

Chapter One

“Well, Winston. What do you think about Texas?” Edward drawled in his soft Georgia accent as he cast a sidelong glance at his best friend and constant companion.

Winston, a six-year-old English bulldog, didn't answer. He was far too busy hanging over the edge of the passenger door, his face in the wind, pink tongue hanging from the side of his gaping mouth, as Edward drove down the rural blacktop at sixty-five miles per hour.

“We're definitely not in Georgia anymore.” Edward sighed. “I've never seen so much livestock in my life.” He shuddered. Another field of black cows dotted the rolling hills. “Although, I've always wanted a brown and white cowhide Louis Quatorze chair. It would be tres chic, n'est pas?”

Winston eyed him sadly.

“The only good thing about Texas is the cowboys. I do love me some cowboy.” Edward gave a low, “yum yum yum,” and wiggled his eyebrows at Winston.

Winston favored him with a soft *woof*, then returned to flying his tongue in the wind.

“You like them too, huh? Maybe you'll find a cow dog.”

Woof.

“Honestly, you'd probably have better luck out here than I would.”

Edward picked up the map he'd folded, laid it on the steering wheel of his Miatta, and glanced at it. Spring Lake had been circled in red and the road they were on had been highlighted in yellow.

Who'd ever heard of a Farm to Market road? He'd exited I-10 westbound and turned south onto the two lane road, all the while wondering where the Market was or if he'd come to the Farm by following the road to its end.

The idea of being on a farm gave him the heebie-jeebies. He was so *not* a Country Living kind of guy. More like Metropolitan Design. Sleek leather, minimal window treatments, grass mat flooring. No livestock in the house.

Not lace curtains, tacky multi-colored chintz and those God-awful oval rugs from the fifties. *So* Lucy and Desi move to Connecticut.

He shuddered again.

But duty called. Well, not exactly duty, but his mother, Lillian. When Lillian Rawlings Beauregard bellowed, Edward Paul Beauregard, the Third, answered with a controlled, if tight lipped, "Yes, Mother."

And if Edward valued his trust fund, and he did, he did what he was told. He gave a silent, but respectful, "Fuck you," to his late father for setting the age at forty before Edward inherited. As if at thirty or now at thirty-five, Edward didn't know what he wanted to do with his life or that he'd outgrow being gay. Never mind that he'd never finished college, or that he'd had numerous careers, each one more exciting than the last.

Who made the stupid rule that you had to do one thing for your entire life? Or even for a few years? Life was meant to be lived, not wallow in a rut.

He'd be the first to admit he'd led an unconventional life. A wild life, even. Scads of parties, beaucoup champagne, madcap friends, overseas adventures, and numerous lovers. For his father, that was right where it had begun and ended.

Edward's lovers.

Like his latest debacle. No, he didn't always pick the best men. Okay, he *never* picked the best men.

"Can I help it if I'm drawn like a moth to the flame whenever there's a bad boy within reaching distance?" he asked Winston.

Woof.

Edward glanced at his dog. "You did *not* just roll your eyes at me."

Woof.

"Since when have you started channeling my father?"

Woof.

Edward gave a long-suffering sigh.

With the gay half of Atlanta hooting over Edward's latest spectacular break up, and oh yes, they *always* had to be spectacular - this time in the middle of the dance floor at this season's gay black tie ball - Edward needed a quiet place to lick his wounds. Not to mention the seven layer chocolate Douberge cake he'd had crushed in his face by that cheating bastard Derek, who Edward had taken into his heart and into his condo.

Secretly relieved to get out of town, Edward had hopped in the convertible, made his excuses for the rest of the social season and packed his matching Louis Vuiton travel bags. Then he drove to Houston from Atlanta with instructions from his mother to visit his grandmother, and find out what was ailing her.

And heal her.

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Chief of Police Jack Whittaker had the mother of all headaches. Again.

Sitting in his white unmarked patrol car, he rubbed his forehead as he leaned back against the headrest. He'd almost run off the side of the road when his vision blurred.

“Shit.” This was the third time in the last two weeks. Whatever was kicking his ass was getting worse, not better. Now his vision was being affected.

Fear crawled into his belly and scratched at his insides. A blind man couldn't be a cop, much less chief of police and he was nowhere near old enough to retire. Hell, he wasn't even forty-five yet.

Jack glanced at his reflection in the rearview mirror. Deep blue eyes. Deeper lines around them. A touch of gray at his temples.

There was no getting past it: he looked older.

“It ain't the years, it's the mileage.”

He's seen a hell of a lot of miles, for damn sure.

Jack blinked, his vision cleared, but the headache pounded on. Opening his glove box, he pulled out a bottle of extra strength pain relievers, popped two, and chased them down with a swig of cold black coffee.

He wouldn't be sitting out on this road if he didn't have so many men out with the flu. Having them come in and work their shifts had only spread it faster through the ranks. But whatever Jack had, it wasn't the flu.

On days like today, he hated his job.

When he'd pulled over, he'd been on his way back to the station at Spring Lake from a vandalism call that had turned out to be nothing more than a high school prank. Not to mention, this afternoon, he had a budget meeting with the mayor.

As he'd sat there, the road had been as empty as his stomach. He put the car into gear, and checked for traffic in his rear view. A car appeared over the hill. His heart kicked up a notch, that familiar rush of the chase grabbing his gut. He waited, watching it eat up the road.

As the bright red convertible Miatta passed him, its wind trail rocked his car. The guy had to be doing sixty - maybe sixty-five. In a forty-five.

With a growl, Jack flicked on his lights, slammed his foot on the gas, and fishtailed onto the road in pursuit.