"No, he told me I'd stay in his room, and he'd pay for my expenses." Ted didn't want to crush the kid's high, so he smiled.

"Great. Just be careful, kid. Darcy's odd." He shrugged. "Did you ask if he was going to keep his dick in his pants while he was with you?"

Peter stared at him as if he'd grown a second head.

"Just be careful." Ted leaned over and gave Peter a soft buss on the cheek. He didn't know why, but he added, "If you need any help, call me." He dug out his business card and handed it to Peter.

"I'll be okay." Peter pocketed the card without looking at it.

Ted shook his head and headed down the stairs. He really hoped so. Peter was a nice kid.

As Ted stood in line to check out, his gaze wandered over to the display of brochures highlighting the tourist events and places around south Louisiana.

At the top, several cubbies were filled with bright red glossy brochures advertising the Rugarou Festival. He stepped out of line and snatched one up, then went back to his spot to read it.

The front panel explained the legend of the rugarou, a vestige of the *loup garou* stories of France, brought to the bayou country by the Acadians who'd settled here.

An artist's vision of what the dreaded bayou monster would look like stared back at Ted, all bared teeth and large pointed ears. Sort of half man, half wolf.

Right then, the other shoe dropped along with his stomach, and Ted put it all together. What a fucking fool he'd been!

He growled as he read the rest of it, barely restraining himself from shredding the flimsy paper. The other side talked about the social club that sponsored the

event, with the proceeds going to help charities for firefighters, EMS, and sheriff's department.

Sheriff? As in Sheriff Scott Dupree?

Scott had been bullshitting him. He wasn't a werewolf at all. It was just some crazy legend, and Scott had to be caught up in it, or had just used it to get him to have sex. How could he have been so stupid to believe that line of crap?

Ted's face burned with the sudden shame of being played, and just as fast, anger swelled in him. He clenched his fist, crumpling the brochure, imagining Scott laughing about it.

The line shuffled forward, and it was Ted's turn.

"I'm so glad you came," Marie told him. "I hope you'll come back soon and visit us again."

Ted forced a smile as he gave her his credit card. "Bayou End is lovely. I'll be sure to tell my friends about it." There, friendly, but noncommittal. He'd never come back here again. What had he been thinking?

She gave him his receipt. "I see you have one of our brochures."

He stared down at the one still crumpled in his hand. "Oh, yeah. I forgot."

"I'll just get you a new one." She laughed and moved away to retrieve another.

"No, that's okay. I've read enough." He frowned as he shoved it into his jacket pocket. Marie nodded and came back. "Marie, thank you for your hospitality."

And with that, Ted turned around and headed out the door, determined to put St. Jerome and everything that had happened here far behind him.

If he ever saw that bastard Scott Dupree, sheriff or no, Ted would beat the shit out of him.

* * *

Scott sat in his cruiser down the block and watched as the cars left Bayou End. He wondered, not for the first or third time, what the hell he was doing there.

He hadn't been able to shake the urge to see Ted again, and he'd almost convinced himself that it was to make sure the man had left St. Jerome.

But the longer he sat, the more he doubted his motives. With each car, his heart raced and butterflies danced in his belly as they turned onto the road from the long driveway and headed out of town. And with each car that wasn't Ted's, he exhaled as his stomach sank when he realized it wasn't Ted's SUV.

This was crazy. Even if he saw Ted, what did he think he was going to do? Wave good-bye? Get out and talk?

Kiss him good-bye? Slide his tongue down Ted's throat and grab his ass? Rub against him?

Ho-ly hell, no fucking way. The spell had been broken, and he hadn't thought of Ted that way since that night.

It was over. He'd made his decision.

Scott put his hand on the keys to crank up the car just as another car pulled into view.

This time it was Ted's, and with a hard thud, Scott's heart beat like a jackhammer in his chest.

The car turned and headed straight for him.

He almost ducked to hide, but something kept his hands braced on the steering wheel.

Ted slammed on the brakes and jerked his car to the side of the road, coming nose to nose with Scott's cruiser.

For a long moment, they stared at each other through their front windshields, gazes locked with something Scott didn't have a name for burning between them.

Ho-ly shit.

Ted glared at the man who'd played him for a fool and all the blood drained from his brain to his dick, leaving only fierce anger and unspeakable need shaking his body.

Scott just sat there, staring at him.

The bastard. Had the fucking nerve to show up. Trying to rub Ted's face in it, no doubt.

Ted had enough. One way or another, this was going to stop right now.

He jerked open the car door, got out, and slammed it shut. Traffic swept past him on the road, blowing his hair around his face as he went around the vehicle to the side of the road.

"Get out, you fucking son of a bitch!" he yelled, as he stormed, fists clenched, toward Scott.

Chapter Twenty-four

Scott growled low in his throat as the hairs on the back of his hand sprouted. His fixed gaze took in only one thing—a furious, mad-as-a-wet-hen, take-no-prisoners, pissed-off PI.

“What the hell got up his ass?” After prying his hands off the wheel, Scott climbed out of the cruiser and slammed his door shut. He’d started forward before he realized Ted was shouting at him.

“Motherfucker! I can’t believe you’re sitting here waiting for me. You must have balls the size of grapefruit, you bastard.”

“Whoa!” Scott held up his hands in a ‘calm down’ gesture, but it only seemed to rile Ted up even more.

“Don’t tell me to calm down.” Ted stepped into Scott’s face, invading his space until Scott had to retreat a bit.

“What the hell is going on, Ted?”

“Did you think I’d never find out about your little social club? That I’d be so stupid to really believe you and all your bullshit about werewolves? It’s just a fucking legend, isn’t it?” Ted poked him in the chest with his finger, and he winced. “One you used to get to me, telling me I was *your mate* just to trick me into having sex with you.” Ted shook with rage, his fists white-knuckled.

Scott blinked, trying to take it all in. “It’s not bullshit. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Right. The Rugarou Festival?” Ted sneered and placed his fists on his hips as he waited for an explanation.

“I didn’t trick you.” Scott’s reserve broke, and he bellowed, “We *both* wanted it. You felt it too.” How could Ted deny what happened between them?

“*All* I felt was lust. A hard-on for a good-looking guy, that’s all. I’ve had them before, and I’ll have them again. You’re the one that came up with the love spell crap and the werewolf story.” Ted glared.

“It’s the truth, not a story.”

“So there’s *no* legend of the rugarou?” Ted cocked his head to the side, glaring.

“Yeah, there is, but...”

“And you *do* belong to a social club, right?”

“Yeah, but it’s not like that...” Scott couldn’t get a word in with Ted in his enraged condition, and it bled over to Scott, kicking his anger into gear. It was all

he could do to keep from grabbing Ted and throwing him to the ground to make him submit.

Ted growled as he pulled at his hair. "And to think, I *believed* you. I even considered staying here with you as your fucking mate! How gullible could I be? How stupid? You must have been laughing your ass off over that. Did you tell your friends at the club?"

Scott froze, then reran Ted's words in his head. "Did you say you considered staying?" For the first time, he really looked into Ted's eyes, searching for something.

Ted's chest rose and fell with each deep gulp of air he sucked in. Pain filled his eyes. He let go of his hair, and his arms fell to his side. "Yeah. I did."

Scott nearly reached out for the man, but caught himself. The spell had been broken. He'd made his decision to let Ted go. What was done was done.

"I'm sorry. I swear to God I didn't play you. I *am* a werewolf, and there *was* a love spell. But we broke it, and you're free to go." Scott took another step backward, distancing him from his former mate.

Ted's glare softened. "Right. Free to go." He exhaled, reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the crumpled brochure. "I saw this when I was checking out at Bayou End."

Scott recognized it. "Oh, yeah. We raise money for charity. The pack does, I mean."

"I'm sure it's a good cause." Ted seemed to have calmed down.

Scott tried to reach him with a smile and a soft voice. "It is. We take care of our own here in St. Jerome."

"Good." Ted's gaze fell to the ground, then back up to Scott. "Look, I'm leaving." Ted waited for Scott to say something, but none of the things that came to Scott's mind could be said. And definitely not any of the things he wanted to do. Not now.

Scott gave him a nod.

Ted shoved the brochure back into his pocket. "Have a nice life." Then he turned and went back to his car, got in, reversed, and pulled away, gravel flying.

A tightness in Scott's chest hit him, stealing his breath. The world spun, and he staggered backward, landing on the hood of his cruiser.

He closed his eyes tight and inhaled deeply several times, then looked up and down the road. Scott rubbed his chest and wondered if anyone got the license of the truck that just hit him, because he felt like he'd just been run over.

Ted was gone.

* * *

Ted hung up the phone. He'd set the meeting with Judge Charbonnet for eight tomorrow night at the old man's office in the French Quarter near the Old Mint.

The old man sounded eager to get the news, but Ted didn't think it would be what he expected.

If everything went Ted's way, he'd have the next check for five grand in his pocket when he left there. If not, he'd just have to deal with it. He'd been stiffed before by a client or two, and unless he wanted to involve a lawyer, there wasn't much he could do about it.

Ted walked over to his makeshift bar on the counter that separated the kitchen from the living area and poured a scotch, then downed it in one gulp. The fire burned down his throat and landed in his belly, spreading warmth through his body.

He poured another, but as he lifted it to his lips, the room tilted, and his knees wobbled. Breathing became difficult, and he staggered over to the couch and fell on it.

"What the hell?" His heart raced, and no matter how he tried to inhale, there wasn't enough air in his lungs. He'd never had that reaction from scotch before.

Maybe he was getting sick? A cold? The flu?

Whatever it was, it passed as fast as it had come, leaving Ted lying on the couch staring up at the ceiling of his apartment. He tried to think of anyone who'd been sick during the artist's week, but everyone had stayed healthy. Not a sneeze anywhere.

The room stabilized, and he sat up. He ran a hand through his hair and rolled his shoulders to release the tension.

"Weird." He shrugged, stood, and went to his room to take a shower and get some sleep.

* * *

Scott paced from one side of his living room to the other. He itched. Not physically, no. But his body wanted...something, and he didn't know what. Well, he knew, he just didn't want to admit it.

He strode to the door, opened it, and stepped out onto his front porch. All around him the swamp called to his wolf to come out and play.

Not possible. Not until things settled around here, and he had no idea when that would happen. Scott looked up at the moon, just a hair past full, receding away from what his pack called the mating moon.

He should feel relief. But he didn't.

The moon controlled them, he knew that on an instinctual level as his wolf, but as a rational man, he also knew he had the ultimate control over what he said and did.

Despite that, he rubbed his hand over his now swollen and aching cock.

He shouldn't feel this urge. Not now. Not after they'd broken the spell, after they'd said their good-byes, and Ted had left.

The urge to mate shouldn't be overpowering him, making him long to change and run in the woods, to find his mate and claim him.

Scott's itching increased to nearly unbearable, and without a second thought, his wolf surged to the surface, and he let the change happen.

Tossing his head back, his now amber eyes reflected the waning moon. He lunged for the stairs, scampered down them, and bolted into the darkness of the swamp.

He ran, the soft mud squishing between the pads of his feet, dashing in and out of the shadows of the oaks and cypress trees. At the clearing, he paused, front paws resting on the fallen tree trunk, and howled.

Calling for his mate.

He waited for the answering cry, but none came.

He howled again, the *yip yip yip* wavering at the end of his call entreating his mate to answer back, knowing it was dangerous and wrong to be so bold, even here in the middle of the swamp.

He needed his mate. To be without his mate wasn't right. His urge to mate, to claim with his body and teeth the one person who would make him complete, body and soul, drove him to carelessness.

He leaped over the log and went in search of his mate. Nose to the ground, he followed the scent, faint, but still there. He'd never stop until he found his mate.

The one meant for him.

* * *

Scott's mother stood at her open door and listened to her son cry for his mate. She looked down at the black cat rubbing against her legs.

"You better get inside. It's not safe tonight." She frowned as the cat moved past her into the house and leaped up on the couch to curl up.

She shut the door and went to the phone. Dialing a number she knew by heart, she waited for the other end to pick up.

"Bobby? He's out there. You got to help him." She wiped a tear from her cheek.

"Fuck," Bobby Cotteau swore. "I'll find him."

"Better get Mike. He listens to Mike." She hung up and went back to the door and opened it again.

The wolf's cry, faint in the distance but unmistakable, echoed through the swamp, and rumbled inside her.

"I'm so sorry, son. The spell didn't work." She sighed and shut the door, her duty to her pack done.

Now she'd have to wait to hear from Bobby or Mike. Taking her rosary from her pocket, she sat on the couch and prayed for her son to survive this night.

* * *

Bobby picked up Mike at his house, and they drove to the road that led deep into the swamp.

"I got a call from Marie at Bayou End. She heard it too. Her guests came running, all in a panic, yelling about the rugarou. She told them it was just Maurice trying to scare them," Bobby told Mike.

"I can't believe he'd do this. He *ordered* it, for God's sake!" Mike fumed and slapped his hat on his knee.

"He's not in control, and you know that." Bobby talked from between his clenched teeth, so angry at the man he considered a son he wanted to turn him over his knee and spank him.

"I know. It's his wolf talking." Mike nodded.

"And his wolf is *gay*, but he isn't?" Bobby sighed. "Damned if that's a new one on me."

"I've known Scott my whole life, sir. He's never shown a single sign of it. Why we even went on dates and he was in the front of the truck with his girl and I was back in the bed with mine and we'd..."

Bobby held up his hand. "Stop right there. No need for details." He shifted in his seat. "You said he sent this Ted fellow away. That he and this guy and his mama broke the spell?"

"That's right. He was sure it was the spell, and the guy wasn't really his mate."

"Well, it looks like he was wrong." Bobby spit out the window. "This isn't good. You know pack law, just as well as I do."

Mike nodded, but he didn't want to think of what would happen to Scott once they found him.

"He's got to leave, Mike." Bobby grimaced. "It hurts me to my heart, but for the sake of the pack, he's got to go. If he won't claim his mate and end this shit spilling over all of us, then he'll have to leave." Bobby didn't have to say the "or else."

"I can't imagine this pack without Scott. Where would he go?" Mike shook his head. "Wyatt can't be put in charge. The men don't respect him, and you know that."

"Then it'll have to be you. Can you do it?" Bobby shot him a hard look, and Mike's belly rolled.

"Fight Wyatt for alpha?" He ran his hand over his stubble-covered chin. "If I have to, but I'm not sure I'd win."

"You're going to have to, son."

"Right. Easy as pie." Mike stared out the window as they came to the end of the shell covered road. He'd never been a coward, but a fight to the death for control of the pack had never been in his plans and definitely not in his wife, Sharie's, plans either. They'd planned to start their family.

Bobby parked his truck and they got out.

"Best if I do it."

Mike nodded, relieved he didn't have to hunt down his best friend and challenge him.

Within a few moments, Bobby's wolf stood on all fours, his once black coat now covered in gray hair, his muzzle nearly white. He shook himself, then slipped into the shadows to hunt his prey.

Mike went to the truck and took down the shotgun from the gun rack, broke it open to see if it was loaded, snapped it shut, then cradled it in his arms and waited.

If Bobby's plan didn't work, it'd be up to Mike to stop Scott.

* * *

Scott caught the scent of another wolf, and for a moment his body lunged, his jaws snapping. Then he recognized it.

He growled. He didn't want the bigger wolf to find him. He slunk on his belly, nose twitching as he sniffed the air downwind of the one he knew tracked him.

In and out of the trees he maneuvered into position. Then the scent was gone. He froze, waiting for it to return.

Danger gone. He relaxed, his head dropped, and his tail gave a single wag.

The gray wolf crashed into him, and they rolled together over the soft ground. The larger wolf's jaws clamped around his throat, holding him on his back, his belly vulnerable, but the wolf didn't kill him.

Bright amber eyes gazed into his. He whimpered, his tail coming up between his legs in submission.

His alpha growled, his big paw came down on Scott's ear and pressed.

Scott gave a yip of pain.

He knew what he had to do, but he wanted his mate. He needed his mate.

The wolf twisted his paw on the ear and tightened his jaws.

Scott whimpered and began his change.

He opened his eyes, and Bobby stood over him. He sat up and put his face in his hands.

"Oh God," he moaned.

"You got to leave, son. You disobeyed and endangered everyone in the pack tonight."

"I know." Scott pulled his knees up and wrapped his arms around them.

Bobby placed his hand on Scott's shoulder. "There's no other way. This isn't a spell. Ted is your mate. Claim him or leave."

Scott looked up at Bobby and nodded. "I'll have to resign from the department, find a new sheriff for now. I can be gone in two weeks."

Bobby cuffed him on the back his head. "Fool! Just go claim your damn mate."

Scott stood, rubbing his head. "Claim him? Right. Then what? I'll still have to leave."

Bobby gave him a long look. "He's your mate, isn't he?"

"Yeah." As much as Scott hated to admit it, he couldn't deny it anymore.

"Then go get him, claim him, and bring him to the pack. Fight for him, if you have to. The Scott Dupree I know wouldn't let this stop him. You're the goddamned alpha. It's your right to mate, and it's your right to bring him in front of the pack."

"They'll never approve it. Wyatt will challenge me."

"So what? You were going to have to fight him eventually. And don't dismiss your pack's loyalty so easily, son." Bobby grabbed his arm and dragged him along the path.

"You came by yourself?"

"Mike's with me. He's at the truck."

"Oh." Scott shook Bobby's hand off and followed.

Fifteen minutes later, they came to the truck. Scott stepped out of the trees.

Mike straightened, swinging the gun's barrel around to face him.

"Gonna shoot me?" Scott asked.

"If I have to." Mike frowned. "Gonna make me?"

"Nope. Not tonight." Scott laughed. "Maybe later. I'll let you know."

"Sure." Mike lowered the shotgun and exhaled.

Bobby followed. "Scott's going to take some time off. He's going to get his mate in New Orleans."

Mike's eyes widened. "That true?"

Scott shrugged. "Seems I don't have a choice." He glanced over at Bobby. "He seems to think I should give it a chance."

"For what it's worth, so do I." Mike grinned and slapped Scott's back. "Besides, we've all be waiting for you to whip Wyatt's ass for years."

"Oh yeah. Me too. I just didn't think I'd be fighting him over a man."

"Not a man, Scott. Your mate," Bobby added. "Don't ever forget that, son."

Scott barked a laugh. "No, can't seem to forget it, that's for sure."

Mike opened the door to the truck. "Get in, and we'll take you home."

It was a tight squeeze, but they climbed into the cab. Once they reached Scott's house, Mike hopped out.

"You need me to stay with you?" he asked.

"No, I'm fine. I'll be in to the office in the morning, get things set up, then head for New Orleans."

"Good luck, man." Mike held out his hand.

Scott shook it, waved to Bobby behind the wheel, and went up his steps to the house.

They waited until he'd gone inside before pulling away.

Scott looked around. It'd be okay. His place was big enough for two. Now all he had to do was convince Ted to be his mate and come home with him.

Chapter Twenty-five

The next morning, after two cups of the sheriff's office chicory-and-coffee brew, Scott cleared his desk of all his work, told his secretary he'd be out of town for a few days, and that she could reach him on his cell.

He'd thought long and hard about whom to leave in charge. In all this confusion, Deputy Billy Trosclair was the one who came to mind. Billy might be young, but he'd kept a level head and showed real promise.

He called Billy and asked him to meet him at the diner for lunch. That would give Scott enough time to go home, change, and pack a bag. He'd leave from there, and if the traffic in Baton Rouge was good, make it to New Orleans before four that afternoon.

At the diner, Scott slid into one of the booths in the back, ordered a cup of coffee and waited for Billy to show.

Right at noon, Billy came through the door. The man was certainly punctual. Scott scanned his deputy's appearance. Everything in order, neatly pressed, hair cut tight and high. Real officer material if Scott ever saw it.

Billy came up to the booth and waited for Scott to ask him to sit down. Then he slid in and put his hat on the table.

"Yes, sir?" Right to business. Scott liked Billy, and he believed the younger man respected him. It was going to be a shame to lose that, but Scott had to do what he had to do.

"I'm going out of town for a few days, and I want you to have my delegation of authority." No sense in beating around the bush.

The waitress came up as Billy's mouth hung open. "Can I get you boys anything?"

"Sure. I'll have the lunch special, and so will Deputy Trosclair." Scott raised an eyebrow at Billy, and he just nodded.

"Got it. Anything to drink for you, Deputy?" she asked.

"He'll have coffee." Scott chuckled. She left them, and Scott snapped his fingers in front of Billy's face. "Deputy?"

"Yes, sir? Did I hear you correctly? You're leaving *me* in charge?"

"Yes, I am. You've proved yourself with me, Deputy. And besides, it's only a few days." Scott smiled and took a sip of his coffee.

"But there are other men, men with seniority..." he stammered.

"Men who are going crazy. Sure, if I wanted my force to come completely unglued. But I don't, so it's you."

"Me." Billy blinked, then nodded.

The waitress returned with his coffee, and he took it from her and downed a big gulp of it.

"Thank you, sir. I won't forget it." Billy gave him a nod.

Scott hoped he'd never need to ask Billy for anything, because that's not why he did it. If so, he could have picked several other older men with more influence in the pack than Billy.

"Good. Let's eat." The food arrived, and the two chatted about the current issues the force had and what to do if anything else arose.

"Mike and Bobby will keep the pack in line. I just need your clear head on the force, understand?" Scott asked.

"Sure do. Mike and Bobby are the best." He grinned. "Besides you, sir."

Scott chuckled. "Right. Here's my personal cell phone number in case you need to reach me." He gave it to Billy who programmed it into his cell phone. "Don't use it unless you really have to."

"Yes, sir." Billy saluted.

"At ease, Deputy Trosclair." Scott was positive he'd made the right choice.

When he said good-bye to Billy and got in his truck, Scott's resolve to get his mate and return with him hadn't weakened. If anything, it had grown stronger.

Nothing would stand in his way of claiming his mate.

Not even his mate.

* * *

Ted stood outside the judge's offices on Governor Nichols Street. The lights were on. He glanced at his watch. Time to face the big bad wolf.

Funny, that phrase just popped into his mind, but he shook off the weird feeling that came with it.

He pushed the doorbell and waited.

The door opened, but it wasn't the judge. A large man with a bald head stepped back so he could enter.

"I have an appointment with the judge," Ted told him.

"Come in. He's expecting you." The guy nodded and closed the door, then showed Ted to an office.

"He's here," the man announced.

"Send him in." The judge's deep voice sent a shiver down Ted's spine. Seriously, he was letting this werewolf shit get the better of him.

Judge Charbonnet wasn't a werewolf. No fucking way. He was a man, a powerful man, but just a man.

Ted entered and crossed the room to the desk where the judge sat.

"Take a seat, Canedo." Charbonnet motioned to a chair in front of the desk.

Ted sat. "I have my report."

"Good. I want names and details." He clasped his hands on the desk and leaned forward.

"Plain and simple—she's clean. She met no one, she talked to everyone, she painted, and she had all her meals with the group." Ted shrugged. "If she's cheating on you, it wasn't there."

Charbonnet frowned. "That's not possible. I know she's been with someone else."

"How?" Ted asked.

The judge looked down at his hands. "I just know."

"Did you see her with someone?" Ted didn't know why, but he couldn't resist pressing for more info.

"No."

"You heard her speaking on the phone to someone? Found receipts she can't explain? Read her e-mail?" Ted threw out some of the usual warning signs of unfaithful spouses.

"No, not that." The judge's eyes narrowed at Ted, and his face flushed.

"Then what? From what I could see and learn from talking to her, she adores you. I don't know why, but she does." Ted shrugged. "I think you're making a problem out of something that isn't."

"Don't tell me what I'm doing!" Charbonnet exploded, coming out of his chair. "I know it! I could smell—" He cut himself off.

"You could smell him on her?" Ted cocked an eyebrow. "Is that what you were going to say? That's some sensitive nose you have there."

Charbonnet studied him. "Yes. A man's cologne." He growled, and something primal in that growl warned Ted he might have gone too far.

"Well, there's lots of explanations for that, aren't there?" Ted tried to soothe the man.

"Sure there are. Just my jealousy rearing its ugly head." The judge smiled at him, and Ted thought of a crocodile, all teeth and bad intentions. "Thanks for the report."

"Sure." Something about the guy's 360-degree turnaround bothered him.

"Now, about your fee." The judge pulled open the drawer. Ted held his breath, thinking this could be his last if there was a gun in there.

Charbonnet pulled out a checkbook. "You'll take another check, right?"

"Of course. You're good for it." Ted nodded. He watched as the judge wrote the check, ripped it off, and handed it to him.

Before Ted could take it, the judge pulled it away. "What else did you learn, Canedo?" His eyes narrowed.

"About what?" Ted shifted in his chair as the hair on the back of his neck stood on end.

"About me. About my wife."

"Nothing. Like I told you, she adores you. She's happy to be married to you."

"Do you find that odd?" The judge caught Ted in his gaze.

"Honestly, yeah. You're older, she's young and gorgeous." He shrugged. "But hey, there's no telling what makes one person fall for another." He gave a nervous laugh. "Could be a love spell, soul mates, who knows."

The judge's face changed, his eyes became cold and hard. "Exactly. Who knows."

Ted waited. Better to keep his mouth shut right now.

"What do you know, Canedo?"

"You asked me that before. I told you what I know. That's it."

"Something makes me not believe that." The judge tapped the check on his desk as if deciding something.

Ted's gaze rested on the check. Five grand. His instincts told him to get up and leave. Just go and forget about the check, but he needed that money.

"Here. Take it." Charbonnet handed him the check.

Ted took it, folded it, and shoved it into his shirt pocket. Then he stood, ready to get the hell out of there.

"Thanks, Judge. Have a good evening." Ted nodded and backed out of the room.

In the hall, the big goon leaned against the wall, waiting. Ted didn't look at him, just beelined for the door to get away.

He was halfway down the block before he exhaled. He touched the pocket, confirming the check was still there, and kept walking.

At the corner, two men stepped out of the shadows and faced him. In the dim streetlights, Ted recognized the man from the judge's office.

So he wouldn't be getting away after all.

* * *

Scott rang the buzzer on the alleyway door. He had the correct address, he was sure of that. Perhaps Ted was at dinner. Once again he cursed himself for not getting the man's cell phone number. Showed him how out of practice he was when it came to picking someone up or dating.

He rang again, leaning on the button far longer than he should. A pissed-off Ted would be better than no Ted at all.

But it looked like he'd struck out. At least, with the normal ways of finding someone.

Scott glanced up and down the street. A few people walked along the sidewalk on the other side of the street, but no one was anywhere near him.

He squatted, leaned toward the handle of the door, and sniffed. Ted's scent filled his nostrils, and his cock rose to it. *His mate*. He growled low in his throat.

Now that he had it, he could track Ted if he hadn't been gone too long. He inhaled and caught a whiff of his mate.

Scott stood and followed his trail through the Quarter. He reached a corner and stepped into a bar. It was early, almost nine, and the bar held only a few patrons and a bartender.

Ted's scent got lost in the odor of stale beer and something else...sex maybe. Scott looked around at the people. They stared at him, trying to figure out who he was and what he wanted.

Scott headed to the bartender and called him over.

"I'm looking for Ted Canedo."

"What for?" The bartender gave him the once-over. "You a cop?"

Scott ignored him. "I have a job for him. Was he in earlier?"

"Yeah, grabbed a shot and headed out."

"Did he say where?" Scott pulled a ten out of his pocket and placed it on the bar.

"No. Ted keeps to himself, except when he doesn't." The bartender smirked at him as he slid the money into his hand.

"What does that mean?"

"Just that Ted doesn't just come in here for a little twink action. He's got other places he goes to get what he needs."

Scott looked around again with fresh eyes. So the young men sitting against the walls were "twinks" and as such, available for sex. Probably for a price.

The thought of Ted being with any of them brought up a growl from his chest.

"Anyone here tonight?"

"Nope. Had his drink and left."

Scott exhaled. "How did he seem?"

"What do you mean? Like happy, sad, worried?"

"Yeah."

He shrugged. "Like he had something to do and didn't like it."

"You wouldn't happen to have his cell number, would you?"

The bartender looked Scott over, then put his hand out. "I might."

Scott handed him another ten, and the man gave him the number.

"Thanks." Scott nodded and moved off. "Hey, which way did he go?"

The bartender pointed out another door that opened onto the side street. "Toward the back of the quarter."

Scott left the bar, but not without seeing the frowns on some of the younger guys' faces. He hated to disappoint them, but the only man he wanted was Ted Canedo.

In the street, he moved away from the bar, inhaled, and caught Ted's scent. Between Ted's scent and his cell number, Scott was certain he'd find Ted.

He dialed the number, leaned against a building, and listened to it ring.

It went to voice mail. "*Hi, it's Ted. Leave your name and number. I'll get back to you.*" Then the beep.

Scott's mouth went dry. "Listen, Ted. It's Scott. I need to talk to you. I need to see you. I need..." He licked his lips, but nothing else came to him, not without sounding like a lovesick pussy.

The message beeped and disconnected.

Scott shoved his phone back in the pocket of his jeans and kept walking.

Chapter Twenty-six

After pushing Ted against the wall and searching him, they'd found his gun and his cell phone and took them. Then they'd marched him down Esplanade Avenue, gun pressed into his back, over to the Governor Nichols wharf, and through a door.

Now he stared at his cell phone as it played a jazz riff. Too bad he couldn't answer it, but the judge's goon held it.

"Who's Scott Dupree?" the big bastard asked, holding the phone out.

"A friend." Ted couldn't deny what Scott's name did to his body, and that was bad. So bad.

But where he was now? That was worse. He'd been in some bad shit, but this was the kind you didn't live through.

"Let's finish this." The other man, smaller but just as dangerous looking as the goon, jerked his gun around.

The big guy tossed Ted's cell phone across the expanse of concrete, and he watched as it slid and came to a rest, still ringing.

Damn, Scott had called. Too late.

The unfairness of it angered Ted, and he clenched his fists. They hadn't bound him, but holding the gun pointed at his chest was all the restraint they'd needed.

"Yeah, let's go. I've got places to be, things to do, people to see," Ted quipped, putting on a false front. Better to go down like a man than a coward.

"Fine." The goon sauntered up to Ted and slammed his fist into Ted's belly, doubling him over, all the air leaving his lungs in one giant rush.

"The judge wants you to forget whatever you think you know about him, get it?"

Still bent over and unable to answer, Ted nodded. The next blow fell, this time, on the side of his head, and he fell to the ground.

"Get up," Someone ordered. "I'm not finished."

* * *

Scott stood on the corner, confused. Ted's scent was here, but so were two others. He'd met people, and they'd continued on together.

Scott inhaled, savoring the smells on his palate, separating them from Ted's. Cheap cologne. And oiled metal.

He knew that smell.

The hairs on the back of Scott's neck stood up, signaling danger. Ted's scent changed, now a sharp tang to Scott's nose, but Ted's pheromones couldn't be denied.

Ted was in trouble.

Scott growled as he followed the three men deeper into the Quarter.

* * *

Ted pushed to his hands and knees, then launched himself at the bigger man. They grappled as the other man danced around them, gun ready but with no clear shot.

Ted got an arm free and swung at the man's jaw, connected, but the big bastard came back with another blow to Ted's side, landing on his kidney.

Pain shot white stars behind Ted's eyelids, and his knees buckled. He went down on one, clutching his ribs. Something had cracked.

The man stepped forward, swung, and caught Ted's jaw. Blood and spit flew as bare knuckles broke skin and tore lips.

Ted lay on the ground, sucking in air, but it felt impossible. Gasping, he tried to get to his feet. His vision blurred, and the empty warehouse and the two men swirled,

"Stay away from the judge, and his wife." The goon grabbed Ted's hair and jerked up his head. "Get it?"

"Yeah," Ted choked out.

The guy brought up his knee, slamming it into Ted's jaw and knocking him backward. Ted sprawled, legs and arms out, on the cold cement floor.

He opened his eyes and looked up into the man's face.

"I'll just take that check, if you don't mind." He leaned over Ted and plucked it from his pocket.

"Come on, let's go. You've done too much," the other voice wheedled. "I got a bad feeling..."

Ted's vision blurred as he tried to catch his breath through the pain. He must be losing it, because he could hear low growling.

"Scott?" he whispered.

All hell broke loose. Something huge and gray leaped over him. "What the fuck?" someone shouted. A scream split the still air, and a gun went off.

Growling filled the warehouse, echoing off the sides and rafters. The shoes of the men scraped on the concrete as they scuffled with whatever it was attacking them.

Ted rolled over and tried to get up, tried to see what was happening, but it was a fast-moving blur. He rubbed one hand over his eyes to clear them, focused, then blinked.

A large gray wolf had the smaller man on the ground, his jaws wrapped around the guy's hand. Blood dripped from it. The animal shook its head and red drops flew as the man screamed again.

The other man crawled on his hands and knees toward the door, whimpering, blood dripping from between his fingers wrapped around his throat.

"Scott?" Ted called. It couldn't be, maybe he'd been hit so hard he hallucinated.

A wolf. His wolf. Scott really *was* a werewolf.

His mate had come for him.

Ted's vision shrank, and he slid to the floor.

* * *

Scott chased the two men out of the warehouse, snapping and snarling at their heels, only bare restraint keeping him from tearing them into shreds.

No one touched his mate, much less beat him. By pack rights they should die for that sin, but by human laws, Scott knew he couldn't do that. Instead, he'd have to just make them go away, and if they suffered a little, so be it.

They scrambled through the narrow doorway, fighting each other for first out and into the night. With his wolf's vision he watched as the big man grabbed the smaller one and they limped off together with only a hasty glance thrown over their shoulders.

The wolf stood in the shadows of the door, well aware of the danger of being seen. The taste of their blood on his tongue left a nasty iron-rich tang, and he shook his head in an attempt to rid himself of it.

He sat and licked at his paw to remove the taste. It wasn't like the other animals he'd tasted. It burned, and he didn't think he'd ever get used to it.

A soft groan from inside the building brought the wolf around, ears pointed forward. He stood and trotted over to his mate stretched out on his back.

Scott sniffed at him, confirming this man was his, then licked at his face, tasting blood again. But this time, the taste was rich, deep, and soothing. He licked at the cuts on his cheek and lips to help them heal in the only way the wolf knew.

Ted's hand came up to brush him away. He growled, and the hand dropped.

"Scott?" his mate asked, eyes still shut.

Scott whined, lay down, and shifted.

Ted opened his eyes and looked up into Scott's blue eyes.

"Hey, you okay?" Scott asked, brushing a strand of Ted's hair off his face. The touch of his fingertips soothed Ted.

"There was a—" he stopped and swallowed. "Wolf. Was that you?"

Scott nodded. "In the fur."

Ted closed his eyes and sighed. "Thanks."

"Who were those goons, and why were they beating you?" Scott helped Ted sit up. He rubbed his hand over Ted's back, soothing and checking it over at the same time.

"Friends of another satisfied client." Ted grimaced and rubbed his cheek.

"If those are the happy ones, I'd hate to see the ones who aren't." Scott stood and pulled Ted to his feet. "Can you make it back to your place, or do I need to call a cab?"

Ted tried a few steps. His vision cleared, but the pounding in his jaw and ache in his side continued. "I'm okay. My head hurts, and I think he cracked a rib or two, but I'll make it."

Scott stared at him. From his look, Scott didn't believe Ted's attempt at bravado. "I think we need a cab. I'm not going to carry you all the way through the French Quarter."

"If you don't think you can manage." Ted grinned, but it pulled at his split lip and it started bleeding again. "Damn." He touched it with his tongue.

Scott stepped toward him and brushed the bead of blood with his thumb, dragging the pad slowly across Ted's lip. Ted reached up and took his wrist, holding his hand in place.

His wolf cupped his hand, and Ted gave in and let Scott cradle his face as he closed his eyes.

Damn. There was something about this man...

"Why are you here?" he asked.

"We can talk about that once we get you home, okay?"

"Sure." Ted let Scott wrap his arm around his waist and lead him from the warehouse. "Wait! My cell phone and my gun. They tossed my phone over there." He pointed.

Scott let him go and trotted over to the phone and snatched it up. "Did you see what they did with the gun?"

"No. But where's the other guy's gun? He had it on me the whole time, at least until you showed up." Ted looked around the floor.

"It went flying when I grabbed him."

"I heard a shot." Ted gazed into Scott's eyes, then down over his body, checking him for wounds.

"High and wide. Asswipe couldn't hit the broad side of a barn." Scott snorted. "I think the shock of seeing a wolf charging him must have upset him."

"You think?" Ted laughed. "It'd scare the shit out of me to see a large, pissed-off wolf coming at me."

"Hey, they had my mate. What was I supposed to do?" Scott didn't smile, but the heated look he shot Ted was like a flaming arrow to his heart.

Ted didn't answer. He couldn't. They'd decided to let this thing between them die.

Scott reached down and held up a gun. "This yours?"

"Yeah. We need to find his. I don't want to leave it lying around for someone else to find."

After a few minutes of searching, Scott tracked it down under a table against the wall. He stuffed it in the back of his jeans, handed Ted his gun back, and together they left the warehouse.

On the corner of Esplanade and the river, they flagged down a cab.

Despite Ted's ragged appearance, the cabbie didn't say a word. Ted gave his address and the two men slumped back in their seats.

Scott didn't touch him, and Ted missed it. Missed that strong arm around his waist, the touch of his hands on Ted's body.

Damn. This wasn't going like he'd hoped. He hoped he'd never see Scott again, never feel these things for another man. Especially a straight man. A straight man who was a werewolf.

This whole situation was fucked, and Ted didn't know what to do.

He glanced at Scott, who stared out the window of the cab. Scott had come for him. He'd saved him, waded into a fight that wasn't his and risked being killed, all for him.

Just like a partner would do.

Partner sounded like they were cops, or a gay couple, but he refused to call him mate. It just didn't feel right to say those words, especially since they both claimed the spell was broken. It sure didn't feel like the spell was kaput, and that scared him, maybe more than he'd been scared tonight with those two henchmen of the judge's.

And what was he going to do about the judge? He'd lost his money. Ted wasn't sure he was going to let the old bastard get away with it, but he wasn't sure going back for another heaping helping of whip ass would be smart.

"We're here." Scott touched Ted's arm.

"Great." Ted's body protested as he got out of the cab. Scott paid the driver while Ted fumbled for his keys in his jeans.

He got the door open, and Scott followed him into the alley.

"I'm in the back." Ted jerked his head as he led the way.

A few minutes later, he locked the door to his apartment and slumped against it. God, his body ached. He turned and locked gazes with Scott.

And like a flash of lightning, Scott was on him, pushing him against the door, burying his face in Ted's neck, wrapping his arms around him, trying to get as close as possible.

Whimpering.

Ted reached up and stroked the back of Scott's head.

"It's okay. I'm okay."

"Oh God. Ted." Scott choked, then swallowed and pulled away. "Sorry. I just had to feel you in my arms. Know you were safe and alive." He stepped back, hands held up. "Sorry."

Ted smiled. Scott smiled back.

There was nothing Ted wanted more than the man in front of him. But a voice inside him said this was a big mistake.

How could a straight man give a gay man *everything* he needs?

Chapter Twenty-seven

Every bone, muscle, and nerve in Scott's body called for his mate. His wolf howled, but he had to ignore it and push it down, deep down inside.

Ted's wounds reminded Scott his mate needed attention.

"Let me help you. Come over here and sit down." Scott pointed to the couch.

Ted nodded and sat. He leaned back, closed his eyes, and exhaled. "The med kit is in the bathroom, under the sink."

Scott found the bathroom, went in, and rooted around. What hadn't Ted put there? It was filled with all sorts of crap, and the med kit was at the bottom of it.

Guess that meant Ted didn't need it often, and that was a good thing. The idea of him being hurt like tonight set Scott's blood on fire. Protectiveness swelled in his wolf, and his growl echoed off the tiled walls of the small bathroom.

He grabbed the kit and went back to Ted, who still sat on the couch with his eyes closed.

Scott opened the kit. *Bandages. Ointment. Swabs. Rubbing alcohol. Cotton balls.*

He held a cotton ball to the open alcohol container and shook it. Then he knelt between Ted's knees, nudging them apart with his body.

Ted moaned, but Scott didn't know if it was from pain or something else. Scott leaned in and dabbed the pad to Ted's cheek, cleaning blood as he went.

Despite a few wincing and hisses, Ted remained silent as Scott worked.

His wolf wanted to lick, wanted to feel Ted's skin and wounds under his tongue, to soothe and heal them.

Scott tossed the bloodied cotton pad away and got a fresh one, to work on Ted's split lip. As he cleaned it, he leaned even closer, inhaling, his wolf rolling in happiness at the scent of this man, close and safe.

He threw away the used pad and then touched Ted's lip with his finger.

"Hurts?" he asked.

"No." Ted's breath puffed over Scott's face, but Scott's gaze stayed on those lips, the ones he longed to kiss.

Ted opened his eyes and sighed.

Scott gave in.

He pressed his mouth to Ted's softly, so not to hurt his mate. As he pulled away, Ted grabbed the back of Scott's neck and pulled him back down.

Ted opened for Scott, and he sank into the warmth and taste of his mate. Ted massaged his neck, his tongue licking at Scott's mouth, his teeth and lips.

Scott moved closer and grabbed Ted's hips to pull them to him. Ted spread his legs wide, accepting Scott's body, and groaned.

God, it was so good to taste his man. Just the act of kissing got Scott hard, and he knew he'd have to use all his strength to keep from fucking Ted right here and now.

His wolf howled, dancing in circles.

Scott rubbed his cock against Ted's, and his excitement grew with each buck of Ted's body toward his.

He ran his hand over Ted's belly, testing the bruised body of his lover. Hurting Ted wasn't what he wanted to do, not after almost losing him.

Ted's head fell back, leaving the column of his throat exposed. Scott licked up it, loving the way Ted's sweat tasted.

"Scott, what are we doing?" Ted whispered. "The damn spell was supposed to be broken. This isn't supposed to be happening."

"You're my mate. Fuck the spell. My mother is a crazy old woman. We can't fight this, babe. I can't fight it. You're mine, end of story." Scott growled just to make his point, then nipped Ted's earlobe.

Ted arched into him, grinding his cock into Scott. "I can't do this, Scott. I can't fall in love with another straight man. You don't understand."

"I don't have to. All I know is my wolf wants you, and I want you."

"Sure, for this." Ted pushed Scott away, far enough to look him in the eyes. "But what about love? What about a loving relationship, a life together?"

Scott exhaled. "What about it?"

"I want more than just hot sex."

"Incredibly hot sex." Scott raised an eyebrow at him.

"Right. I need *more*."

"More? Like a man who'd be willing to fight his entire pack for the right to keep you? A man who'd track you down and come to your rescue when you're in danger? A man who'd spend his life looking at you like this?" Scott stared at Ted, trying to put all his desire into the gaze.

"A man who'd love me?" Ted whispered.

Scott didn't have an answer for that one, or at least he couldn't form the words. Not now. Maybe not ever. How could he love Ted? Desire him, claim him, lust for him, but love him? Not even Scott knew whether this was love or the werewolf's desire for his mate.

Scott rested his head against Ted. "I don't know what to say." At least he could be honest. "I don't know if this is love. I've never been in love before, babe."

"Well, I have, and for me, this comes too damn close to it." Ted pushed Scott away and stood. "I think you'd better leave."

"Leave?" Scott frowned.

"Before I get hurt."

"Oh." Scott bit his lip. "I can't leave you. I have to bring you back with me. To St. Jerome. To the pack."

"Uh-uh. No fucking way. I'm *not* your mate. I *won't* be your mate. I won't tie you to me or myself to you. I can't live that life, Scott. I won't." Ted's eyes watered, and Scott knew the man was on the verge of breaking down.

Ted stalked to the door, but Scott jumped up and crossed the room in two strides. He slammed his hand on the door, keeping Ted from opening it.

"Listen to me. You *are* my mate. I know you can feel it. I know you know it. I need you, Ted, and you need me."

"No, I don't." Ted shook his head. "Get out."

"I'm not going anywhere but to that bedroom in there." He pointed to the door he figured was it. "With you."

"What?" Ted couldn't believe it. "I just told you how I felt."

"I'm claiming my mate tonight, Ted."

Ted's mouth dropped open. That was a mistake. Scott swooped down on him, plastering their mouths together, dominating the kiss with his lips and tongue, Ted's body with his hands.

Ted's knees wavered, and he couldn't help burying his hands in Scott's shirt to hold on for dear life. No one had ever kissed him like this, and fuck if he wasn't a sucker for a kiss. His cock stiffened painfully in his already tight jeans.

God, he wanted Scott. He'd felt it the first time he'd seen him in the restaurant. He'd known it would come to this. Letting Scott take him.

Scott didn't wait for an answer, but swept Ted up in his arms and carried him to the bedroom. Damn the man was strong, but that was probably the wolf.

He was beginning to really like the wolf.

No, he had to stop thinking like that. And he would, as soon as Scott let him go.

Scott tossed him on the bed and began stripping off his clothes.

"You want me to undress you, or do you want to do it yourself? Either way, you're getting naked." Scott growled.

Ted laughed. "You really are an alpha, aren't you?"

"Damn straight. And I want my alpha mate." Scott's gaze pinned Ted to the bed, unable to move. Well, mostly unwilling to move.

And at that moment, Ted knew he wanted his mate. His heart and soul cried out for Scott, despite knowing Scott would never love him. He was damned, that was all there was to it.

Scott's shirt dropped to the floor, and Ted's mouth went dry.

"Fuck." Ted licked his lips, his tongue touching the split and tasting blood. It must have come open while Scott kissed him.

To describe Scott as ripped didn't do him justice. He was the finest man Ted had ever seen with his own eyes, and that was saying a lot. If Scott's legs and ass were as fine, what the hell did love matter?

Which was a totally shallow and debased thought, but Ted couldn't stop thinking it.

Not with Scott standing there, the long outline of his cock bulging in his jeans, with the blond trail of hair leading to it. His furred chest was a man's chest, not like the twink Ted usually fucked. Everything about Scott turned Ted on, no doubt about that.

It was futile to resist. Scott was going to fuck him, or claim him, and Ted wasn't going to do a damn thing to stop him.

Ted worked open the buttons on his shirt.

Scott never let his gaze stray from his mate. Even as he toed off his boots, unzipped his jeans, shoved them down with his briefs, and stepped out of them.

Naked, he stood not in front of another man, but in front of his mate. The one person in the world meant for him. And that turned him on like nothing else had ever done.

His cock rose and touched his belly, leaving drops of precum on his skin. He took his dick in hand and stroked it as Ted watched, hands frozen on the buttons of his shirt.

"You're moving too slow, babe." Scott climbed onto the bed next to Ted and pulled off his shoes and socks. Then he took over, working free the button on Ted's jeans.

When he stripped them from Ted, it was all Scott could do to keep from falling on him and feasting. Ted's body wasn't slight; he had muscles where a man should have them, well-developed arms, thick thighs, and a well-defined stomach. Ted wasn't one of those twink Scott had seen at the bar.

Ted was all man.

Ho-ly shit. He was going to fuck a man.

And that should have freaked him out, but it didn't. His wolf howled in gratitude at the chance to finally claim his mate.

"I never get fucked, Scott. Never." Ted tried to explain.

"Never? Not even once?" Scott grinned at him.

"Not anymore." Ted swallowed.

"Well, I've definitely never been fucked, and I think this would work better if I went first. Besides, I have to claim you."

"But at some point, will I get to claim you?" Ted asked. For a man like Scott, even if he was a werewolf, being taken by another man had a very different connotation. One that went with the music from *Deliverance*.

Scott leaned over Ted, licking his lips. "I can't tell you yes, babe. I just don't know. But I do know, it didn't freak me out when you asked. That's gotta be worth something, right?" Scott's brows furrowed.

For now, that's probably the best Ted could hope for, although a slim hope. Perhaps in time, Scott would want Ted like Ted wanted him.

"Now, how do I do this and not hurt you?" Scott sat on his knees and ran his fingers over Ted's belly. He ended by grabbing Ted's stiff cock and stroking it.

Ted arched up into the touch. "Oh God, just like that." He pulled on his balls to keep from shooting, it was so fucking hot to see Scott doing that to him.

"I've never touched another man like this, Ted." The waver in Scott's voice reminded Ted that he wasn't the only one having a "first."

"Do you like it?"

"Fuck, yeah. I'm touching your dick, and that's so hot. It shouldn't be, but damn it's making me so hard." Scott's chest rose and fell with each breath he took, and his blue eyes darkened with arousal.

"It feels good. You're doing it just right." Ted groaned. *Perfection*. "In my drawer, there's lube and some condoms."

"Condoms?" Scott frowned. "I don't want to use a condom."

"We should, until we've been tested. Look, I've been pretty sexually active, but always safe. Still, it's best to be really sure." Ted's face burned as he admitted his past to Scott.

"Like those twinkies in the bar?" Scott worked Ted's cock a little faster and harder. Ted pumped into his grip.

"Yeah."

"What did you do to them? Fuck them?" Scott relentlessly stroked him, and he added rubbing his thumb over the slit to tease it.

"Shit." Ted swallowed. "I fucked a few. Mostly let them suck me off."

"Like you sucked me?" Scott's voice deepened.

"Yeah. Did you like it?" Ted asked.

"Fuck yeah. Best blowjob ever." Scott reached down and fondled Ted's balls, rolling them around in his sac.

It was so good, being touched by Scott. Being fucked by him would probably blow his mind and short-circuit his brain.

Scott leaned over and opened the drawer. He tossed a condom and the lube on the bed. "I got the condom part, but how does the lube work? I put it on the condom?"

"Man, you *really* haven't had gay sex before, have you?" Ted chuckled.

"I told you. Straight as an arrow."

"And you're sure about doing this?" Ted worried about the regrets Scott would have later, then shoved them away.

"Yeah. Can't seem to stop myself. Don't want to stop myself. Babe, wanna fuck you so bad my dick hurts." Scott ripped open the condom and rolled it on.

Ted took the lube, popped the top, and squirted some on his fingers, then pulled his balls to the side. His slick-covered fingers found that tight pucker, and he pushed inside.

He hissed. "Been a while for me."

"Will it hurt?" Scott seemed genuinely worried.

"At first. Then, if we do this right, I'm going to fucking fly."

"Do it right?"

"Yeah," Ted gasped as he worked his fingers deeper. He scraped over his gland and arched into the pleasure. "Right there, baby, that's the target—my prostate. Hit that with your big dick, and I'll go into orbit. Promise."

Scott's eyebrows shot up. "No shit."

"No shit."

"I did not know that."

"Well, now you do, and you'll have to remember it if you want to keep me happy, wolf." Ted smirked as he added more lube.

"Wolf?" Scott shuddered. "Fucking love hearing you say that." He rubbed some lube on the condom. "Like this?"

"Yeah."

"Ready, 'cuz babe, I need inside you now." Scott groaned and bit his lip, looking wild-eyed and desperate.

"Now." Ted removed his fingers, and Scott crawled forward on his knees, positioning his cock at Ted's entrance.

"God, I need you, babe." Scott pushed the flared head in, and Ted bucked into it, wrapping his legs around Scott's waist. Scott's prick slipped inside, and Ted grimaced.

"Damn you're big." Ted gasped as Scott moved deeper.

"I'll go slow."

"I'll let you know when you can fuck me hard, wolf."

Scott shuddered every time Ted called him that. His wolf howled with pleasure. The pressure surrounding his cock wasn't like being in a pussy. That was tight, but this was tighter than any handjob he'd ever given himself. And hot. Fuck, even through the condom he could feel the heat of Ted's body taking him in.

And that just turned him on. Fuck. It shouldn't. God knew it shouldn't, but it did.

He closed his eyes and pushed in, this time sliding until his body met Ted's.

"You're in, wolf."

"Oh fuck. Ho-ly shit."

"Now, open your eyes and fuck me." Ted slapped Scott's ass, then kneaded the firm round globe.

Scott opened his eyes, found Ted's, and let his wolf run free to mate.

Chapter Twenty-eight

As Scott pounded into him, Ted slid up on the bed. He reached up and held on to Scott's shoulders, fingers digging into flesh, their chests rubbing, bellies trapping Ted's cock between them.

On the bottom, with Scott over him, dominating him, he remembered all the reasons why he never bottomed. It meant giving into the need he kept buried to be mastered. Not in a slave way; more submissive. It meant letting himself be vulnerable, taking what someone like Scott gave him, pleasure and pain, and the emotions that went along with being penetrated. With having your body let someone in, perhaps deep enough to touch your heart and soul.

And that's just what Scott did as he worked hard to pleasure Ted. He mastered Ted. He opened Ted's heart and soul to something terrifying.

Something Ted needed more than anything else in the world. He needed love. To be loved and to love in return.

And how could he have that with Scott? The man couldn't even say it, much less promise it in time.

Ted looked up into Scott's face, into his eyes as he gazed down at Ted in sheer and utter amazement.

Scott tilted his groin and angled in, raking his cock across Ted's gland.

"Oh God!" Ted cried out, clutching tighter to his lover.

"Is that it? I can feel it. Shit. I know where it is now." Scott grinned, looking as if he'd just won a prize.

Ted nearly came as Scott hit the spot again on his next thrust.

"Gonna make me come," Ted warned.

"Shit. Without touching you? Just fucking?" Scott's amazement and interest in what happened between them, sexually, endeared him to Ted even more, if that was possible.

Ted nodded. "Getting lots of friction on my dick. And you fucking me. And hitting my sweet spot. Shit. It's all good."

"So good." Scott gasped. He supported his body on his arms and looked down into Ted's face. "I can't believe how good this feels. Being inside you. You're so tight and hot. Like a vise on my dick." He shuddered.

"You should try getting fucked. It's good too." Ted grinned.

Instead of recoiling at the idea, Scott growled. Ted was learning to interpret the man's sounds, and this growl sounded hungry and horny.

Damn wolf.

Ted could deal with the physical. Right now, it was all about Scott fucking him. Claiming him, as Scott called it. He could understand that, sex for sex's sake.

But then, Scott did something that took it to another level and left Ted not knowing what to do or how to feel.

Scott sat back on his knees and pulled Ted up onto his lap. Wrapping his strong arms around Ted for support, Scott pulled him so close their bodies touched from belly to chest.

Ted wrapped himself around Scott and hung on as Scott slowed down, moving his cock in and out of Ted's channel only a little at a time. Ted's cock, trapped between their bellies, got its own rubdown.

In this position, Ted sat higher than Scott. Scott buried his head in Ted's neck and nuzzled his throat. Ted let his head fall to the side to give him more access.

This was a more intimate position than before. Everything felt more intense, more important, more emotional.

If that weren't enough, Scott licked his neck, from the hollow near his collarbone to the underneath of his jaw.

Scott's tongue felt rough, and his teeth much sharper than before.

"Uh, Scott, are you changing or something?"

"Just a little." Scott licked over his chin, then nipped him, raking sharp incisors across his flesh. Ted shuddered.

"There isn't going to be fur, is there?"

"No, no fur." Scott growled low in his throat. Where their bodies touched, the sound reverberated in Ted's chest.

Scott licked Ted's cheek, over the scrape he'd gotten from the big goon's punch. Oddly, it soothed him, and he closed his eyes. The touch was so tender, so filled with caring, and, if Ted didn't know better, with love, that he could only shiver.

As his wolf's tongue bathed his face, his split lip, his scraped chin, Ted felt the last of his resolve fall away.

"Can't lose you." Scott nuzzled into Ted's neck again, and Ted clung to his wolf.

Dampness spread on Ted's throat, and Scott's shoulders gave a single shudder.

"Hey, wolf. You okay?" Ted leaned back and pulled Scott away from him, his hands on either side of Scott's face.

Tears tracked down Scott's cheeks.

"It's just so..." Scott swallowed and blinked. "So fucking powerful. This feeling. Inside me. Inside you. Oh shit." He gasped.

Ted didn't think; he just did.

He leaned in and licked the salty tears from Scott's face, shushing him, kissing his eyes, licking him, working down to his neck.

Scott leaned back and let Ted have access to his throat. Let Ted mark him, sucking hard on the skin where Scott's shoulder and neck met, bringing up a mark of ownership.

"My wolf."

Scott shuddered in Ted's arms. Then he fell on Ted, taking his mouth in a hard kiss, his cock pistoning in and out, hitting Ted's gland, making Ted cry out.

His wolf was back and needing.

He needed Ted to come.

"I'm coming, wolf. Can you feel me?"

"Oh God, yes. I feel it. Oh fuck," Scott cried out. "So goddamned good."

Ted jetted, cum spurting between their bodies, and all he could do was groan with the intensity and pure pleasure of his release.

Scott thrust two more times, then threw his head back and howled. Literally, howled as he came.

He collapsed on Ted, rolled to the side, and pulled Ted close to spoon against his chest.

"Ho-ly shit." Scott exhaled as he got rid of the condom, tossing it on the floor, then snuggled back against Ted, and within moments was asleep.

Ted was so fucked. He'd fallen in love with a straight man who was a werewolf. A gay werewolf, but still.

F.U.C.K.E.D.

* * *

During the night, Scott took him again. Ted had no idea what time it was, or how much time had passed since they'd first mated. Ted had come to think of what they'd done as mating.

Ted, lying on his belly, woke to the touch of Scott's slicked fingers pressing against his hole, seeking a way in.

He groaned as Scott's fingers breached him, spreading the lube deep enough to ease his cock's entry.

Ted, shameless in his own need, canted his rump upward to receive Scott's dick in his ass.

Scott held him by the hips, strong hands keeping him from moving, covering him with his larger body, weighing him down, pressing him into the mattress.

It surprised Ted. He hadn't expected Scott to do this again. He'd thought the first time would be the end of Scott's desire for him. Ted fully expected there to be an awkward morning after and a hurried good-bye. Claimed and done.

He didn't expect the hunger burning in Scott's blue eyes, or the fever of his skin next to Ted's, or the tenderness of his kisses.

Fuck, Scott could kiss. And he had no idea what it did to Ted to be kissed like Scott kissed him. Hard and punishing or tender and sweet; no matter which way, Ted could feel Scott's desire for him. And more. There was more mixed in there, but Ted was too unsure to name it or to hope for it to be the love he wanted.

Still, Scott had made love to him, their fingers entwined and pressing into the mattress, their bodies moving slowly to a primal rhythm, all soft grunts and groans, sweat-slicked skin, and precum-slicked cocks.

When finally Scott bit Ted on the shoulder, it undid Ted and he came, spilling over the sheets, his dick untouched. Scott held on, sharp teeth embedded in Ted's shoulder, as he shot his load, warming Ted's chute.

Again, Scott rolled over and pulled Ted to him, refusing to let him go, even to the other side of the bed.

Ted sighed. Scott hadn't used a condom.

* * *

Ted woke in the morning with a hot, sweaty man adhered to his back. He pulled away and rolled over.

Scott opened his eyes. "Hi." Smiled. Okay, he hadn't expected that.

"Clingy much?" Ted asked, cocking an eyebrow.

Scott shrugged. "I guess I am. Never did it with anyone else. Cling, I mean. I've fucked before."

"Obviously. My ass is feeling it too."

"Christ, I'm sorry I hurt you." The frown on Scott's face made Ted laugh.

"Only in a 'hurts so good' way, wolf." Ted rolled onto his back.

Scott rose up, leaned over, and kissed him. "Delicious. I love the way you taste, babe." His fingers teased at Ted's nipple until it pointed and ached. Looked like the wolf was hungry again.

What had Ted gotten himself into?

He stared up at the ceiling. "You didn't use a condom last night."

Scott sighed. "I know. Forgot about it. Look, werewolves, we're not quite like normal people."

"Ya think?" Ted cocked an eyebrow at him.

"Aside from being able to shift into wolf form. We're stronger, faster, can see and hear better, smell better..."

"As evidenced by your tracking me down last night," Ted interrupted.

"And we don't get sick. We don't contract human diseases. So, no STDs or HIV. I know you might not believe me, but we just don't catch stuff."

"Not even colds?" Ted asked.

"Nope." Scott shook his head. "So, the condom thing. Did it freak you out? You should have said something. I could have stopped and put one on."

Ted sighed. He'd only realized it after Scott had come. It was just as much his fault as Scott's. "No. It's fine. I'm cool with it."

"Good, because I got to tell you, it's so much better fucking you without one. Damn you're hot. Inside, I mean. It burns my dick up, like it's superheated and supersensitized." Scott shuddered and looked down at his growing hard-on.

"See? Just talking about fucking you..." He growled and reached for Ted.

"Again? Seriously?" Ted laughed.

"Yeah, but this time, I want to try something different." Scott gave him a sly smile and pushed him onto his back.

Scott licked him again, dragging his tongue over Ted's chest to his nipple. He lapped at it like an animal seeking to clean or sooth another animal. The pull of arousal ran from his tormented nipple to his now aching cock.

"This licking thing?" Ted asked. "Is that the wolf or you?"

"Both. I can't seem to help it, not where you're concerned. Does it bother you? I won't do it if it does." Scott's brow furrowed.

"It's fine. Sexy, even. Lick away."

"Good, because I figured you'd like getting your dick licked." Scott laid his tongue along the base of Ted's cock and lapped at it.

It was Ted's turn to howl as he arched off the bed.

"Not bad. Your taste is really intense." Scott smacked his lips. "Need more." He nuzzled against Ted's balls, sniffing and rooting around with his nose.

Ted had never had a lover who'd enjoyed his body like Scott did. The man was enthusiastic and open in showing his excitement.

Scott licked up the underside of Ted's now fully erect cock, tracing the vein, then tickling the thick wad of nerves under the flared head with the tip of his tongue.

"God, I hope this is going to lead to you sucking me."

Scott bit his bottom lip and gazed up at Ted. "I've never done this before." His voice wavered.

Ted held his cock up toward Scott's face. "Suck me, wolf. Make your mate come."

Scott rolled his eyes, growled, and swallowed the head of Ted's cock. Ted cried out as a raspy tongue played against his flesh as Scott sucked the head.

"Shit." Ted flung his head back and closed his eyes. Was it just Scott, or was this the hottest blowjob ever?

Scott rode him, taking his shaft down deeper with each bob of his head, then he pulled off hard with a *smack* and a *pop*.

"Damn! I can taste your precum. It's good. Not like mine at all."

“You’ve tasted your own cum?” Ted gaped at Scott.

“Sure. Thought everyone did, at least to see what it was like.” Scott shrugged.

“Oh, wolf, you surprise me.” Ted laughed.

Scott wiggled his eyebrows and surprised Ted with a valiant attempt at deep throating him. Ted surprised Scott when he came, shooting into Scott’s mouth.

Scott choked, then swallowed, then pulled off. “Ho-ly shit! I can’t believe I just did that!” He sounded exhilarated, not grossed out.

“Did you like the way I tasted?” Ted asked between gulping for air. At the pace he set, this wolf was going to wear his ass out.

“Yeah.” Scott licked his lips and gave a joyful *smack*. “Salty. I want more. Is that normal?”

“Yeah, for lovers.” Ted tensed. He hadn’t meant to use any form of the *L* word.

“And for mates, too, it seems.” Scott smiled and fell back against the pillows.

“You’re not falling asleep again, are you?” Ted grouched.

“No. I didn’t come.” He grinned down at his erection.

“I suppose you want me to take care of that for you.”

“It would be nice.”

“Nice?”

“Really, really nice.” Scott leered at him.

So Ted took care of his wolf, until he howled as he spurted down Ted’s throat.

Chapter Twenty-nine

"So how long will it take you to pack up your things?" Scott asked as he dressed.

Ted stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you're going to come back to St. Jerome with me, aren't you? That's why I came, to bring you back."

"I can't just pack up and go, Scott." Ted jerked open a drawer and pulled on a T-shirt. "I have a life here."

"You're a PI. You can be a PI anywhere."

"Right. In St. Jerome? Exactly *who* is going to hire me in that hick town of yours?" Scott had lost his mind.

Scott bristled. "Well, I don't know. You could be a deputy, do law enforcement again."

"Under you? No fucking way." Ted tugged on his jeans. "Besides, I swore off being a cop three years ago. You haven't thought this out very well, have you?"

"I came to claim my mate and bring him home; that's about as far as I got. Ted, my life is there. My career as sheriff. I'm alpha of my pack. I have responsibilities."

"And I don't have a life?" Ted barked. The wolf had some nerve.

"Don't you want to be with me?" Scott face fell, pain evident around his eyes.

"Yeah, I do. But I'm not sure how." Ted ran his hands through his hair.

"I told my deputies I'd be gone for a few days. My pack expects me back. You and I have to be together, not in two different cities. It'll kill us both," Scott blurted out.

"Whoa! What are you talking about, kill us both?"

"I needed to claim my mate. My pheromones were going off the chart, and it was driving everyone in the pack insane, including me. If I didn't claim you, I'd sicken and die. Same goes for you."

"You're shitting me."

"Have you been feeling dizzy since you came home? Out of sorts. Weak?"

"Yeah, but I thought it was the beginning of the flu." Ted rubbed his chest.

"No, it's the beginning of the sickness. I felt it too. So it comes down to either leave the pack or claim you and bring you before them for a vote."

"Wait. A vote? Leave the pack? What kind of stupid rules are those?" Damn, he needed a fucking rule book for wolves. Where the hell could he get one of those? Maybe they handed them out at the pack meetings.

"Pack law. The alpha of the pack gives permission for each member to take his mate. In return, the entire pack must agree to the alpha's mate. If I bring you, there's a good chance the pack will reject you."

Ted sat on the couch. "No shit. And if that happens?"

"I can accept exile, abandon you, or fight for you." Scott sat on the coffee table opposite Ted and clasped Ted's hands between his.

"Exile. That sounds bad."

"It is. I'd have no protected territory. No place to change and run. No pack to set rules to live by. For a wolf, a pack animal, it's torture. Lots of wolves go rogue and have to be eliminated."

That option didn't sound good to Ted, especially the eliminated part.

"This fight? What if you lose? You get kicked out?"

"If I survive." Scott shrugged.

"What?" Ted groaned. Didn't any of these options *not* suck?

"It would be for my position as alpha, and my right to keep my mate. My wolf will defend that to the death."

"Who would you have to fight?"

"Well, right now, a guy named Wyatt wants my spot. Probably him."

"Can you take him?" Ted searched Scott's eyes for the truth.

"Maybe. He's a big wolf."

"Are you bigger?"

"No. But it's not size that matters with alphas, it's attitude, skill, and strength."

"So he *could* kill you."

Scott looked away, refused to meet Ted's gaze.

"Then you have to abandon me." Ted shook his head. "Don't be crazy about this, Scott. Your pack isn't going to accept me. I'm gay. They're going to freak at the idea of you having a gay man as a mate. They're going to hate me for doing this to you, for turning you gay."

Scott stood and paced. "I can't leave you. My wolf *won't* let you go. *I* won't let you go. I'll fight for you, Ted. I told you that last night. I'd fight to the death for you." Everything about the way Scott held his body told Ted he was telling the truth.

"Why?" Ted didn't understand it. He didn't get the whole werewolf pack thing. It baffled him and pissed him off.

"You are my mate." Scott jerked his chin up.

Okay, along with strong and fast as werewolf characteristics, he could add stubborn. Ted wasn't going to convince Scott to give him up. There had to be another way out of this mess.

"And if you do fight, and you die, what happens to me?" Ted asked.

"Nothing. I'm dead. Whatever bond between us will be broken. You'll be free." Scott turned to face Ted, and their gazes locked.

Ted walked up to Scott, wrapped his arms around his waist, and laid his head on Scott's shoulder. "Leave me now. Don't do this. I'll take the chance about getting sick."

Scott buried his hand in Ted's hair. "No. I'm *alpha*. I make the decisions. I'm bringing you back for the pack vote. You're mine." He took Ted's mouth in a hard kiss.

"Fuck that alpha shit, Scott." Ted pushed him away.

"It's who I am." Scott shrugged. "It's why you love me." He gave Ted a sexy smile and a devilish wink.

"Love you?" Ted sputtered. "Who the hell said anything about love?"

Scott grabbed Ted's shirt and hauled him against his body. He ran his nose over Ted's neck, inhaling. "I can smell it on you. Every time you come near me. When we're talking, right now, when we're fucking. I can smell the way your body reacts to me."

"That's not love, that's lust. That's a hard-on for a hot guy," Ted declared, but damn if Scott didn't speak the truth.

Scott licked him, dragging his tongue over Ted's neck, over the line of his jaw and across his cheek. "You love me."

Ted swallowed. "Do you love me?"

"You're my mate."

"That's not an answer, Scott." Ted broke Scott's hold on him.

"That's the best I can do right now." Scott looked truly sorry. "It'll have to do."

Ted stared at his mate, his wolf. "Yeah, it'll have to do." He was so fucked. This wasn't going to end well. The best he could hope for was what? Scott dead and he'd be free? Or Scott and him on the run, as a rogue wolf? Both of them dying, alone and apart?

"So how long to pack?" Scott looked around the apartment.

"I'll go with you, but I'm not packing anything. Let's see how the vote goes. If you wind up dead, I don't want to lose this apartment." Ted gave Scott a cocky grin.

"Sure, I understand. This is prime French Quarter real estate. Bet there's a waiting list and everything."

"Damn straight, wolf."

They grinned at each other.

"So how soon can we leave?"

"Well, I have a little business to take care of first." Ted had decided to face down Charbonnet and ask for his money back. He'd need at least the day to do that. Maybe more if he got his ass kicked again.

"A little payback for last night?" Scott cocked an eyebrow.

"Yeah. Those goons stole the check for the work I did, and I want it back." Ted slipped into his loafers, slung on his shoulder holster, and covered it with his jacket.

"Great. Let's go." Scott tugged on his boots.

"Uh-uh. You're not going."

"Oh, yes I am. I've got your back. You need me, like you needed me last night. I'm not going to let you walk into wherever and get another beat down." Scott curled his hands into fists, and Ted knew arguing with his alpha wolf would be pointless.

"Okay. Let's pay Judge Charbonnet a visit and see if I can get my money back." Ted snatched his keys off the table, and they headed for the door.

* * *

Ted stood on the same doorstep as he had last night, only this time, he had backup. On the way there, he'd filled Scott in on what had gone down the night before.

Before the door opened, Ted slipped his gun out of his holster. The goon stood there, shocked as hell to see Ted.

More shocked to see the gun pointed at his belly.

"Tell the judge I'm here." Ted used Scott to shield his gun from view of the street. "Now."

The goon backpedaled, and the two men stepped inside.

"Nice place." Scott looked around, then froze. He inhaled. "Shit."

"What is it?" Ted cast a glance at Scott.

Scott moved closer to whisper, "Another werewolf."

"I thought as much." Ted nodded. "It's Charbonnet. What can you tell about him?"

Scott stepped farther down the hall. "He's older. Powerful. Definitely alpha."

"Is he the only one?" Ted needed to know if they were in over their heads. "Do I need silver bullets? An AK-47? A bazooka?"

"No, that's a myth. Real bullets work just fine." Scott sniffed again and took another step down the carpeted corridor. "No, just one. In there." He pointed to the room where Ted had met the judge before.

"Right." He motioned with the gun. "Out of my way."

The goon held up his hands in surrender and moved aside.

Ted went to the door, knocked, and then opened it and stepped inside.

The judge looked up, frowned, then bolted to his feet as Scott came through the door and closed it behind him.

“What the hell is this?” Charbonnet’s gaze danced between Ted and Scott, but landed on Scott. “Who are you?”

“This is a friend of mine. You don’t need to know his name. He knows all about you, Judge.” Ted grinned.

Low growling from both weres filled the room, and the hair on the back of Ted’s neck and his arms stood on end. A lot of fucking power shot around the library.

“Now, before everyone goes all wolf crazy and furry, we need to talk.”

“What about? I paid you last night. You told me Kirsten didn’t meet anyone. I believe you.” The judge kept a wary gaze on Scott.

“Oh, so I suppose you didn’t order your goon out there to meet me down the block with his friend, take me to the wharf, beat the shit out of me and steal that check?” Ted sat in the chair in front of the desk, and Scott moved to stand behind him.

“What? He took the check?” The judge looked puzzled. “I’ll admit my instincts told me you suspected something. I wanted you scared off. They were only supposed to rough you up a bit, nothing serious. But I never told them to take the money.”

“Maybe you should have a talk with your minions,” Ted suggested. “It’s so hard to find good help these days.” He pulled out the goon’s gun and laid it on the judge’s desk.

The judge glared at the door. “I’ll take care of it.” He sat and pulled out a checkbook. “In the meantime, I’ll write you another.”

Wow, Ted didn’t expect that. At all.

Charbonnet tore it off and handed it to Ted. “It doesn’t look as if you were hurt too badly.” He sounded sincere.

“No, I had help.” Ted glanced up at Scott, towering over him.

“I can see that.” The judge frowned as his gaze darted between them. “You’re mated?” It seemed he’d decided not to play stupid about being a werewolf. “I didn’t know there were other weres in town.”

“I’m not from here.” Scott grinned, but didn’t reveal anything.

“Yeah. We’re mates.” Ted stood. “Just like you and Kirsten.”

“So that’s why you didn’t believe my wife cheated.”

“Right. But I can’t figure out why you did.”

The judge slumped down in his chair and all his attitude and confidence fell away. “Like you said, she’s beautiful and young. I’m old and...the truth is I haven’t been able to...well, Kirsten isn’t pregnant.” He waved his hand in the air. “I’m worried she’ll want a baby more than she wants me.”

Scott snorted. “A mated pair are bound to each other, no matter what. No one divorces, leaves, or cheats. It’s one of the perks.”

The judge sighed. "I know. I know. But"—he glanced away then back at them—"I'm fifty. What if I can't give her a child?"

"Look, be thankful you have a mate who adores you. Lucky son of a bitch." Ted tapped his check on the arm of the chair. "This time, I'm leaving, and I hope there won't be any problems."

Charbonnet stood, pulling himself together. "Not for you." Intent burned in his eyes, and Ted didn't want to think of what might go down once they left. "By the way, Kirsten spoke highly of your artwork."

"She did?" It shocked Ted that Kirsten had even mentioned him.

"Perhaps you should quit your day job," the judge suggested. "Sounds like you have a lot of wasted talent."

"Thanks, but I think I'll keep my day job." Ted waved the check. "The money's good."

"Good day, gentlemen." The judge nodded, dismissing them.

"Good day, Judge." Ted stood, and with Scott following, they left the office.

Ted searched the street. It was almost ten in the morning, and people traveled up and down the sidewalks.

"All clear." They headed back to his apartment.

"Did you know he was a were when you took the job?" Scott asked as they strolled.

"No. But I got the strangest vibe from him. It's like I knew something was different about him but couldn't put my finger on it."

Scott grunted. "Once you've been around us for a while, you'll be able to tell who is pack and who isn't."

"That's presuming we survive the vote." Ted slapped his wolf on the shoulder.

Scott growled, and all Ted could do was laugh.

Chapter Thirty

Scott drove down the road from the highway to his house.

"I've seen this before, you know." Ted pointed at the trees on the side of the road. "In my dreams."

"Dreams?"

"The ones your mother sent me, the ones I've been having of you for the last four months. I never saw your face, just your arms. Strong arms, blond hair. That's all I knew."

"So I could have been anyone, huh?" Scott chuckled.

"Yeah. I thought my mystery man could have been my art instructor, he was blond and tanned. Quite handsome."

Scott growled. "That Darcy guy? Did you...you know, with him?"

"No. Might have, if I hadn't seen you in the restaurant."

"Good." Scott smiled.

"There was a young man too. Peter. Blond and so fucking cute. I thought it could have been him."

"Is that the guy I smelled on you?" Scott's face darkened, and his hands clenched the steering wheel.

"Yeah. He tried to—well, you know, it didn't happen."

"Once you find your mate, that's it. No one else will do." Scott winked at him, then sobered. "Did you want him?"

Ted leaned back in the seat. "I wanted to want him. I didn't want to be controlled by whatever was or wasn't happening between you and me. I let him suck me just to prove I could, but in the end, I couldn't fight it. I pushed him off and told him to forget it."

"Sorry. Sort of." Scott shrugged. "From what I learned about you from that bartender, you seem to have a lot of casual sex."

"Yeah, I did. Is that a problem? You didn't expect me to be a virgin, did you?" Ted laughed.

"Maybe, had you been a woman." Scott exhaled. "Those thoughts went out the door when I realized my wolf wanted a gay man."

"Well, at least one of us is a virgin." Ted gave him a saucy wink. "Your ass is still virginal."

"And it's going to stay that way."

It was Ted's turn to growl. "Oh, really?"

"Give me time, babe. I've had to put a lot of learned behavior aside. I'm straight, and I've never done anything like what I've done with you, Ted." He frowned.

"Does that bother you? What we've done? The sex?"

"Yeah. It does. It bothers me that I love it so much. That I can't stop thinking about fucking and sucking you. I'm not supposed to want that, not with another man." Scott swallowed and stared out the front window of the truck. "We're home." The truck came to a stop.

Ted looked out at the house in his dreams. The stairs up to the front door of the raised house were exactly as he remembered them.

"And I swore I'd never fall for a straight man again, and here you are, and here I am, and I feel as if I have no control over my life anymore." Ted punched the dashboard. "It's frustrating, Scott. I don't like this situation. Every fiber in my body wants you, and my mind just keeps telling me to run for it."

"Come on up. Let's relax for a bit. I have some phone calls to make." Scott got out of the truck and waited as Ted got out and shut his door.

Ted followed Scott up the stairs and inside.

"It's just like I dreamed." Ted stared as he turned in a circle. "Your bedroom, right?" He pointed to a door.

"Right."

Scott walked over to the couch and sat. "Help yourself to anything in the kitchen. I need to make those calls."

Ted nodded and headed to the refrigerator for something cold to drink. Right now, he was praying for a beer.

Scott pulled out his cell phone. First call to Billy Trosclair and check on the men and the job.

"Billy?"

"Hey, sheriff. How's it going?"

"I'm back in town. At home. How are the men?"

"It's weird. After you left, everything settled down. It's been life as usual, sir. No events, no fights."

"Good to know." Scott exhaled. It had been him all along causing the craziness, and it just proved without him there, the pack had been better off.

"Are you coming in today?" Billy asked.

"No. But there's going to be a pack meeting tonight. I'm getting ready to call for it now."

"Yes, sir. I'll be there." Billy rang off, and Scott leaned back on the couch as Ted joined him, handing him a beer.

"One of your deputies?" Ted asked.

"Yeah. Good kid. Levelheaded as hell. Even when all this was going on, he kept his cool."

"Who's next?"

"I need to call a pack meeting." He punched a few buttons on the cell and put it to his ear. "This is Sheriff Scott Dupree. There will be an emergency meeting of the Rougaroux Social Club tonight at eight. I'm bringing my mate before the pack for a vote tonight. All available members and their mates should attend." He snapped it closed. "Well, that's that." Scott took a long gulp of his beer.

"Great. Can't wait." Ted rolled his eyes.

Scott's phone rang, and both men jumped. Scott glanced at the cell and groaned. "My mom."

"Yeah, mom. It's true." He wanted to make this as brief as possible.

"Is it Ted?" she asked. He could hear her smoking.

"It's Ted. He's here with me now. We're going to ask the pack to accept him."

"You weren't going to call me first before you let the whole pack know?"

"All they know is there's a meeting and I found my mate." He needed to know how his mom felt about this, and if he'd lose her over having a gay man as a mate.

"Scott, you're my son. I love you." She exhaled. "Are you sure about this?" She sounded more concerned than mad.

"I'm sure. It's the only way." Scott ran his hand over his head.

"I'll see you at the meeting tonight, then." She hung up, leaving Scott completely unsure where she stood. If his mother wouldn't vote for this, they wouldn't stand a chance in hell.

"Is everything okay?" Ted asked as he slipped his arm around Scott. Not thinking, Scott leaned into him. That was it, really. When Scott didn't think about it, being with Ted came easy.

"I'm not sure. She didn't say one way or the other." He looked at Ted, trying to put on a brave face. "Look, both of us know how this is going down, babe. I'm going to fight."

Ted bit his lip. "Do you have to kill this guy, Wyatt? Does he have to kill you?"

"No, I can force him to submit to me and leave it at that. But if he wants a clear path to control of the pack, he'll have to kill me. My wolf is alpha, and nothing will stop it from fighting to the last breath."

"Great. Just great." Ted shook his head and took another drink. "I get to watch you fight to the death and maybe die." Ted's gut shredded at the thought of that. "Do you know how that makes me feel?" He turned Scott to face him. "I'm more

frightened for you than I was last night when I thought those guys were going to shoot me. I'm scared to be left without you. I'm mad and angry that I got caught up in this mess with no way out." Ted wrapped his arms around his belly as the pain hit harder. Tears filled his eyes. "I can't do this. Tonight. I can't be there."

"What? You have to be there."

"No, I don't. I won't." He shook his head and bolted out of his seat. "I won't watch another man I love die." He turned away from Scott. "It'll kill me."

Scott leaped from the couch, over the coffee table, and took Ted in his arms. "Shhh, babe. I'm not going to die. Promise."

"Liar. You know you could be killed, and I get to stand there and watch it?" Ted yelled. "Watch the blood, the life flow out of you? Watch you take your last breath?" His voice rose as fear flooded him. "This is going to be just like Douglas. Just like the convenience store. All the blood. Holding Douglas as he died. I can't do that again. No fucking way."

Scott held him, tightening his grip. "Hey, babe. I'm sorry about what happened to you before. And I know I can't make promises about this now. But I need you. I need you there. Life or death, I need you to be there. I need something to fight for, my mate standing beside me. Understand?"

Ted looked up into Scott's blue eyes and shook his head. He didn't want to understand. He wanted to go home.

"If you don't go, I don't stand a chance. My wolf needs his mate there to defend. Without my mate, there's nothing to fight for, and I won't last long."

Ted buried his head in Scott's shoulder. "Damn you, Dupree. Goddamn you. And this crazy wolf shit. I hate it. I hate you." He nuzzled into Scott's throat. Even now, when his heart was breaking, and he was so frightened of what would be left of him if Scott died tonight, even now, he wanted Scott.

Scott put his hands on either side of Ted's face and pulled him up. "You are my mate. Be there. For me." Scott kissed him, a brush over his lips.

Ted surged, bringing their lips together in a hard kiss. Who was he kidding? There was no way out of this. He couldn't leave Scott to face this alone. The idea of Scott dying on the floor, without his lover holding him, hit Ted even harder.

"I'll go. I'll be there. Fight for me, wolf." Ted gasped as Scott pulled him even tighter and took Ted's mouth in a soul-searing kiss, all tongue and teeth.

Scott pulled him down, and they hit the floor, Ted on top of Scott, grinding their erections against each other.

Scott's phone rang.

"Fuck!" Scott growled and held it up to see who it was. "It's Mike."

"Who's Mike?"

"My best friend. He knows about you."

"Better answer it." Ted rolled off his lover and sat up.

Scott flipped open the phone. "Yeah, Mike."

"You found your mate? What the hell happened to the gay dude?" Mike sounded out of breath, as if he'd just been running.

"It is the gay dude. It's Ted." Now he had to gauge Mike's reaction.

"Cool. It's going to freak everyone out, you know." Mike laughed. Scott should have known Mike would stand behind him, just like he'd said.

"I got you behind me on this, right?" Scott had to ask.

"Right behind you. Like I told you before, better a gay mate than Wyatt for a boss. Merde, I hate that guy," Mike cursed. "What are you going to do about everyone else?"

"I have no idea."

"Look, I'm going to talk to Sharie."

"What for?"

"She's on a zillion committees with the other wives. She'll make some calls."

"Thanks, I appreciate that." Scott hung up.

"Mike's with us." He exhaled. That was one. No wait, two, and maybe more, because the pack's mates would have the right to vote also. "He's going to get his wife Sharie to call around for more support from the women."

"Great. Wives in motion. We're set." Ted looked at Scott and then burst into laughter.

"Shut up." Scott smacked him on the arm. "They might not be wolves, but they know how to handle them."

Ted glanced at his watch. "We've got three hours before the meeting. What should we do?"

Scott grinned.

"Besides that. Seriously, Scott. Mike's right. This is a political thing. You need to gather supporters. Walking into that place and not knowing where you stand is crazy."

"You're right."

"What about your deputies? The pack members on the force? Would they stand behind you?"

"I don't know." Scott shrugged.

"Well, let's find out." Ted pointed to the cell phone. "Call or go to the station?"

"I think I better make a personal appearance. You too." Scott stood. "And after that, I should swing by the fire station and talk to those guys too, but that's where Wyatt works."

"Maybe you should let Mike deal with that."

"Good plan." He called Mike back.

"Hey, can you find out from your men if they'll support me in this?"

“Now you’re talking like the Scott I know and love. None of that sad-sack shit. Let’s get this party started!” Mike whooped and hung up.

“Mike’s on it.” Scott nodded and offered Ted his hand.

Ted took it and got on his feet. “Great. Let’s go.”

They left, got in the truck, and drove off to the first of many stops before the meeting that evening.

For the first time, Scott reached across the seat and took Ted’s hand. Nothing could have prepared him for the feelings that rushed over him, landing smack in the middle of his heart.

Chapter Thirty-one

It was dark when Scott and Ted pulled into the parking lot of the strip center. Scott parked and sat back.

"No one's here yet." Ted looked all around.

"I suppose that's good." Scott got out. "It'll fill up quick, I promise."

"Think Wyatt will come?"

"Hell, I think he'll be first." Scott laughed as he got his keys to the building out. He unlocked the door and walked quickly to the back to turn off the alarm. "This is where we hold our meetings."

Ted stood in the middle of a large room with chairs arranged in rows. "So you think everyone in the pack will show?"

"Yeah. Wives included." He snorted. "It's their turn to give back to me, since I'm the one that has to approve their marriages."

"Well, if we can't be married, how can they approve it? If there is no marriage, we can just be together and no one gets hurt." Ted hoped he'd found a loophole, anything they could use to get out of this.

"Sorry. It's not just the marriage. That's not what I or the pack votes for. We vote to bring a mate into the pack, not if you can or can't marry."

"Right. Pack stuff." Ted didn't think he'd ever get the hang of the rules. "So what now?"

"We wait." Scott checked his watch. "It's seven forty-five." Scott moved to stand behind the podium at the back of the room, near the offices.

Ted pulled out a chair and sat next to him. He hated waiting, and this was just about the worst thing he'd ever waited for except one. In that case, the ambulance didn't arrive on time.

Ted wondered if he'd have to call for an ambulance tonight.

"How would they explain your death?" Ted looked up at Scott, but Scott was staring at the door.

"We'd come up with something. If they ever found the body," a voice said from behind Ted.

"Hello, Bobby." Scott straightened.

Ted spun around in his chair. A large man, around sixty or so, stood in the doorway. He wore jeans and a western shirt, the kind with mother-of-pearl snaps,

and a huge belt buckle. This was a man to be reckoned with, Ted knew. He didn't know how he knew, but this man had been an alpha.

Ted stood. "Hello. I'm Ted Canedo." He held out his hand as the man advanced.

"This him?" Bobby looked Ted up and down, like he was a prize bull. "I can see the attraction, son. Hope the others will too." He came up and took Ted's hand and gave it a single shake with a firm grip.

"I hope so too." Ted grinned, then glanced over to Scott.

"Thank you, Bobby. Having you behind me—you don't know what that means to me." Scott and Bobby shook.

"Best find my seat before all the good ones are taken." Bobby ambled over to the side and took a seat in the last chair in the row at the very front.

Mike and his wife Sharie came through the door next, waved to Scott, introduced themselves to Ted, and then took the seats next to Bobby.

Sharie gave Ted a very concerned look, and Ted nodded in response. Then she smiled, leaned over and whispered something to Mike. He laughed, and nodded. Sharie winked at Ted, then Scott.

"Bout time you settled down," Scott's mother said as she walked up the aisle and took a seat next to Mike's wife. "It sucks about the grandkids, but what are you going to do?" She shrugged. Sharie patted her hand in sympathy.

"Good to see you again, Mrs. Dupree," Ted said as he leaned over.

"Call me maman, son." She winked at him.

Scott coughed into his fist, his glance dancing over to Ted. Ted figured he'd get lots of looks, lots of comments, and he'd have to do his best to keep his temper. This was Scott's fight, not his.

Over the next ten minutes, the place filled. About twenty men and ten women, of all ages, took their seats. Ted figured at least half of the men were single, too young to mate. The others were probably their fathers and mothers. Only half of the men, like Mike, had women sitting with them.

"Is this everyone?" Ted asked Scott.

"No. We're missing some who are on duty. Another ten or so."

"Are they mostly married?"

"No, single. They take the night shifts so the married men can stay home with their families."

Ted wished more of the younger men had shown. Younger might mean more open to different ideas, like gays in the pack.

"Where's Wyatt?" Ted asked, covering his mouth with his hand so no one would know what he'd said.

"In the back. The large guy in the blue flannel shirt," Scott whispered back. "His wife is next to him."

Ted used his best PI skills to assess Wyatt without seeming to look at him at all.

His stomach sank. Wyatt was bigger. Scott had to be six feet two, but Wyatt looked to be about six feet six or so. His hands looked huge. Ted shivered at what he'd be like as a wolf.

Wyatt's wife looked worried. Very worried. She bit her lip and twisted a handkerchief in her hands. Ted figured she knew what was going to happen, and maybe she was as frightened as he.

Everyone waited for Scott to take his place and call the meeting to order.

"Good evening."

Heads nodded.

"I guess most of you know why we're here tonight. I've found my mate, and I'm here to bring him before the pack. I ask the pack to accept my mate, Ted Canedo." Scott turned to Ted and motioned for him to stand.

Ted swallowed and stood, moving next to Scott.

The entire room gaped at him. Well, not everyone had their mouth open, but to Ted, it seemed that way.

"What do I do?" Ted whispered.

"Introduce yourself." Scott moved away from the podium and pulled Ted behind it.

Ted grabbed the podium for dear life. Public speaking wasn't his forte, but this was do or die, so he dived in.

"I'm Ted Canedo. I'm from New Orleans. I'm Scott's mate. I hope you'll accept me in the pack." He looked at Scott and raised his eyebrows. What else was he supposed to say or do?

Scott moved next to him. "I'd like to call for a vote."

One of the men in the group stood. "What the hell is this, Scott? Some kind of joke? You telling us you're gay?"

"It's not a joke, Henry. This is my life I'm talking about. Ted is my mate. If that makes me gay to you, then so be it." His attitude and voice said it all: *get over it*.

Ted gazed at Scott and saw why these people had him as their alpha.

Wyatt stood, and Ted braced himself. "So does this mean you've claimed him?" Everyone had turned to look at the man speaking.

"Yes." Scott nodded. The audience turned back to Scott.

"You fucked a man?" Wyatt spat out. "Merde. What the hell is this pack coming to? Fags leading us?" His eyes narrowed. "Maybe he claimed you? Huh? He fuck you, Dupree?"

Scott's fists went white as they held on to the podium. Ted watched as coarse blond hair sprouted from Scott's knuckles. Even his smell changed, and it excited Ted, arousing him.

"Sit down, Wyatt," Scott ordered. "All you need to know is I claimed him. I didn't ask you what you did when you brought your mate to me, did I?" Scott's intense gaze bore into his competition.

Wyatt's wife tugged on her husband's sleeve, trying to get him to sit. He slapped at her hand, then fell into his chair.

"And this is 2011, not the Stone Age. Just like on the force, or on the fire department, discrimination isn't allowed. I'm not going to let narrow-minded bigotry drag St. Jerome back to the time when some of us"—Scott paused and gazed out into the room—"couldn't walk on the same side of the street, or eat at the same restaurant."

Ted looked around and for the first time, realized there were men and women of color in the pack. He'd never thought what segregation would do to a pack, but he knew what it could do to a neighborhood or town.

"Who I chose as my mate, black or white, male or female, shouldn't be an issue. Not now. And if I have anything to do with it, not ever." Scott looked over his pack.

And Ted watched as Scott's words filled the air of the room, and heads nodded in agreement.

"So this is Ted. He's my mate. I claimed him." Scott came over to Ted and wrapped his arm around him. "This is my mate."

Ted leaned into Scott and jerked his head toward Scott. "He's my wolf."

The crowd laughed, and people smiled at him.

Wyatt jumped up again. "I say we vote," he called out.

Scott nodded. "All in favor of Ted Canedo taking his place by my side as my mate, raise your hand."

They watched as the crowd hesitated.

Bobby raised his hand, Scott's mom, then Mike and Sharie. She turned around, gave a nod, and then every woman in the room, including Wyatt's wife, raised her hand.

"What the hell? Woman, what are you doing?" Wyatt yelled at her.

"I'm voting. You don't control me or my mind, Wyatt. I might be mated to you, but that doesn't mean I think like you." She set her jaw and glared at him. "I'm doing this for our kids, for the future of the pack."

"But our son isn't gay." Wyatt looked completely confused.

"That's right. He's only eight. We don't know what he'll be, but whatever it is, I want him welcome in this pack." Her jaw jutted out, and her eyes gleamed with the determination of a female protecting her young.

Scott counted, going down the rows. He reached Billy Trosclair and his deputies sitting together.

"Billy?" Scott said.

Billy stood. "I'm with you, Sheriff. Thank you."

"For what?"

"For making it possible for me to claim the man I'll want as a mate when it's my time." He turned to the other men. "I *am* gay. Always have been. Always will be. And when my time comes to find a mate, I'll be lucky to find someone like Ted."

Scott gave him a nod of thanks. The other men, his deputies, stood too. "Men? Do you have something to say?"

Frank Commeau stepped forward. "Yes, sir. Been a privilege to serve with you and have you as our leader. Whoever you chose is fine with us." Then they sat and held up their hands.

Scott smiled at Ted, and Ted could read the relief in his eyes. The pack had accepted Ted. Thank God. There wouldn't be a fight. All he had to worry about was moving his things into Scott's house and finding a job.

Ted slung his arm around Scott's waist. "You did it."

"We did it," Scott answered. Right then, all Ted knew was that he was happy and safe, with Scott by his side.

"Just wait a goddamned minute," Wyatt shouted. "I can't believe it. You're going to let our alpha have a boy toy?" He stared around at the men and women.

"I'm not a boy," Ted said. "We're mated. For life."

"Right. Until the next guy comes along. I know how loose you queers are. How many men have you fucked in bars, huh?"

Ted's face burned, and he wished he could hide his embarrassment. "None of that matters now. Just like whatever you did before you got mated and married didn't matter. You did tell her the truth, didn't you? Or were you a thirty-year-old virgin?" Ted couldn't resist giving Wyatt back some of his own poison.

Wyatt sputtered. His wife ducked her head and shifted away from him. He searched the faces of everyone around him, looking for support, but didn't find any.

Wyatt's face turned red, and to Ted's amazement, he began changing. Ted turned to Scott, but Scott's gaze was focused on Wyatt like a laser beam, along with a low growl rumbling in his chest.

"I challenge you, Dupree. Here and now! I challenge you as alpha of this pack!" Wyatt snarled.

Chapter Thirty-two

Wyatt shifted, and a large black wolf stood in the aisle. Everyone else rushed to the sides of the room, dragging their chairs out of the way, leaving it cleared.

Scott pushed Ted behind him. "Take him, Bobby. Keep him safe."

Large strong hands grabbed Ted around his arms and pulled him back to a safe distance. "No, wait! This can't be happening. The vote was good." Ted didn't understand. They'd won.

What the hell was Wyatt doing?

"He's challenged Scott, Ted." Bobby's whiskey voice sounded in Ted's ear. "This is for pack leader, not for you. This one is all about Scott."

Ted tried to break free again, but Bobby's hold tightened like a vise on his arm. "Leave him be. If you get in there, you'll distract him. Wyatt will use you to get to Scott."

"He'll be killed." Ted wanted to close his eyes and wish this all away.

"Maybe." Bobby nodded. "Maybe not. But Wyatt's had this brewing for some time. It just broke tonight."

Ted couldn't believe it. He was going to have to watch the man he loved fight to the death for leadership of his pack.

Scott gave Ted a final look and a nod, then shifted.

The wolf standing in front of Ted was the same one that had come to his rescue the other night. Large, gray, and magnificent.

Wyatt's wolf was big, but there was something about Scott that screamed alpha. Attitude and skills, right.

From what he could see in Scott's wolf's body, he had more than enough attitude. But did he have mad wolf skills?

The wolves circled each other, growling, thick fur standing on end.

The black wolf snarled, crouched, then lunged at Scott. Scott jumped aside, snapping at the black as he went by. Blood splattered on the linoleum floor from the wound he gave Wyatt's side.

Wyatt spun around and attacked again, all bared teeth. Ted's belly tightened at the sight of his massive incisors and what they might do to Scott. The sounds of the animals snarling and snapping blocked out all other sounds, except the pounding of his heart.

Scott circled, growling, low to the ground, his tail steady and down, never once looking at Ted, stalking his prey.

Ted understood the danger. He was a distraction. He stepped back. "Let me get behind you," he whispered to Bobby.

"He can stand with me," Mike said. He reached out and pulled Ted to his side.

Bobby grunted and stepped in to block Ted from Scott's view. Ted could still peer between the two men and watch. Not that he wanted to watch his lover be torn to shreds, but he was unable to look away.

There was nothing he wanted more than to pull his gun and end this, but he didn't have it with him. And something inside him told him that Wyatt's death wouldn't end this at all.

He glanced at Wyatt's wife across the room. He felt so sorry for her, as she clasped hands with another of the women, her eyes red with tears, her mouth turned down. Grieving already.

Did she know Wyatt wouldn't survive this?

Ted felt a flare of hope in her distress, and it was awful, but it was what it was. His wolf was out there fighting, and there could only be one winner.

"Come on, Scott," he whispered. A small arm circled his waist, and he looked down at Scott's mother.

"Maman," he said. "I'm so sorry for—"

"Hush. This has been building for years. Wyatt always was jealous of Scott." She patted him on the back. "It'll be all right, you'll see."

Ted could only nod, as Scott crouched, growling, and leaped toward Wyatt.

Everything became a whirling blur of gray and black as the two wolves fought. Standing up on hind legs, clawing with their forearms and paws, biting with their razor-sharp teeth, they looked for a weakness in the other's defenses.

Blood spotted the floor. More of it. He didn't know if it was Wyatt or Scott. Both animals had blood-matted coats. Ted stared at the blood and saw the pool of blood Douglas had emptied onto the floor.

"Oh God," Ted murmured. This couldn't be happening again. He wanted to run, leave this place, let them fight without him to watch. He glanced to the side. If he moved quietly, he could fit between the wall and the crowd and sneak out.

He couldn't do it. He couldn't leave Scott. He had to be there, to hold him, to let him know someone loved him. Just in case.

Ted stood his ground. He'd watch as Scott fought for the right to lead this pack of men and women. And him. Ted was a part of the pack now.

If Scott died, what would that make him?

Alone.

Scott hadn't seen his mate or heard him since the fight began. Had he left? The thought of being abandoned made him stagger.

Wyatt lunged and bit Scott's leg, tearing a deep gash. He pulled free, but it bled, and he cried from the pain.

"Get him, Scott!" Ted yelled. "Take him down!"

That voice rose above the others and gave Scott hope that what he was doing was right. His mate stood for him in this contest for control of the pack.

Scott flew across the narrow space and hit Wyatt so hard the other wolf fell on his side. Scott went for Wyatt's throat and locked down on it.

Wyatt, trapped under Scott, whimpered as Scott stood over him, sharp black claws poised over his belly, ready to rip it open and disembowel him.

Scott waited.

Bobby said, "That's enough, son."

Ted pushed his way through the men. "Scott, let him go."

Wyatt shifted back to a man, with Scott's wolf's jaws still on his neck. "I submit, I submit," he cried.

"Don't kill him, Sheriff. I know he's been an asshole, but we've got kids." Wyatt's wife stepped forward to speak for him. "Please."

Scott shifted back and stood over Wyatt.

"The pack says you live." Scott moved away. "So you live, but the decision is up to me if you stay in the pack."

Wyatt's wife went to her husband, to help him up and tend his wounds. Ted watched as the bleeding stopped on Wyatt's punctures, and they began to heal.

He turned to Scott. He'd been bitten and scratched also. But there were no signs of the wounds.

"Scott!" Ted pushed past Bobby.

Scott met him halfway, and they wrapped their arms around each other and held on.

"Oh God, please tell me it's over," Ted asked.

Scott patted him on the back. "It's over, babe."

A few men helped Wyatt to his feet to face Scott.

Scott moved to the podium. "Wyatt, they say the punishment for a failed attempt is worse than death. Exile is a hard thing for a wolf. To lose your pack, your extended family." Scott shook his head.

"I'll leave." Wyatt rubbed his chest. "But I'd like my wife and kids to stay. No reason they should leave. My boys will need the pack when they get of age."

Wyatt's wife cried, burying her hands in her face.

"Wyatt, you're staying. You're on probation."

"Probation?" Wyatt stared at Scott. "What's that mean?"

"It means if you step out of line, I'll sentence you to the exile you earned today."

Wyatt's wife looked up. "We'll take it," she said. "I'll vouch for him, Sheriff Dupree. He'll stay out of trouble with the pack. He'll never challenge you again. I swear."

Her husband stared at her, mouth open. When she stared at him, one eyebrow raised, he closed his mouth and nodded. "Thank you, Scott."

Scott nodded. "Show's over. Move along. Go on, everyone, go home." He waved his hands, and the other deputies joined him in clearing the room.

Just before Billy Trosclair left, Scott went over to him. "Thanks for your support, Billy. You didn't have to out yourself. Not for me."

"I did it for me and maybe some of the others too afraid to come out of the closet. I hope it doesn't change how you feel about me as an officer." Billy held out his hand.

Scott shook it. "Don't sweat it. You're one of my best men, gay or not."

"Thanks, Sheriff." Billy saluted and left.

Ted, Scott, his mother, Mike and Sharie, and Bobby were left in the room.

"Guess we'd better get the mops and clean that up," Scott's mom said.

Sharie nodded, and together they went to the back.

"That was a good move, son." Bobby slapped Scott on the back.

"I'd a killed him." Mike snorted.

"I'm just glad this is over." Ted exhaled. "I'm not sure I can survive all the drama here. And I thought it was bad in the Quarter." He wrapped an arm around Scott, and Scott held Ted around the waist.

"What now?" Bobby asked.

"Home." Scott gave him a nod and pulled Ted along with him. "Here, Mike." He tossed Mike the keys to the place. "After the ladies finish, lock up and set the alarm, will you?"

"Sure, boss." Mike winked. "Gonna go claim you some mate?"

Scott and Ted turned around. Before Scott could say anything, Ted said, "Gonna go claim me some wolf." He winked back, and everyone laughed.

Scott blushed. "Ho-ly shit, babe. Did you have to say that?" He dragged Ted away before the man said anything else.

Ted swatted him on the ass. "Fine as you are? They knew I was thinking about it."

"I think that boner in your pants gave it away." Scott pointed to Ted's crotch. They got into the truck and shut the doors.

"You mean the one that matches yours?" Ted snorted. "Wolf, you got a hard-on for your mate?"

Scott growled. "Just wait until I get you home."

“Home. I like the way that sounds.” Ted sighed. “You scared the shit out of me tonight.”

“Sorry.”

“The blood on the linoleum. Took me right back to that night with Douglas.” He shivered.

Scott pulled Ted to his side. “No more, babe. I’m fine. I’m alive.”

Ted nuzzled his lover, inhaling his scent. He licked a line up Scott’s throat, making his lover purr, if wolves can purr.

“Alive and horny.” Scott shifted in his seat, letting Ted get a glimpse of the outline of his cock.

“Well, shut up and drive, and I’ll see what I can do about this.” Ted popped the button on Scott’s jeans and undid his zipper.

Scott moaned and had to force himself to pay attention to the road and not the world class blowjob he received from his mate.

Chapter Thirty-three

Scott raced up the stairs to the house and unlocked the door. Ted and he fell through it, grabbed each other, and slammed against the wall.

"Is it sick that watching you fight turned me on?" Ted asked as Scott bit his neck and sucked at it.

"Nope. Just pheromones, that's all. I was excited and you, as my mate, picked up on that." The next bite made Ted shiver. He buried his hands in Scott's hair.

"I'm needing," Ted whispered.

Scott ground his erection against Ted's and moaned. "I can feel you, babe. Don't worry, I'm going to take care of you." He back-walked Ted to the bedroom, kicked the door open, and pushed him down on the bed.

"Naked. Now." Scott began stripping off his clothes.

A few scratches remained from the fight; a long one on Scott's thigh, and a few shorter ones on his chest and back, but all of them were pink and healing.

"You guys do heal fast." Ted pulled off his jeans and briefs and stretched out naked on the bed.

"Told you." Scott grunted as he crawled up the bed toward Ted, determination and lust in his darkening blue eyes.

Ted stroked his cock and rolled his balls, letting his arousal build as he watched his lover stalk him.

A low rumble rose from Scott's chest as he slid his hand up Ted's leg. He nestled between Ted's legs, nudging them wider so there would be enough room for him.

Scott's cock, straight and hard and dripping precum, dragged along the covers of the bed. His furred balls hung heavy with his seed. Ted hadn't seen a more erotic sight in his life than his horny wolf.

"Fuck me, wolf." Ted reached for Scott as he pushed off the bed. Their mouths met in a clash of teeth and tongues as each fought for dominance. But as usual, Ted couldn't keep up the fight. Something about Scott made Ted submit to him, every time. He'd never given in before, not to anyone, not in a very long time, but Ted knew he'd let Scott fuck him anywhere, anytime, any way.

Scott broke the kiss and leaned down to capture Ted's nipple in his mouth. He sucked on it, his hand pushing it up, deeper into his mouth. Ted arched and whimpered, and his balls pulled tighter.

God, Scott could make him come so easily. Every time he touched Ted, it was all Ted could do to keep from exploding. It amazed Ted, and frightened him, that he wanted this man so badly.

Scott let his now-tender nipple go and dragged his tongue down Ted's belly, following the light trail of hair that ran from chest to cock.

The look in Scott's eyes nearly sent Ted over the edge. So much desire, yet a warmth burned behind it. Ted knew it was foolish to call what he saw love, but he did. He had to have something, or else he'd be a hypocrite to himself. But Scott had yet to say those words.

Scott reached over and jerked open the drawer, pulled out the lube and tossed it on the bed. He sat back on his haunches and stroked his cock. "Do it. I want to watch you stick your fingers inside your ass. It's so fucking hot, babe."

Ted popped the top, added the slick to his fingers, and pulled his balls to the side. He teased his own hole, all the while never losing Scott's gaze. He tapped it, leaving a string of lube stretching between fingertip and pucker. Scott groaned and stroked harder on his rigid shaft.

It turned Ted on to watch Scott pleasure himself. Those big hands wrapped around that perfect, thick dick just got Ted hard and ready to shoot.

"Damn, wolf. You got to look so fucking sexy?" Ted asked, his voice deep and husky with arousal.

"Just for you, babe." Scott gave him a cocky smile.

Ted plunged his fingers inside and worked them to stretch his opening. Scott's gaze locked on his ass, and he licked his lips and almost drooled.

With a quick stroke, Ted hit his gland. He cried out and arched. "Oh fuck, that's the spot."

"Don't you dare come until I'm inside you, babe."

Scott moved into position. "Lube my dick up. Make it slick so I can just slide inside your scorching, tight ass." He held his cock out, presenting it to Ted. Ted squirted more lube on, then worked it over Scott's prick.

His meat was hot, burning up, so fat and well-veined, and the flared cap, all deep red with blood, looked good enough to suck. Ted pushed his finger into the slit and Scott gasped, then closed his eyes and fucked Ted's hand. His hips snapped back and forth as Ted jerked him.

"Wait, wolf!" Ted ordered. Scott halted, his chest heaving, eyes nearly black with lust. Ted pulled Scott's cock to his opening. "Now, fuck me."

Scott cried out as he shoved in, his body shuddering as he breached Ted's tight ring. "Oh God. Ho-ly shit, this is so good." Scott slid until they were body to body, leaned down, shook his head, and then looked into Ted's eyes.

He reached up and cupped Ted's cheek. "I love you, babe. I can't help it. I don't know what else to call what I feel for you, except love." He kissed Ted's lips, nose, eyes, and forehead, then leaned his head against Ted's.

Ted's heart raced, beating happiness against his chest.

He wrapped his hands in Scott's hair and gave him a shake. "I love you, Scott, and your big wolf. Don't ever—" Ted's voice broke at the thought.

"Never. We're mated. For life. I'll always be here."

Scott pulled out, slow and steady, then pushed back in, rubbing over Ted's gland with each forward thrust. Sparks few behind Ted's eyes as his wolf mated with him.

They made love that night with soft touches, gentle kisses, and comforting words.

When they fell apart, both hearts beating hard from their releases, Scott rolled to his side, and Ted took his place against Scott's chest, wrapped in the arms of his mate.

* * *

Ted stepped out of the shower and slapped Scott on the ass. "Okay, it's official. You're a freaking horndog. Do you ever get tired?" His wolf had just given him a blowjob in the shower, and this time Scott had swallowed it all.

Scott, still proud of his new talent for sucking dick, grinned into the mirror over his side of the counter. "No. Weres have great stamina." He winked.

Ted groaned and went to his sink. "It's great you have this double sink already here."

"Yeah, I built the house to hold a family." For a moment, a dark cloud passed over Scott's face.

Ted put down his razor. "Are you okay with this? I know it isn't what you thought you'd have. The wife and kids."

Scott looked at him. "Hey, got better than a wife. Got a dude! We can drink beer, watch football games, act like jackasses, and neither of us will ever nag." He laughed.

"But you wanted kids, didn't you?" Ted asked. He'd thrown a monkey wrench into more than just Scott's life; he'd ruined Scott's mom's hope for grandkids also.

"Yeah. Still do." Scott looked forward in to his own reflection. "Would you consider adopting?" His blond brows drew together in a sharp vee.

Kids had never been in Ted's plans. Ever. He looked into Scott's eyes and read the hope and hurt in them.

"Sure. If that's what you want. But not a baby, right? I'm not sure I could deal with a baby." Ted grimaced.

"No, I was thinking maybe an older kid." Scott shrugged.

"How long have you been thinking about this?" Ted asked.

"It's all happened so fast, babe. It came to me last night." Scott finished shaving.

Ted turned to him, his heart in his throat. "Was it a dream?"

Scott's face twisted. "As a matter of fact, it was."

Ted groaned and looked at Scott, who was only a minute behind him in making the connection.

"My mama!" Scott barked out.

"She's doing it again, wolf." Ted frowned, then laughed. "Oh God, what else of yours does she have to put in that gris-gris bag?"

"I don't want to know. The question is, what does she have of yours?" Scott wiggled his eyebrows at Ted.

Ted thought. "She was standing next to me during the fight. You don't think—"

Scott burst out laughing. "Yeah, I do."

"Merde." Ted rolled his eyes, then leaned over and splashed water over his face to rinse the lather off.

After they dressed, Scott sat on the couch and pulled Ted down next to him. He slung his arm over Ted's shoulders in a gesture of ownership. Ted laughed it off. They might be mates, but Scott didn't own Ted.

Well, maybe his ass. But that was all.

"So, when are you moving in?" Scott squeezed Ted's shoulder.

"Uh, I haven't thought about it."

"Why not? I have plenty of space here." He waved his arm around. "We could pack you up in a weekend and be done with it."

"For the first thing, I'm not ready to just pick up and leave."

"Right. You have a business."

Ted didn't like the way Scott said that at all.

"Look, Sheriff Dupree, you might not like or respect PIs, but it's what I am. It's what I do. If you can't respect that, you can't respect me. And if that's the case, we have a big problem." Ted moved away to the other side of the couch.

"Whoa! What I meant was you don't have a physical business. Nothing to move. Your business is you and wherever you are, right?"

"Well, yeah." Ted hated to admit he was right.

"So the only thing keeping you in New Orleans is you." Scott poked a finger in Ted's chest. "You haven't let go. It's like a married guy who keeps his bachelor pad, just in case." Scott frowned.

"No, it's not like that." Ted knew Scott was right, and it sucked.

"If you're thinking 'just in case' with me, then this will never work. I'm committed to you, completely, Ted. I want you here, living with me in this house, here in St. Jerome. Are you committed to me?" Scott gazed into Ted's eyes, and Ted's heart could deny his wolf nothing.

"I'm committed to you. Give me a week to go back to New Orleans, get my stuff settled, and pack. You come the next weekend, and we'll move it all here." Ted leaned over and kissed Scott. "Okay?"

"Okay." Scott grinned. "What about your business? Think you'll set up here? That job on the force is still open. I could use a few good men."

"Thanks for offering, but I think it's best if we kept our work lives separate. I'll think about it. We don't have to rush. I have money to live on from the last job."

"You don't need money, babe." Scott grinned.

"Wait. Stop right there. If we move in, it's fifty-fifty or I won't do it. I won't be kept, Scott. No matter how I feel about you—"

"You love me," Scott interrupted.

Ted sighed. "No matter how much I love you, I won't be supported by you. I'm not your wife, I'm your partner."

"Okay. That's fair." He nodded.

Ted wasn't sure what he'd do to earn a living here in little St. Jerome, but being a PI probably wouldn't be it.

Chapter Thirty-four

It has been a long two weeks since he'd last seen Scott. Long and frustrating. Phone sex just wasn't cutting it, but damn, did his Cajun wolf know how to talk dirty!

Ted had a few more things to do before the weekend and Scott's arrival. He'd packed most of his apartment, but this afternoon, he was headed to the bank on Royal Street to transfer his accounts to the bank in St. Jerome.

"Ted!" A woman's voice called out to him. Ted froze and turned around.

Kirsten rushed toward him. "Ted! I can't believe I ran into you."

"I live in the Quarter." Ted kissed her on the cheek. "What about you? What are you doing here?"

She grabbed his arm. "Come see. I bought a partnership in my friend's art gallery." He let her drag him into a corner shop filled with paintings and sculptures.

"This is nice." Ted looked it all over. "You can afford to buy a gallery?"

"Well, no. Malcolm paid for it, but he's so generous. I swear if I even whisper I want something, he gets it for me." She blushed. "When I came back from the artist retreat talking about galleries, well, he told me to go ahead and work up the papers." She giggled as she spun around. "I can't believe this is half mine."

"That's great, Kirsten." Ted gazed at the art on the walls. Several other people walked around the gallery. Most of the pictures were local French Quarter scenes, and some South Louisiana canvases. "What are your plans?"

Her face lit up, and her eyes widened. "Well, I scouted out this fabulous undiscovered artist. He's fantastic, and I just know his work will sell. All I have to do is convince him to let me take his work on consignment."

"Well, you've got a great location here on Royal Street. There are at least a dozen people in here right now. That artist would have to be a fool not to take your offer." Ted wanted to support Kirsten, and it didn't surprise him that her husband had fronted this for her. It seemed wolf devotion went hand in hand with generosity and support.

"I was hoping you'd say that." She clapped her hands together.

"Why?" Ted stared at her.

"Because *you're* the artist. I want those canvases you painted. All of them." At his look of shock, she added, "Please don't tell me you sold them!"

"Sold them? You're joking right?" Ted could not be more surprised. This couldn't be real.

"No, I'm not joking." She pointed to a blank wall. "I want to hang them there. I was going to call you next week."

"I'm leaving town this weekend. Moving to St. Jerome." Blood filled his cock as he thought about his wolf.

"Now you're pulling my leg. How did that happen?"

He shook his head. "Let's just say I found someone I could take a chance on."

"Well, can you get the paintings to me before you leave?"

"Sure. I'll bring them by later this afternoon, if you're sure."

"I'm positive. I can't wait." She clapped her hands again, squealed, and then threw her arms around his neck.

"You better take a shower before you go home," Ted warned. The judge knew his scent, and the last thing he wanted was a visit from a jealous werewolf. "I've been packing all day, and I got sticky man-sweat on you."

Kirsten frowned, sniffed her arm, then laughed. "Sure. You know, Malcolm hates it when I come home smelling like oil paints and linseed oil."

"He must have a very sensitive nose." Ted barely held in his laughter. From her reactions, Ted figured she didn't know he knew her husband's secret, and that's the way he wanted to keep it. Safer for everyone that way.

She nodded and let him leave. Ted rushed down Royal Street to the bank. He'd have to drive back to the gallery with the paintings.

Nothing might come of it, but what if it did? Ted pushed dreams of artistic glory out of his head. Right now, he had business accounts to deal with and the rest of his packing to do.

* * *

Ted backed the van slowly down Scott's driveway up to the house. Scott stood on the bottom step, motioning to him. He held up his hand, and Ted hit the brakes.

Ted climbed out of the cab and grinned. "You were wrong. I did fill the van."

"Really? I hope I have enough room for all your stuff."

"If you don't, we can put some in storage." Ted frowned and pointed to the open space under Scott's raised house. "Too bad this isn't walled in."

Scott rubbed the back of his neck. "I was thinking. What if I did get it closed in? You could use it for your office."

"My office?"

"For your PI business." Scott smiled at him, and Ted's heart melted. He wanted to give the man a big kiss. Ted glanced around, but Scott's house was screened from the rest of the world. He laid a smack right on Scott's lips.

"What was that for?" Scott asked.

"For being sweet." Ted winked.

"Sweet? I wasn't being sweet. I was being rational. You need space. I have space. Made sense." Scott gave him a hard stare.

"Sure." Ted whispered, "Sweet!" Scott gave him a warning growl.

Ted stared at the space, then stepped onto the concrete and checked it out. "Hey, there's hot and cold water down here."

"Yeah. Had that put in when I built this place. I'd planned on enclosing it as a garage and thought I might need the hookups." He shrugged. "Never got around to doing it."

"It'd make a great artist studio." Ted liked the way the light hit the floor. "With the right windows, of course." Ted could just see the tall windows wrapping around the room.

"An artist studio? I thought you were a PI?" Scott scratched his head.

"I was. In my youth, I painted. That woman I was tailing here, Kirsten, the wife of the judge? Before I left the city, I gave her four of my paintings to sell at her gallery."

"Really? That's fantastic, babe!" Scott high-fived him. "I'm sorry I didn't get to see them. Well, I better talk to the contractor about getting started on this room."

Ted slung his arms around Scott and pulled him close. "Thanks. I'll pay for half." He bit Scott's earlobe and laughed.

Scott opened his mouth to argue, but Ted said, "Fifty-fifty. We made a deal, and I'm holding you to it. Besides, I have the money from the judge and can't think of anything better to do with it." Not even Hawaii sounded as good as building onto his and Scott's home.

"Okay. It's settled. Now let's get your things unpacked and set up. Once we see if it all fits, we can decide on what goes into storage."

"Right. Yours or mine," Ted replied.

Scott opened the back of the van, and Ted pulled out the loading ramp. They had a lot of work ahead of them, but Ted didn't mind. Not when he saw how Scott smiled at him when their gazes met, or how Scott never missed a chance to touch him, or brush his hands over Ted's body as they passed.

For the first time, Ted knew he'd done the right thing in taking a chance on Scott. He just hoped Scott would always feel the same way about him.

"Hey, babe! I don't know what you're thinking about, but I sure as hell hope it's got something to do with my cock in your mouth." Scott leered at him as he carried a chair up the stairs.

Ted pushed the matching chair to the ramp. "Maybe it does, or maybe it's my cock in your mouth." He wiggled his eyebrows.

"As long as it's not your cock in my ass," Scott muttered.

Ted laughed. "Oh wolf. It will be. Just give me some time. I'm gonna make you howl for me."

Scott tripped on the stairs and cursed. “Merde.” He looked at Ted and adjusted his dick in his jeans. “You already make me howl, babe.”

“I’m going to do you as soon as I get up there.” Ted trotted down the ramp with the chair.

“I’m planning on it.” Scott picked up the chair and climbed to the porch. Ted groaned as he watched Scott’s tight ass go up the stairs.

“Just wait, wolf,” he whispered so Scott couldn’t hear. “It might not be tonight, but I’m gonna make you fly.”

“I heard that, babe. Wolf ears!” Scott called out.

Ted growled, and his wolf just laughed.

🐾 THE END 🐾

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Lynn Lorenz

Lynn has been writing all her life, but only recently for publication. She writes a variety of genres besides historicals, including police procedurals, fantasy, paranormal, and contemporary romantic comedy, but enjoys reading suspense and detective stories most of all and wishes more cops would fall in love between their pages.

Born in New Orleans, she has a strong affinity for the South, pralines and po'boys. She's never met food she didn't like, but finds it hard to beat the food she grew up with and constantly craves from N'awlins. Going back occasionally to visit her father who still lives there, her car is often laden with epicurean delights such as Hubig Pies, Barqs in the bottle, Central Groceries' muffalattas and Gambino's pastries.

Graduating with a bachelor's degree in Fine Arts, Lynn is also an artist whose still lifes, life studies, and landscapes are done in acrylic, watercolors, pencil, and pastels. She loves getting away for a week at a time just to paint outdoors.

She has a real job that keeps her busy nine-to-five, but in her spare time she finds it hard to stay away from writing. It keeps her off the streets and out of the bars.

Lynn has two incredible kids, a supportive husband of twenty plus years, and a black lab/Aussie sheep dog mix. She's lived in Katy, Texas, since 1999, where she discovered her love of all things Texan and cowboy, like big hair, boots, and blue jeans. Yeehaw!