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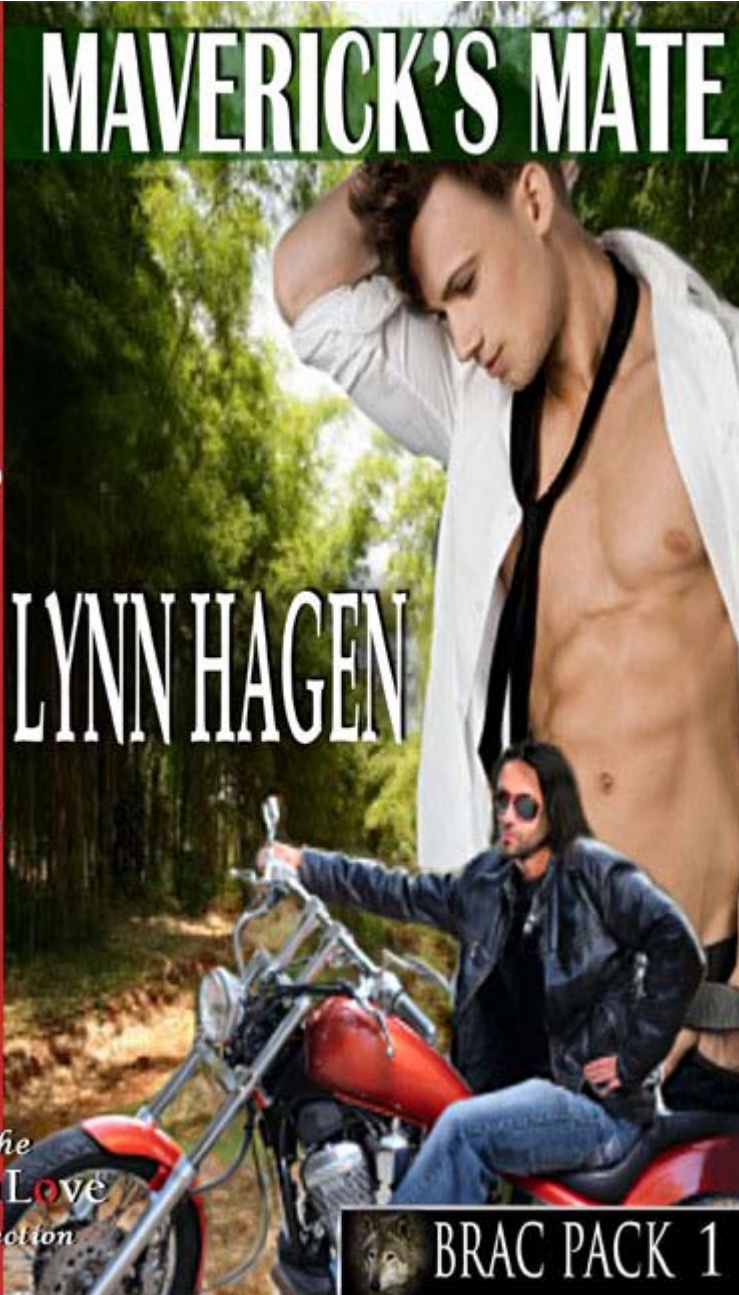
Everlasting Classic

MAVERICK'S MATE

LYNN HAGEN

The
ManLove
Collection

BRAC PACK 1



Brac Pack 1

Maverick's Mate

Maverick Brac has formed a pack of his own, naming them the Brac Pack. With fourteen men under him, they all have one thing in common, the preference for men.

Cecil Walter was living a life no one would wish on their enemy in an abusive relationship with his partner with no way out.

Getting away from pack problems and a migraine, Maverick indulges in his one secret love, Chai tea. While in the coffee shop trying to forget the world outside exists for five minutes, Maverick has found what he never thought to have, his mate, his very human mate. Rescuing Cecil from his abusive boyfriend to finding out who in his pack is trying to take Cecil's life, Maverick has his work cut out for him, but the largest challenge is getting Cecil to come out of his shell and be the man he once was.

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Vampires/Werewolves

Length: 26,250 words

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DEDICATION

To my sister Jean who talked me into publishing my books when I wanted to keep all the little guys to myself.

I love you, Neeners.

MAVERICK'S MATE

Brac Pack 1

LYNN HAGEN

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Chapter One

Maverick Brac sat at the kitchen table, staring down at his half empty bottle of beer. Days like this he wanted to chuck it all in, walk away. It didn't matter that he was the Alpha or that he had a pack depending on him. Some days he hated that dependency. He had to figure out what to do about the pack to the east. Heaving a heavy sigh, he turned the bottle with his fingers.

"Hey, boss man. What's eatin' you?" His beta, Kota, slid into the chair across from him.

"Fucking Jackson is at it again. The guy's got a death wish. No one in their right mind comes into my territory, leaving their scent mark all over the damn place." Maverick swallowed the rest of his beer, slamming the bottle on the table a little harder than he meant to.

"You know he's doing it just to irritate you. He's not stupid enough to actually come into town, or even the surrounding area for that matter. We'll catch him." Crazy thing was Jackson was a spineless coward. He taunted the Brac Pack for shits and giggles, with no real intention of seizing the territory. It was a waste of time and effort. Maverick should just kill him and get it over with.

"Go into town. The coffeehouse is a good place to relax. Kick your feet up and don't worry about here. I'll take care of things while

you're out," Kota offered.

Maverick shot him a dry look. "Fine, you can deal with this mess while I go kick back. Call me if your head explodes. Other than that, leave me be." He needed a change. The everyday running of things had grown stale. That spark was gone and once that left, there wasn't too much to enjoy anymore.

Maverick walked to his motorcycle, thinking about how complicated life had gotten when he decided to form his own pack. His father thought Maverick would take over as Alpha, lead the pack once he handed over the mantle of leadership. After all, Maverick was the largest Timber wolf born, surpassing his father, who only stood six seven. In his wolf form, no other rivaled him.

He knew it would never be. The pack was outraged when they found out he was gay and voiced their narrow-minded opinions to his father.

His father had reassured him that the pack would change their minds. Maverick doubted it. So he left the pack with his best friend, Kota. Slowly, over the centuries, Timber warriors of the same sexual preference joined him until the Brac pack was formed. He made Kota his beta.

When the warrior, Hawk, joined, Maverick made him the Commander over the other wolves, naming them Sentries, guardians of the mates Maverick and the others hoped to one day have.

It had been three centuries since he left his pack. Three centuries and still no mate.

Maverick sighed as he climbed onto his motorcycle and started it, praying he would find what fate had deemed his soon. They lived one thousand years, and he wasn't getting any younger.

The drive into town didn't take long. The estate he owned was deep in the forest, hidden back from the road, but the town wasn't too far away. Pulling the bike into the parking lot of the coffeehouse and cutting the motor, Maverick hoped fate knew what it was doing because he was getting really tired of waiting.

Giving his order, Maverick headed over to the sofa in the corner. He laid his head back on the sofa, closing his eyes and enjoying the peace. The pounding in his head seemed to ease some, the tension draining. He palmed a cup filled with Chai tea. He was a closet tea drinker. Only Kota knew his little secret. He smiled. If the guys knew, he would never hear the end of it. Sipping at the hot brew, an aroma wafted past his nostrils. He inhaled deeply. Cinnamon and summer rain, the aromatic scent bringing his senses alive. Maverick opened his eyes and sat forward, scanning the patrons, trying to find the owner of that strong, spicy scent.

There. A man was staring into the glass case of pastries, shifting from foot to foot with indecision. *He* held that skin-tingling scent. Maverick sat his tea down, watching him. His eyes roamed over the guy's body. Shorn mahogany hair tapered at his delicate neck that gave way to a slender back covered with a red T-shirt. Blue jeans were hugging a firm little ass that sat upon diminutive lean legs. If his backside was that tempting, Maverick was willing to bet the front was even better. As if reading his mind, the guy turned, staring directly at Maverick.

Maverick's eyes hooded. The man was stunning. He had a flop haircut in the front, a patch of it hanging over his right eye. His facial features were perfectly symmetrical, and he had a swan-like neck that was kissable, suckable. The guy tilted his head to the side as they studied each other. The heavenly scented male turned back around, giving his attention to the cashier. He knew the guy felt the pull, which was the only reason he knew he was being watched. Maverick pulled at his soul patch under his lip, waiting to see if the man was going to find a seat or leave. His eyes followed every move the guy's body made—shoulders lifting, waist twisting, ass hitching to the side.

He wanted him.

Mine.

* * * *

Maverick watched as the lights died in the apartment. He would wait another half hour before going to his mate. The urge to claim him in the café had been strong. It was compelling him to take what was his. Tossing his mate down and fucking his brains out in front of the tea selection probably would have gotten him arrested.

Stalking was a much better route.

His mate was the most gorgeous man he had ever laid eyes on. Will power alone was holding him back, and he wanted to claim his mate, not give him a heart attack. This had to be done right. After what seemed like forever, Maverick left the safety of the woods, using the shadow of night as cover, and he slid through the back door. The swoosh of the sliding glass door could barely be heard even by Maverick, who picked up the sound only because of his heightened senses. He followed the scent to the strongest place, the bedroom.

Lying naked with the sheets draped around one hip and falling down his legs was his mate. Maverick stood for a moment, taking in the beautiful form. The lean back that had been covered at the coffee shop was now exposed for his appreciation. His eyes traveled down to a slender waistline. The man was quite tiny. What was his mate's name? What were his passions? Maverick wanted to know everything about him.

He finally lowered his gaze to those two smooth, rounded globes. His canines ached to nip them, to scrape along them as his tongue eased the sting. His cock began to throb, wanting to bury itself deep between those two exquisite mounds. He walked quietly over to the sleeping figure and tugged gently. The sheet gave way and slid down to the floor. Saliva pooled in his mouth as Maverick dipped down and kissed each cheek. His mate moaned, pushing his hips up.

No longer able to resist, Maverick pulled the cheeks apart and laved at the starburst. He nipped with the tip of his fang and then sucked along the mark. His mate's hips pushed back further, enjoying the sensation in his sleep.

Maverick's tongue glided across the hanging sac, sucking one in at a time while his finger breached the little pink prize.

He rimmed his tongue around the hole as he added saliva for the second finger. The tip of his tongue bathed the perineum, loving the fact that his mate was hairless below.

"More," the human moaned.

Maverick pushed a third in, stretching his fingers apart. He nipped him playfully as he stood and disrobed. The night stand revealed a bottle of lube inside waiting to be of use. Grabbing it, he popped the lid and poured a generous amount onto his fingers.

"On your knees," Maverick softly commanded with his hypnotic voice. As long as there were no sudden noises, his mate would stay in a trance. Tonight was about marking him, letting others know who the little guy belonged to.

His mate pushed back onto all fours, spreading his knees, offering himself. Maverick ran his fingers up and down the crease and around the ring of muscles, ensuring the least amount of resistance.

Pouring a thick line from base to tip, he lathered the cool gel around his cock. Placing the palm of his hand between the human's shoulder blades, he eased his mate to submit.

Maverick placed the tip of his cock against the tight opening and pushed, popping past and sliding in to the root. His chin touched his chest, his eyes closing as he breathed in and out, staving off a quick release. This was his mate, not just another back he was staring at as he fucked another anonymous person. His mate. Special care was given only to this man. He would sacrifice his life to keep him safe, to keep him happy. This man was about to find out what being mated to a Timber wolf entailed. He would want for nothing.

The feel of tight, soft flesh clamping down on his dick was incredible. Maverick looked down to watch as his cock disappeared over and over again. His mate tipped his ass higher as Maverick's balls kissed his, the sound of skin connecting ringing throughout the room. Firm lines, tight ass, and a beautiful cock were the epitome of

what Maverick thought heaven was.

His cock became engorged as his release neared, his mate's ass bouncing every time Maverick slammed forward. His head fell back as his canines elongated, and his eyes shifted as his claws extended.

Maverick struck, his teeth embedding into soft, tender flesh. His lips creating suction as he drank the sweetest wine, taking in what would always be a part of him now.

He grabbed his mate's hips, slamming that firm, sweet ass back onto his cock, punishing the pink little pucker. His mate cried out as Maverick's head snapped up, and he roared his release, blood dripping down and off of his fangs. His hips thrust faster, harder as his seed bathed the stretched channel.

Maverick leaned forward and sealed the wound.

"Sleep," he whispered into his mate's ear.

The man instantly nuzzled into his pillow, pulling a leg up, then drifted off. Maverick dressed, once more watching his mate sleep. He bent at the waist and lightly kissed his forehead.

In a barely audible voice, he said, "I will be back for you." He slid back out of the door and into the shadows. Pulling his motorcycle from its hiding place behind the brush, he swung his leg over and straddled it, pulling his cell phone from the inside of his leather.

"Hawk, I need a Sentry for guard duty." He hung up and slipped the phone back into the safety of his jacket.

Now that his scent was permanently on his mate, any wolf near him would detect who had claimed him. An Alpha's mate was the ultimate capture for his enemies. His mate would need to be guarded now.

He heard the Sentry approach before the shadow came into view. Maverick knew which one Hawk sent. Cody. He was the best tracker of the twelve warriors.

Maverick stared at the apartment as he spoke. "I want that man watched," he pointed, "till I say otherwise."

"Yes, Alpha." Cody's reply was short. No questions needed to be

asked as far as his Sentry was concerned. The order was very clear.

Maverick started his bike then pulled onto the road. His mate was simply gorgeous. The need to claim was riding him strong, but he knew the man wasn't ready.

The motorcycle pointed in the direction of home as Maverick tore up the road. He would have his mate watched until he felt his mate was ready to be claimed. A plan needed to be formed. Somehow, he needed to introduce himself to his mate so they could become friends.

Pulling the bike into the gravel drive, he knew what he needed to do. Caden was the youngest of the Sentries. He would send him to befriend his mate and have the two become friends. Next, the Sentry will invite Cecil over. Maverick would take it from there.

He hadn't started the claiming process yet. What they had was just mind-blowing sex. Words of an ancient ritual had to be spoken, but until his mate was ready, Maverick wouldn't speak them.

Laying his helmet on the stand inside the door, Maverick sought out the young wolf. He found Caden sitting back with a couple other warriors in the den.

"My office, Caden." Maverick tucked his thumbs in his front pockets as he turned away.

Entering his office, he slid his leather off, tossing it onto the leather sofa. The warrior walked in behind him.

"Have a seat, pup."

Caden sat down, looking nervously around the room. Maverick knew he was being secretive. The pup was the youngest of them all. Caden was only ninety. He took his duties seriously at such a young age. Once the warrior fully matured, he would make a fine Sentry. Warriors were born, not made.

"I need you to befriend someone for me." Maverick stretched his booted feet up onto the desk. He studied Caden as he pulled at his soul patch.

"Can I ask who?"

Maverick chuckled. "It would be hard for you two to become

friends if you didn't know who it was."

Clearing his throat, Maverick stretched his arms behind his head. He didn't want to reveal that he had found his mate. Not yet. Maverick forgot for a moment that he wasn't alone. Images of his mate's body danced in front of his eyes. That smooth and creamy skin was calling to him. What was his mate's name? Maverick was dying to find out.

This had to be done right, taken slow. Three centuries was a long time to wait only to turn around and screw things up. There were already a few things not in his favor when trying to claim a human mate.

For one, he was a Timber wolf. What human could wrap their head around that? The second was his height. At six nine, he was pretty damn scary to short people. And his mate was short. Pulling his arms from behind his head, Maverick sat forward. "I'm not sure what his name is yet."

Caden's eyebrows pulled in, but the pup didn't question him. He knew he sounded crazy asking the young one this.

Maverick knew he would be back to that apartment even with Cody guarding his mate. The pull was a powerful force. He could feel the draw to the small human even now. Things needed to be taken care of first before he went back to stalk the guy.

Chapter Two

Why was he headed to Jeremy's house? His boyfriend called and asked for him to come over, and stupid him said yes. He always said yes. The plan was for Cecil to head over there straight after work, but someone had called off. Lucky him. If Jeremy gave him shit over this...*yeah right, he would take it like he always did.*

No sooner had he stepped through Jeremy's door than he was snatched up and shoved into the wall, Jeremy's fist punching the drywall inches from Cecil's head. "Where the hell have you been?"

Cecil couldn't believe he was going through this again. His heart hammered in his chest, and his mouth went bone dry. He stood there cowering, wishing Jeremy would calm down.

"Fucking answer me!" Spittle flew in Cecil's face as Jeremy screamed at him. He didn't want to be in this relationship anymore. There had to be a way out. Jeremy had promised no more violence. He even bought Cecil the gold chain that lay around his neck like a collar, as if he were Jeremy's property. The chain felt like it was choking him. He didn't want the roses or the dinners or even the expensive gifts. Cecil wanted out.

"I-I had to work overtime. One of the guys called off, and I had to cover for him till someone else could come in." Cecil ducked as Jeremy's fist struck the wall again. He could hear the drywall crumbling by his ear. Fuck! He hated this.

"I better see it on your pay stub, or your ass is mine. Now get dressed so we can go to Lucky's. I need a damn drink." Jeremy shoved Cecil's shoulder back as he turned and grabbed his keys. Cecil dipped down and grabbed his jacket that had fallen to the floor when

the jerk pushed him.

“Wear those tight jeans I like so much.”

Cecil mentally rolled his eyes. Not only was his boyfriend a real jerk, but he insisted that Cecil dress the way *he* liked to see him, not what Cecil was comfortable in. He would prefer to put on a pair of slacks and a button-down shirt. Instead, the moron had him painting jeans on and wearing netted shirts. He always felt like a slut when he wore those damn clothes. If it were up to him, he would burn every one of those hideous outfits.

Unfortunately, the clothes at Jeremy's were things Jeremy had bought. He said Cecil looked too prim and proper in his own choice of clothing.

Jeremy followed Cecil into the bedroom and yanked his collar back. “Where the hell did that bite come from?”

Cecil reached a hand up and rubbed his neck. He had no clue what Jeremy was talking about, but that answer wouldn't be good enough.

“Answer me, Cecil.” Jeremy knocked him to the floor. “How did you get a bite mark on your neck? Is that why you were late getting here? Cheating on me?” Cecil tried to crawl away, but Jeremy pulled him up by his hair.

“No! I-I don't know how it got there. Must have cut myself at work.” Cecil tried to pull his head free, but Jeremy yanked it back. This was bad. He hadn't seen him this pissed, ever. Cecil knew he had to get away, or Jeremy was going to kill him.

“Pull your pants down. I want to see if someone else has been in you.” Jeremy released him and grabbed at Cecil's slacks. With every survival instinct in him, Cecil pushed Jeremy away then shot out of the bedroom. He slammed into the hallway wall but kept going.

“You bitch.” He heard Jeremy shout out as raced to the front door. If Jeremy caught him, Cecil would suffer greatly. He grabbed the doorknob and turned, feeling panic grip him as the door stayed shut. The lock! Cecil twisted the lock and swung the door open, running through it and down the driveway.

Cecil's eyes grew round as saucers as he dropped to the pavement. A man the size of a semi truck stalked up the driveway. The truck went past him and into the house. He heard wood breaking and Jeremy scream. Glass shattered, and then it became eerily quiet.

"Are you okay?"

Cecil snapped his head around when he heard a deep, masculine voice. It was the man from the coffee shop. What the hell?

Cecil nodded and the man took off into the house as well. Cecil didn't know what to think, so he crept back in to see that the semi truck with multi-colored hair and the coffee shop man had Jeremy cornered. The man resembling the truck glanced over at Cecil, winking with a smile, and then turned back to Jeremy.

"He is no longer your boyfriend. Come near him again, and I will tear you into so many pieces, identification will be impossible." The coffee shop dude growled.

"Fuck you," Jeremy shouted, but Cecil could hear the tremor in his voice. He knew Jeremy was all bravado with him and only him.

"Not even on a good day." The semi truck guy laughed.

The coffeehouse man backed away from Jeremy then turned his sights on Cecil.

Oh, man. He didn't like that look. Why did he feel like his life was about to tip upside down? The guy sauntered over to him and grabbed Cecil around the waist.

"Mine."

"Yeah, whatever you say. Just, uh...yeah." Cecil was at a loss. He peered around the broad body to see Jeremy staring daggers at him.

"Follow me," The coffeehouse man commanded.

What the hell, he wasn't staying here with Jeremy anyway. Cecil's neck throbbed as he walked behind the stranger to the front of the house. He ran his hand over the area, wondering what his ex had seen and why it was making his skin burn just under the surface.

"We need to talk." The coffeehouse man sat on a motorcycle sideways, his legs extended and his ankles crossed. Man, why did

Cecil have an urge to crawl into his lap and lick him from head to toe? His body vibrated at the thought.

"I need you to trust me. I know that's asking a lot since you don't even know me, but I can tell you that you are safer with me than any other place on earth."

Cecil had been lured into a false comfort before by Jeremy. He didn't want another macho man running his life, but somehow he knew the guy was telling him the truth. Somehow, he could feel it deep in his bones. He felt drawn to him.

"Who are you?" Cecil tilted his head, fascinated by the commanding aura that seemed to just flow around the guy. The man had to be at least six eight or six nine. He was the largest man Cecil had ever seen.

"Maverick, and you are my mate." The giant watched Cecil closely, his hands crossed over his lap. "What is your name?"

Man, things just kept getting more and more bizarre. Cecil looked around to see if his perception of reality was distorted. Nope, everything *looked* normal.

"My name's Cecil. Uh, right. Next you're going to tell me you're a wolf or something." Cecil snorted. The guy didn't laugh, not even a hint of a smile. *No way*.

"Very perceptive." He chuckled.

"Look, I really do thank you for helping me with jerk wad in there." Cecil tossed his thumb over his shoulder. "But I need to get back to earth, and you need to go back to whatever place you escaped from." His head hurt, and he really didn't feel like indulging this guy's delusions.

Cecil fell on his backside when the guy's gray eye's shifted to a crimson color and fangs grew from his mouth. He wasn't lying. Crap. Now what? Should he run? Wait a minute, if Maverick was a wolf, then running would be useless. Fine, he would give into his hallucinations. Maybe he would have a bit of fun with it.

"I'll take you home." Maverick stood, and Cecil got to his feet.

There went that funky feeling again, the need to wrap himself around this giant.

“Fine.” Whatever. How did he keep getting into these situations? Cecil scrubbed his forehead with his hand. Maybe he had *idiot* written there to attract these domineering men.

He dusted his bottom off as Maverick handed him a helmet, cursing inwardly as he climbed on. His stomach knotted when Maverick rode directly to his house without directions. What did that mean?

He showed Maverick into his apartment, clearing the couch of yesterday’s laundry. He quickly stuffed the underwear into the basket that had been sitting on the floor and threw the rest of the laundry on top.

“You can have a seat.” Cecil waved at the now cleared couch. The guy did save him after all. The least he could do was be hospitable. Deciding to see where his hallucinations led, Cecil sat next to him.

They were sitting there silently when Maverick pulled Cecil toward him. He stared into Maverick’s beautiful gray eyes. They sparkled like diamonds.

“Will you bind yourself to me?” He took Cecil’s lips in a slow, burning kiss, kneading his hip and clasping the back of his head. The look of arousal in Maverick’s eyes was turning Cecil’s head in a three-sixty hyper-horny direction.

Cecil’s blood was on fire just from one kiss. Wrapping his hands around Maverick’s neck, he opened for him. Cecil pulled at the long, black hair, wanting more, needing to be closer. He pulled his leg up, readjusting himself to straddle Maverick’s lap. His hands played in the long, silken strands as they flowed through his fingers. He felt a strange familiarity with this guy, like he had been with him before. Comfort and contentment washed over him.

Breaking the kiss, Maverick leaned his forehead against Cecil’s. “What does it mean to bind with you?” Cecil asked quietly.

“You will be tied to me. Forever. It’s stronger and deeper than

marriage between humans. It can't be broken. It will be my responsibility to see to your health and happiness. You will want for nothing," Maverick answered in a husky voice.

Where was the down side in this? Cecil mentally slapped himself. He had to think rationally. He didn't even know the guy. The man could be worse than Jeremy. And he couldn't get out of this. Maverick said it was forever. But somehow he *felt* it was right. He *felt* something different. Cecil looked in to his eyes and saw home.

"Yes. I'll bind with you, Maverick. How does it work?"

Maverick's canines slowly extended. Cecil was fascinated and frightened by the sight. Something deep inside made him tilt his head to the side. He wrapped his fists in Maverick's hair as the man scraped a tooth along his skin. Shivers broke out as the act made Cecil nearly come in his pants.

Soft lips were a contrast to the large man. Cecil's head fell back as Maverick kissed and nipped his way up his neck. Cecil's hands clenched and unclenched in the soft strands as Maverick's hands ran up and down his back.

What was he doing? The war inside his head made him pull back slightly. He had said he would bind with the guy, but past experience with Jeremy kept popping up to smack his lust-filled brain around. He shouldn't be doing this—Cecil moaned. His brain cells short circuited when Maverick reached between them and palmed his denim-covered cock.

The only thoughts registering were of having this man inside of him. Shirt buttons started parting as Cecil realized Maverick was removing it.

The urge to cover his exposed skin was making his arms cross over his chest. Compared to Maverick, he was undefined, and he had a few scars to remind him of his life with Jeremy. He resisted the tug until finally giving in and uncrossing his arms.

"You're beautiful."

Cecil felt weird sitting on Maverick's lap half-naked when the

man was still wearing his leather jacket, although the smell of leather was making Cecil's cock hard. He never thought he would go for a bad boy image. Maverick wore the look. It radiated from every pore.

"Come."

Cecil grabbed tight to Maverick as the giant stood, taking him to his bedroom. It wasn't hard for the giant to guess which room it was. There were only two choices.

Cecil's hands fisted at his sides as Maverick laid him down and began to tug his jeans off. His mind screamed at him to make sure this is what he really wanted before committing to it. Cecil bit his bottom lip, the tongue gliding over his body making him forget the question that was just bouncing around in his head.

He really wanted to believe that not all men were abusive and cruel. This man lavishing his body was trying to make him forget. Raising his hands above his head, Cecil became lost as he gave in to the sensations pulsing throughout him.

"Let go," was whispered into his skin.

Cecil pulled his legs up as fingers entered him. He writhed, his body going up in flames as a soft cry left his lips. Maverick took him to new heights as another finger was added.

When the giant pulled back, Cecil whimpered. His hole pulsed at the remembered fingers. Clothes rustled, and he watched as Maverick dropped all fabric as he pushed Cecil further onto the bed.

Hands skimmed down Cecil's sides, over his abdomen, and across his chest. A veil of midnight black hair fell around him as Maverick leaned forward, kissing each eye then his lips.

"Mine."

All Cecil could do was nod. His voice was gone, and his throat was dry as a bone. He shivered as Maverick ran a single finger down the side of his face as if memorizing it. Cecil wondered if this god would still want him in the cold light of morning, still look at him with desire burning in his eyes.

Would that flame fade to a flicker before going out as it had with Jeremy? Would Maverick start abusing him as well when the newness of exploring each other wore off? Pushing aside the fears he carried, Cecil concentrated on the hands and mouth making love to him. He knew he couldn't live his life in fear, but when it had been punched, slapped, and kicked into you for two whole years, it was hard to set it aside and walk away. He felt pathetic giving in so easily at the first gentle touch to come his way.

His mind came back to the present when Maverick slid his hands under Cecil's body and pulled him up, Cecil's arms fell away to the bed as Maverick sucked at the pulse beating rapidly under his skin.

Chapter Three

Maverick lay Cecil down onto the sheets. The scent his mate carried drove him to taste every inch of him. He could feel a slight tremor coming from the body clutched in his hands. The main thing Maverick wanted to do before taking Cecil was to relax him and make him feel safe in his arms.

The fear in his mate's eyes was Maverick's undoing. He leaned forward, kissing each eye before tasting those heavenly lips again. The crown of his cock was leaking heavily onto Cecil's abdomen, but he wouldn't rush this. Even though his plans to have Caden befriend him first were shot to hell when Cody called him to tell him of Jeremy, he still needed to go slow.

His massive body could crush the small frame below him. Reaching out, he brushed the hair from his mate's eye. Tenderness flooded him as he thought of the life his mate must have lived.

Maverick used his tongue to part Cecil's lips, running it along his mate's teeth. His arousal was so potent that his claws threatened to emerge. If only he had the power to make Cecil forget the pain he had lived, but that wasn't in Maverick to do, so he would help his mate come back to life and be the man he once was.

Grabbing the lube from the nightstand, Maverick slicked his cock. His hands shook as he lined himself up. The reality slammed into him that he was finally claiming his mate. He felt like a pup having sex for the first time again. Exhaling slowly, he breached the tight star.

Maverick dropped to his forearms, the skin stretched so tightly around his shaft he was so close to losing it. In that moment, he knew he was nothing without this man. Only half a soul.

“Do you accept me as your mate, Cecil?” He had to bind this soul to his, never wanting him to leave his side again.

“Yes, Maverick,” came a moaned reply.

Maverick struck, sinking his canines into his mate’s shoulder, his eyes rolling back as he felt the ribbons of their life forces untwining from their separate souls and realigning together, binding them. Their hearts synchronized.

Maverick snapped his hips as his mouth pulled on his mate’s neck, the blood flowing onto his tongue and down his throat. He pulled harder at the wound, his eyes untamed from the essence entering him.

Maverick’s head shot up, and he roared his release, his mate’s blood flowing from his canines. He slammed his cock into his mate, riding the orgasmic storm. The binding was complete.

Dropping his head, he sealed the wound, licking the escaped blood running down his mate’s shoulder. His hips slowed to a sensual grinding. Gasping for breath, he shook his head, small aftershocks bursting in his groin. They both moaned as his soft cock slid free.

Maverick pulled Cecil to him, draping him across his chest, kissing him softly. “We are now bonded mates.”

* * * *

Cecil lay sated against the muscled chest. His sweet prince had rescued him from the dragon. His hand roamed over hard pectoral muscles, amazed at how turned on he was. It still surprised him how much Maverick affected him. Large men, and muscled men for that matter, had never appealed to him.

Maybe it was the fear of the damage they could do to him, he thought as his hand ran over solid ridges that made up the man’s abdomen. Cecil kissed his nipple, his tongue licking at it as the round delight pebbled under his playful assault.

Cecil moved over as Maverick cursed and reached over the side of

the bed to answer his ringing phone.

“Maverick.” The giant answered in what could only describe as the deepest, huskiest voice he had ever heard. His hand skimmed over Maverick’s back, not seeming to get enough of touching him. The giant leaned into his touch. This encouraged Cecil to explore further.

“I’m not able to make it right now. You’ll have to handle it, Hawk.”

Cecil wondered who this Hawk person was as he gathered Maverick’s long hair in hands, running it over his face. It smelled like menthol. He wondered what Maverick shampooed with.

As Maverick turned over, Cecil released his hold on the black silk.

“I’m sorry, baby.” Maverick sighed. “But we have to go.”

Cecil’s felt his pulse quicken at the statement. It wasn’t a request. He frowned at Maverick’s words. His eyes roamed over his bedroom, his thoughts racing from one possibility to the next of what Maverick meant.

“Pack what you want to take.” Cecil leaned back as Maverick sat up, grabbing for his clothes.

“I’m not moving in with you.” Was the giant insane? Taking a stranger home to have the best sex ever was one thing—a little slutty, which he was not. But moving in with said stranger? Hell no. Rolling off the other side of the bed, Cecil reached in his dresser drawer for a pair of boxers. Can’t argue with a crazy man naked.

Cecil’s stomach twisted into knots as Maverick’s actions of getting dressed stilled. He was bent over, his long black hair hanging precariously as the man stared at Cecil as if he had lost his mind.

This was it. The man would try to bend him to his will, dominating Cecil and forcing him to do as he told him. His eyes watched Maverick cautiously as the man straightened, clearing his throat as he dressed. “I have enemies that would love nothing more than to obtain you. It isn’t safe here.”

Obtain? As in kidnap? Cecil rubbed his temples, not really following any of this. His independence was at stake here. Somehow

he knew that if he followed Maverick that he would never again know freedom as he did now.

Summoning courage he didn't feel, he said, "I can't." His heart was racing wildly as he pushed on. "I won't live under someone else's thumb again."

* * * *

Maverick pulled his jeans on as he studied his mate. The fear emanating from the false bravado was disturbing. Never in his life had he harmed a weaker man, and his mate wasn't going to be the first.

Pulling the T-shirt over his head, he removed his hair from inside of it. There had to be a way to convince the little guy to come home with him. Their home now. If that lunatic Jackson knew Cecil was his mate, all hell would break loose.

Maverick sighed deeply, knowing he had his work cut out for him.

"I'm not going to force you, baby. The choice is yours. Just know that I've waited over three centuries to find you. I would never do anything to hurt you now that I have claimed you."

He had to fight the smile that threatened to break across his face as his mate's jaw dropped, his eyes growing as wide as saucers.

"Three centuries? Seriously?"

Maverick gave in and chuckled. "I'm old." Pulling his boots on, he continued. "But not that old." Maverick winked at his mate, watching a blush creep across that gorgeous little face.

"Y-you'd never hurt me?"

Maverick grew serious, growling out his reply. "Never." He took a calming breath, not wanting to scare his already skittish mate. "I would kill anyone who I thought was a threat to you. That ignorant ex of yours should count himself lucky he still breathes."

"I'm scared," Cecil admitted softly.

Maverick crossed the room in two strides, pulling his mate over to

the bed. He sat down, reducing his size for the comfort of his mate. "I know." Maverick cupped his face. "It must be terrifying trusting someone you don't know after what you've been through. I won't harm you. I promise you this."

Cecil stood between Maverick's open legs, the internal struggle showing on his face. Maverick looked into his eyes, waiting to see when a decision was made. It wasn't long.

"Okay."

Maverick exhaled his relief. If his mate hadn't agreed, it would have been hard to run his pack from this tiny apartment. The fourteen wolves and Maverick would have been cramped. "I can send one of the warriors here to pack your personal belongings up."

Cecil jerked back, "How many of you are there?"

"There are twelve warriors that are the Sentries that guard the mates we claim. The wolf who delegates over them, Hawk. Then my beta, Kota."

"And what rank do you have?"

Maverick was dreading this. After what Cecil had been through, this wasn't going to go over well with him. "I'm the Alpha, I rule them all."

He pulled his mate into his arms as the smaller man began to twist his underwear in his hands. "I won't hurt you, baby." He whispered into the shell of his mate's ear. "Ever."

Small arms snaked around him, holding on for dear life.

"I have you. He'll never hurt you again." Maverick caressed Cecil's back, laying his cheek on the soft head of hair under his chin.

* * * *

"I'm telling you guys. Maverick scared the shit out of me when he walked into that house. I've never seen him like that. That little guy was the only safe one there. I can't believe he told me to watch him and didn't mention that I would be guarding his predestined mate. A

little inside info would have gone a long way.” Cody tipped back the bottle of beer, taking another hard draft. He still felt like Maverick was going to walk through the door and rip his throat out for letting his mate get attacked. Shit, this was so fucked up.

Hawk wasn't a happy camper either. Cody spent the better part of an hour having his rear-end handed to him by his Commander.

“Wish I could have been a fly on the wall. Poor Cody, almost getting the Alpha's mate killed. Might as well hand in your tin star and pop gun, ride out of town on your broken down horse.” The Sentry Remi was laughing hysterically, holding his side.

Shit wasn't that funny.

“Piss off, Remi.” Cody tossed his empty beer bottle in the trash, twisting the cap off of another one.

* * * *

Cecil would take a leap of faith, praying Maverick caught him. Once he was dressed, Maverick held his hand as they left his apartment behind, left his old life in the bedroom. Taking one last look back, Cecil closed the door.

Starting over was scary.

Cecil held on tight as Maverick left the town behind, riding into the countryside, taking him further away from the only life he had known since moving here. The motorcycle vibrated under him as Maverick rode with skill. The helmet was a little stifling, but Maverick had insisted on it. Cecil turned his head, resting it against the large back as they glided down the one-lane country road.

Maverick turned onto a gravel road that led to a ginormous house. Cecil's jaw dropped at the sheer size of it.

The bike pulled to a stop next to a row of pickup trucks. All looked brand-new. Maverick cut the motor, kicking the stand down as he removed his helmet. Cecil did the same. Once again, he leaned in to smell the menthol surrounding Maverick's hair.

“Use my shoulders.”

Cecil did as he climbed down. He tucked the helmet under his arm as he followed Maverick up the front steps and into the house. They were in a large foyer, rooms webbing off in every direction. He followed behind the giant as Maverick led him into a den.

Holy cow! The room swarmed with mountainous men. Cecil stepped behind Maverick, intimidated as hell. Was enormity a prerequisite to be a warrior? If so, these guys passed with flying colors.

Maverick reached behind, bringing Cecil front and center. All eyes turned to him. Cecil gulped, feeling sweat pulse from his pores. Maybe this was a huge mistake. The men looked like they ate kittens for breakfast. Cecil swallowed, praying he wasn't the next kitten on the menu. They all were staring at him curiously. His midget height probably intrigued them when compared to the vertical galaxy they lived in.

Chapter Four

“Hey, boss man. Who’s the hottie?” Remi teased Maverick.

“This is my mate, Cecil. I know everyone will introduce themselves and make him feel right at home.” Maverick put his hand on the small of Cecil’s back, giving a small amount of comfort to his trembling mate.

“Hey, Cecil. I’m Remi. How’s it going?” Remi extended his hand, winking at his mate. Maverick gave the Sentry a low growl.

“Fine, nice to meet you,” his mate squeaked out. Maverick pulled the smaller man closer to him.

“Hey, Cecil. I’m Cody. We met earlier.” Cody bumped knuckles with Cecil, locking eyes with Maverick. “Sorry, Alpha.”

“No hard feelings...this time.” Maverick’s lip tugged up in a smile. He wasn’t mad at Cody for not protecting him against Jeremy, but it was fun as hell watching him sweat. He had done everything he could, calling Maverick when Cecil went in to that house. How was the warrior supposed to know his mate’s ex was abusive?

“I remember you. Thank you for helping me,” Cecil said.

Maverick slowly stepped away, giving Cecil room to interact with the men who would be responsible for keeping him safe. His mate would have to get comfortable with them because they were going to be a permanent fixture in his life.

“Anytime, little dude.” Cody tilted his bottle at a guy standing behind him. “That redhead standing over there is Jasper.”

“Nice to meet you, Cecil.”

“Same here.” Cecil shook Jasper’s hand.

The rest of the guys introduced themselves. The Alpha knew Cecil

was going to have a heck of a time remembering everyone. As if reading his mind, Cody patted Cecil's shoulder.

"Don't worry if you can't remember the rest of these Neanderthals' names. You'll get it." Before letting go, he squeezed Cecil's shoulder. Maverick watched all of this, gauging his mate's anxiety level.

Now that they were bonded, he would be able to feel what his mate was feeling when close to each other. So far, all Cecil felt was nervous.

* * * *

"Do you shoot pool?" Cody led him over to the bar, handing Cecil a cold beer. "You are twenty-one, aren't you?" The warrior pulled the bottle back, waiting.

"Actually, no. I'm twenty. I'll take a soda if you have one." Cody handed him a root beer.

Thanking Cody for the drink, he looked around. Maverick had disappeared. "I've never played pool." Damn, he didn't see a game system anywhere. This was going to be torturous. Who didn't have one in their home that could afford it?

"What do you do for fun then?"

"I play video games." Cecil's cheeks pinked. He waited for the guys to make fun of him. Most adults did. He loved his job, but sometimes he was embarrassed to admit where he worked.

"I was thinking about getting one for here. What do you recommend?" Cody asked.

Cecil and Cody engaged in a long conversation about different systems and their pros and cons. They talked about the new games out and the best vintage ones. The guy was more knowledgeable than Cecil thought he would be. He couldn't believe Cody was going to go out and just buy one. Cecil had been saving up to get one for home.

"So which system do you rock at home, Cecil?" Cody was reading

his thoughts. Cecil kicked his toe at the floor, shoving his hands into his pockets. It was embarrassing to tell someone who had money that you couldn't afford one even though you worked at a video store.

"Hey, I didn't mean to embarrass you. It's cool. Come on, let's go raid the fridge." Cody led him into the kitchen as Cecil watched for Maverick. Where did he go?

"Looking for me?" Large arms came from behind him, circling his shoulders, lips kissing him on the neck. Cecil smiled, laying his hands on Maverick's arms, enjoying the feeling of having Maverick surround him.

The feeling of being safe cocooned him. Cecil felt his face flush when Maverick chuckled in his ear. "Hungry?"

Cecil nodded, too flustered to speak. He turned in his wolf's arms, not wanting Cody to see his erection pressing against the front of his jeans. God, he wanted the wolf again. Cecil tilted his head back as Maverick tucked a knuckle under his chin, lifting his head for a kiss.

"Should I leave and come back later?" Cody chuckled while setting everything out for the sub sandwiches. The guy with the silver eyes came in the kitchen, grabbing items to make his own sandwich. Cecil thought he remembered the guy being called Remi.

"Hey, that's for the Alpha's mate. He eats first. You should know that, Remi." Cody narrowed his eyes as he knocked Remi's hands away. Cecil watched as Remi quickly took a step back, glancing over at Maverick nervously.

Cody took the attention off of Remi. "Okay, little dude, what do you want on it?"

"I can get it." Cecil stepped up to the table, grabbing items and making his sandwich. He caught the look Cody gave Maverick. "Did I do something wrong?" he stepped from the table, the knife smeared with mayo still in his hand.

"No, baby, make your sandwich. Come to my office when you're done." Maverick kissed him on the lips then left.

Once they were alone, Cecil turned on Cody, "Okay, Cody. What

did I do wrong?" He wasn't stupid. He felt the vibes.

"I, uh...shit. Don't tell him I said anything. The big guy is already pissed at me. An Alpha's mate always eats first and *never* prepares his own food." Cody looked uncomfortable.

Cecil didn't want to come into Maverick's home and become a nuisance. How was he supposed to know? "Sorry, no one told me. Is there anything else I should know?" Cecil set the knife down, pulling the chair out and sitting. Cody immediately began to prepare his food. Cecil didn't know if he could get used to someone else serving him like this.

Cody explained it as he made his sandwich. "Well, you are never to go anywhere unescorted. That's only because we have rival packs and kidnapping an Alpha's mate is considered a trophy catch. Wars have started because of that. I think the one about us bathing you is outdated. At least, I hope it is. No offense."

"Yeah, you're a cutie, but I ain't scrubbing your back." Remi chuckled.

"Believe me, none taken. I don't know if I can get used to this. I'm very independent. I even have a job."

Cody and Remi glanced at one another, and then Cody went back to his task.

"What?"

"Nothing. Here's your sandwich. Want something to drink? Soda?" Cody leaned into the fridge, avoiding Cecil's question.

"Fine, I'll ask Maverick." Cecil ate in silence, trying to absorb everything that had happened so far. Today was one for the books. Now Cody was telling him there were rules to this mating? What other surprises would he discover?

"Okay, Remi. Eat." Cecil and Cody watched as Remi laid waste to the cold cuts. Man, could he eat. Remi had a sandwich stacked so high. There was no way the guy could open his mouth that wide. He watched in fascination as Remi devoured it.

Guess the guy had a detachable jaw. Cody cleaned up the mess,

storing everything back into the fridge.

“Wanna ride with me to go check out a game system?” Cody asked as he wiped the table down then tossed the towel into the sink.

Was Cody serious? Even if it wasn't for him, Cecil would still love to help him pick out everything he would need to set up a cool “play-room.” “Let me let Maverick know I'm leaving. I'll catch up with you.” Cecil headed down the hall where he had seen Maverick disappear. He tried to guess which door was his office, finding bedroom after bedroom. How many bedrooms did this house have?

“Can I help you?”

Cecil swung around to find a tall, wiry man standing with his hands behind his back. He had beady eyes and slicked back brown hair. He did *not* look like he fit in with the rest of the guys here. “Yeah, I'm looking for Maverick's office.” Did the guy actually sneer at him?

“And you are?”

Yeah, he didn't like him already. “Cecil, Maverick's mate.” That was definitely a sneer.

“Hmm. This way.” The man looked Cecil up and down with a disapproving look. Cecil pushed his bangs back from his eyes as he followed the guy down the hall, paying attention to the door he stopped at. He made a mental note of the location. That way, he wouldn't get lost again.

The man looked over his shoulder at Cecil, turning his nose up to him. What was that for? Whatever. The guy knocked on the door, waiting for a reply. Maverick yelled for them to enter.

* * * *

“Hey, baby. Finished eating?” Maverick held his arms as Cecil came to him, climbing into his lap. He knew Maverick could taste mayo when he kissed him. A breath mint would have been handy right about now.

“You need something, Lonny?” Maverick never took his eyes off of Cecil as he addressed his assistant.

“I found your *mate* wandering around. I thought I would bring him to you.”

“Thanks. That will be all. Lock the door on your way out.” Maverick had devilish ideas and didn’t want an audience.

“Yes, Alpha.” Lonny tilted his nose up and left the room.

“Cody wants me to go with him to buy a video game system. I wanted to let you know I was leaving.” Maverick cupped Cecil’s face, sipping at his lips. He traced his tongue along Cecil’s lower lip then delved in for a mind-blowing scorcher.

Maverick hissed into soft lips as hands fumbled at his jeans. Leaning back, he gave his mate room to do as he wanted.

Unzipping and freeing Maverick’s cock, Cecil took it into his mouth. Maverick caressed Cecil’s jaw as he licked and sucked the crown, running his tongue along the large vein that snaked the length.

Maverick moaned, lifting his hips to pull his jeans down his legs, which pooled at his ankles. He spread his knees further apart for Cecil’s assault. He cupped his balls as his mate ran his tongue over the eye in the head, slurping up the pre-cum that dripped down the side. “That’s it, baby. Suck my cock.”

Cecil opened wider, taking the girth down his throat. Gagging, he pulled back. Maverick knew he was well endowed and that his mate would have trouble taking all of him in.

“Take only what you can, love.” Maverick wanted to fill Cecil’s mouth with his seed, emptying his balls down his throat. He pushed in and out in short bursts, not wanting his mate to choke again.

Maverick moaned as Cecil concaved his cheeks, pulling Maverick further in, creating a tight vacuum. Maverick shuddered as Cecil suppressed his gag reflex and pushed forward until the head of his cock hit the back of Cecil’s throat. Relaxing his muscles, Cecil took him down further.

Maverick grabbed Cecil’s head, holding it steady as his hips

bucked. Cecil took it. His mate massaged Maverick's prick with his tongue, and his lips stretched as he began to bob his head. Maverick was too close with the way his mate was sucking him.

Cecil pulled back, sucking on the head, his tongue working magic around the helmet, circling the bundle of nerves. Maverick led Cecil's hand to his nuts, rolling them around and lightly squeezing. Cecil toyed with his perineum, his finger sliding back and forth.

"Gonna...come." Maverick panted.

Cecil doubled his efforts. Locked onto the head, he pumped Maverick's cock in a fast pace frenzy.

"Shit, baby. Coming." Maverick threw his head back, shouting Cecil's name as he came down his throat, ropes of hot seed spurting continuously. His mate struggled to swallow it all, but a little escaped down his chin.

Maverick pulled free of his mate's mouth, licking up the wasted seed. He grabbed Cecil in a passionate kiss, tasting his flavor in his mate's mouth. It was intoxicating. He pulled Cecil onto his lap, his back to Maverick, and pulled Cecil's jeans down. He began to masturbate Cecil's cock, playing with his balls. The desire was riding him to watch his mate come.

"You do it, baby. I want to watch." Maverick watched Cecil grab his own prick, pumping his hand and pulling at his balls. "Damn, that's sexy." Maverick licked his finger then reached his right hand under Cecil's ass, sliding a finger in his tight hole.

Cecil bowed his back, his seed shooting out onto his hand and the desk, his body jerking as he made the cutest sex noises. His mate twitched a few more times before collapsing back, panting. Maverick slipped his finger out then circled his arms around him, kissing his neck.

"You are one sexy man. I'll watch you do that anytime." Maverick reached in one of his drawers, pulling Kleenex out. He wiped his mate clean and then swiped up the come shots on the desk before helping Cecil pull his pants back on. Maverick tossed the

napkin in the trash, pulling his rumpled self back together as well. “Go have fun with Cody.” He kissed his mate one more time before Cecil stood and promised to be back soon.

Chapter Five

Lonny watched as the Alpha's mate walked down the hall. Jealousy ripped through him. *He* was the one who loved Maverick the most. Not that pint-size human. How dare he come in here where Lonny had set up home and try to take everything away from him. He would bide his time until the necessary changes could be made.

* * * *

Cecil walked out of the office, seeing someone slide around the corner, out of sight. He stood there a moment, waiting. When no one appeared, Cecil walked off to find Cody.

"Hey, Cody. You ready?"

Cody hopped up, grabbing his keys from the glass bowl by the door.

"Grab your coat, Cecil. It's nippy out today."

"I don't have one. I didn't think to bring it with me." Cecil sat on the couch. Guess he wasn't going. Cecil had forgotten his coat in the winter box at home. The ride to Maverick's house was cold enough, and he wasn't going through that again.

He looked around the room, trying to decide what to do. He didn't like pool or cards. He wasn't a television watcher. Maybe he could find a book to read. Had to be a library in this big house somewhere.

"Hang on, C-man. I'll be right back." Cody took off down the hall. Was he going to tell Maverick that Cecil was coatless? Well damn, was there anything he could do around these guys that wouldn't get him into trouble?

Cody came back into the den. “Come on, Cecil. Let’s rock ‘n’ roll.”

Man, Cody was right. It was chilly out. The truck finally warmed as the heaters began to blast hot air.

“Got orders from the big guy to buy you a coat. To the mall we go. Hope you like shopping.” Cody grinned at him as he waggled his brows. He put a CD in, cranking it up. Godsmack was playing. Cody threw his arm over the back of the seat as they cruised down the highway. Cecil was enjoying the freedom of getting out of the small town, even if it was just for a few hours.

They made it to the mall in record time, thanks to Cody’s lead foot. “Don’t go telling your mate I was speeding with you in the truck. He’d hang me out and skin me.”

“Not a word. Promise.” Cecil laughed as Cody rushed him into the mall and out of the cold.

It was packed. Of course, Saturday was a busy time for the mall. The place was crawling with teenagers. He watched as a couple of Goth kids headed to the food court, noses pierced and wearing all black. Cecil liked how teenagers freely expressed themselves. One guy walked by with a purple mohawk. The freedom to be whatever you wanted, or even the choice to change it, was a beautiful thing in his opinion.

“This way, C-Man.” Cecil followed Cody to a department store. They passed a woman trying to spray them with the latest disgusting smell. He hated perfume. Another woman tried to pull them over to try the “softest lotion money can buy.” No thanks. They hit the escalators, taking it two flights up to the outerwear.

“Okay, Cecil. Let’s get you a coat.” Cecil and Cody rifled through the racks, trying to find a decent one for Cecil’s small frame. They weren’t having any luck in the men’s department.

“Uh, Cecil, I’m not trying to be funny or anything. Honestly, I’m not. But maybe we should look in the boys section.” Cody gave him an apologetic look.

"It's cool. Just don't tell anyone where we got my coat." Cecil laughed.

"Promise."

Cody snapped the hangers to the right as he went through the selection. He pulled one out for Cecil's approval.

"Spiderman! Kiss my ass, Cody." Cecil barked with laughter.

"Shit, you got a mouth on you. Does Maverick know about your potty mouth?" Cody teased.

"I don't fucking think so. You gonna tell on me?"

Cody burst out laughing. He tossed a black coat at Cecil to try on.

"This one's good. It fits damn nicely."

"You better stop cursing. My Alpha's gonna think I corrupted you. No offense, I like my balls hanging *between* my legs." Cody was chuckling as he led Cecil to the checkout. They went one floor down, heading to the back.

"Where are we going now?"

"Alpha told me to get you some clothes, too. I do what he tells me." Cody started pulling T-shirts and boxer briefs off of the shelf, and he held a pair up to Cecil's waist.

"Stop that. You look like my mother." Cecil swatted at his hands. A woman standing on the other side of the shelf giggled. Cecil smacked Cody in the arm. "See what you started. I can pick my own underwear out." He grabbed a few pair in his size, pushing Cody to move on.

Next Cecil was led over to the jeans and shirts. "Did he say a few things or a shopping spree?"

"Just get what you need and stop crying like a baby. I'll take you to the toddlers section if you don't stop complaining."

Cecil narrowed his eyes, "You wouldn't dare."

"Try me." Cody again held clothing up to Cecil to check his size.

"I'm going to start calling you Mommy in a minute if you don't knock it off." Cecil snatched at the jeans, but he was too slow as Cody yanked them out of his grasp.

“Go ahead.” Cody chuckled. “People will look at *you* funny, not me.”

They gathered jeans and shirts and headed for the checkout. How much money did Maverick have? They were definitely on a shopping spree. He wasn’t comfortable with Maverick spending all this money on him, and he voiced his objection to Cody.

“You are his mate. You will want for nothing. Get used to it. Believe me when I say you’ll piss him off if you refuse. Let the spoiling begin.” Cody grabbed Cecil’s arm, leading him to the escalators. Cody wouldn’t even let him carry the bags. Cecil was getting frustrated.

Now this was what he was talking about. The game store. Cecil could get lost in here for hours. He helped Cody pick out an X-box and all the accessories a guy could dream of. The wolf bought at least ten games to go with it. Cecil’s mouth dropped open when everything was rung up. Must be nice to have money lying around like that. He wasn’t jealous—just wishful.

They stopped at a mobile phone stand. Cody told him to pick a cell phone out.

“Okay, I draw the line here. I don’t *need* a cell phone. This is too much. No, Cody.” Cecil tried to walk away, but Cody reined him in.

“I can really embarrass you here. Don’t make me do it, Cecil.” Cody gave him a warning stare.

Cecil walked away.

“But, baby! I didn’t mean to sleep with him, honest. It just happened! Come back! Let’s talk about it. I love you!” Cody shouted at Cecil.

Cecil was mortified. His face turned a deep crimson as he looked around to see many people snickering and some scowling at him. Mothers covered their young children’s ears. Mall security approached Cecil.

“Is there a problem here, sir?” One rent-a-cop looked at Cecil in disgust. The other winked.

"No, no problem." Cecil sputtered out. He was going to kill Cody. He stormed back to a smiling wolf. Yeah, he was going to skin him.

"Fine, I'll pick one out. Payback's a bitch." Cecil pointed to a phone, not even looking. His arms were crossed over his chest and his eyebrows furrowed. How embarrassing was that!

A woman walked by him, winking. She stopped to give Cecil her phone number.

"Call me, stud."

Cecil stared at her unbelievably. Were woman actually turned on by gay men? Cody snatched the phone number from his hand and threw it in the trash.

"You are *really* trying to get me killed today." He handed Cecil the bag with his cell phone and accessories in it.

"Hey, Code-man. You started it with that cheating outburst. What do you think Maverick would do if I told him about that, huh?"

"You wouldn't!"

"Try me." Cecil danced out of the way as Cody lunged for him, giggling as he raced away. He bumped into someone, nearly knocking them over.

"Excuse me. I'm sorry about that." Cecil caught himself before he fell.

"No problem, Cecil."

Cecil snapped his head up. Jeremy. Was the guy following him? Cody walked up next to him and growled as Cecil got behind Cody.

Yeah, he was a chicken. So what? Too many memories of abuse assailed Cecil. Jeremy had put the fear of god in him and old habits die hard. He knew Jeremy couldn't touch him now, but the triggers were still there.

"Run along, little boy. Leave us men alone." Cody sneered.

Jeremy glared at him and walked away.

"You okay, Cecil?" Cody walked back over to the phone stand, retrieving the bags that were dropped.

Cecil shook his head, unable to answer the wolf.

“Come on, buddy. We have everything we came for. Let’s get you back to your mate.”

* * * *

“What do you mean it was for me? Enough is enough. I’m not taking it.” Cecil crossed his arms over his chest, twisting his nose in the air.

“What do you mean you won’t take it? Don’t you like it?” Maverick couldn’t understand why his mate was refusing his gift. He knew Cecil wanted a game system but couldn’t afford one. So why was he being so damn stubborn? Cody had given him his credit card back and all the receipts. He knew his mate was well taken care of today.

He had told Cody to buy him the console and all the accessories under the ruse that it was for the den. He knew his mate wouldn’t have picked out what he really wanted if he knew it was for himself. Cecil was going to take it whether he liked it or not. A mate didn’t refuse gifts, let alone from his Alpha. It was unheard of.

“Maverick, it’s too much. You’re spending too much on me. I appreciate it, I do. But I can’t take it. Take it back.” Cecil walked out of his office. Did his mate lose his mind?

“Cecil, get back here now!” Maverick barked in his deep Alpha commanding voice.

Cecil slowly stepped back through the door. A look of fear was on his face, his hands twisting together in front of him. Maverick could feel the fear coming off of him in waves. He could also see him trembling. This was not how he expected his mate to react when he presented him with the gift, but he was pissed. “You will never turn your back on me when I am speaking to you, do you understand? You will take what I offer without complaint. I will not tolerate this behavior from my mate.”

“Yes, sir.” His mate’s eyes were darting everywhere. “May I go

now, sir?"

Maverick nodded, watching his mate run across the hall and slam the door. He cursed when he realized he hadn't even shown his mate their bedroom yet. The only excuse he could give himself was that this mate stuff was new to him. Maverick was trying.

He felt like a bully, hating the way he had handled that. Cecil was human. He didn't follow the same guidelines as the wolves. Cecil didn't know that it was disrespectful to refuse a gift from his mate and Alpha. Maverick would have to keep that in mind when dealing with his human mate. He needed to explain things to Cecil. Calmly.

Maverick strolled across the hallway, trying to open the bedroom door, but it was locked. He knocked. He had never been locked out of a room in his own home before. When no one answered, he knocked again. Nothing. Fuck this. He broke it down to find the bed empty and the curtain blowing.

His mate had run away.

Maverick was seething. Didn't Cecil know that he was the number one target now for his rivals? The small man didn't realize the danger he was in. Dammit. Maverick called his Sentries to attention. There were six of them in the den.

"Cecil has gone missing. I want him found now!" The Sentries took off, shifting into their wolf forms. Maverick stormed out of the house. Cecil was so in trouble for this. First, though, he had to find him.

Maverick wasn't going to shift. Tracking his mate would be easier in his wolf from, but bringing the wayward human back would be more challenging without a vehicle. He grabbed the emergency pack from the closet in the foyer which contained several changes of clothes. The warriors would need them when they shifted back.

Tossing the pack into the bed of his truck, Maverick followed the wolves. They would track down his mate, and then Maverick was going to spank his bottom.

The Alpha wouldn't allow himself to worry. Worrying would

keep him unfocused, and he needed to keep a cool head. The dangers his mate just placed himself in had his knuckles turning white as he gripped the steering wheel.

If Jackson or one of his pack members found Cecil before Maverick, then a war would start. No one took what was his.

Chapter Six

He flung himself on the bed, crying, and balled up into the fetal position, letting large tears roll down his face. Maverick was just like Jeremy, only worse. He was three times the size of his ex and had ten times the strength. For the first time, Cecil was beginning to regret his decision.

He wanted to go home. He was a kept man, and he couldn't have that. Cecil had to get out of here. There was no way he was going to stay in a gilded cage. Wiping the tears, he stood.

Cecil closed the bedroom door, locking it. He tiptoed over to the window and, checking behind him, he slid the window up. He crawled through, landing on his feet. Looking around to see if anyone spotted him, he shot across the yard, heading for the woods.

Racing around the house, Cecil ran to the only place he could think of at the moment.

It took what felt like hours to reach what he thought would be a safe haven.

"Chad, it's Cecil. Open up." Man he hated to have to turn to his nasally coworker. Where else did he have to go? His apartment would be the first place searched. Chad finally opened the door, stepping aside to allow him entrance.

"What's up, Cecil? Finally decide to grace us with your presence?" Cecil rolled his eyes. The guy was annoying.

"Hey, just thought I would come by and take you up on your offer to play." Cecil pasted a phony grin on his face. It really sucked to realize you had no one when you needed a place to run to. He would just suck it up and act like these guys were his buddies.

“Sure, come on in and play. Sasha just got the newest release out. It’s a killer.” Chad snorted at his own joke. Maybe he had been too hasty with his prison break. Maybe dealing with Maverick’s overbearing manner wasn’t so bad compared to Chad’s bad puns and nasal-onics. He sighed. Too late now. To be honest, he was afraid to face Maverick. He had gone too far.

Cecil sat there bored out of his ever loving mind. He played the game with fake enthusiasm, declined the illegally purchased alcohol and started missing Maverick something awful. He wanted to go back.

Cecil knew running away from his problems was juvenile. He had panicked as flashbacks of Jeremy triggered the urgent need to run. Now he was stuck in a different kind of hell. The seventh circle, to be exact, with Chad as the gatekeeper.

His head jerked up when he heard howling. Had they found him? He had been gone for hours. Cecil was tired and hungry. Cheese puffs and soda weren’t cutting it.

There was a loud, booming knock on the front door. Cecil jumped. He had an urge to hide in a closet. Instead, he watched as Chad looked through the peephole and then paled. Yeah, his mate was here. Time to go back to the happy farm.

The banging became louder, with an audible growl to accompany it. Chad ran to his bedroom, slamming the door. Cecil rolled his eyes and got up, bracing himself for the abuse. He opened the door to one pissed off looking mate.

Maverick grabbed Cecil, pulling him into his arms. This wasn’t exactly what he had expected, but he would take it.

It beat getting knocked around.

“Let’s go home,” Maverick said in a deadpan tone.

* * * *

Cody stared up at the magnificent show Mother Nature was

giving. Lightning streaked across the sky, lighting up the night. Storm was coming. Maybe he would go home tonight. If Maverick was going to punish Cecil, he didn't want to be there. Cody had grown to care about the man in such a very short time. He wouldn't be able to listen to any screaming or crying. His conscience couldn't take it.

"You think he'll hurt the little guy?" Remi asked solemnly.

"Don't know. I'm heading home. See ya tomorrow." He shifted into wolf form, taking off across the field.

* * * *

The drive home was silent. As badly as Maverick wanted to reach out to his mate, he was too angry right now. Instead, he stared out into the night, appreciating the beauty of the storm heading their way. It added mystery to the darkness. He watched the lightning storm until they pulled into the graveled drive.

Taking his mate inside, Commander Hawk was standing in the den, his hands shoved in the pockets of his charcoal gray slacks.

"I'm glad you found him, Maverick. Is he alright?"

"Yeah. He's fine, Hawk." Maverick looked down at Cecil, feeling disappointed. "Jasper, take my mate to my room."

Maverick threw up a hand to silence Hawk. "Don't, Hawk. I've already had one hell of an evening." He blew his breath out, running his hand through the long strands of his hair. He had no clue how to deal with this.

"You know, sometimes people have to put their pride aside for the ones they love. Think about it. And remember he's human. Totally different set of rules." Hawk strolled across the room, fisting his jacket in his right hand and taking the back door out.

Maverick looked up at the ceiling. He didn't want to start their life off with Cecil fearing him. Maybe Hawk was right. Maybe he had to handle this differently with his mate. He wanted Cecil happy. Jeremy had put him through enough.

“Sir, if I may add a word of advice. This must be nipped in the bud. Your mate must recognize your position and the responsibility of leadership. He must learn to keep his place silently at your side as an Alpha’s mate.”

Maverick turned to see Lonny standing in the hallway. He chewed on the advice for a moment. The man did have a point. He couldn’t have his mate running all over him and the Sentries witnessing it. Respect must be maintained. “Thanks, Lonny.”

“Just trying to keep a peaceful house. Is there anything else I can help you with?” Maverick noticed Lonny’s eyes lower to his crotch. No...he was seeing things. Lonny had never come on to him. Maverick needed sleep.

“Nothing else, thanks.”

* * * *

Cecil sat on the edge of the bed, his hands in his lap, picking at a fingernail. He wished Maverick would get his punishment over with. The wait was killing him. He wondered how bad it would hurt. He remembered the abuse he suffered with Jeremy. The trips to the hospital, the excuses given for the bruises to his coworkers. He had lived in hell for two years, finally escaping only to run right into another realm. This cycle had to be broken.

His heart thrummed in his chest when the bedroom door opened. Maverick quietly closed the door and took a seat in the soft, cushioned chair in the corner of the room.

Cecil’s muscles were twitching from the coiled tension. His mate just sat over in the corner, not saying a word, watching him. The longer Maverick stayed quiet, the more Cecil’s body perspired, his heart raced and his nerves frayed. The silent treatment always broke Cecil. His mom had used it often when Cecil misbehaved to pull him back in line. It never failed to work.

Maverick crooked his finger at him finally. Cecil pushed himself

off the bed and walked over to him, lowering his head and clasping his hands together in front of him. He stood in front of the giant, his body shaking from nerves. Would it hurt?

Maverick splayed his arms out, Cecil climbed in his lap, still nervous, laying his head on Maverick's chest.

Knuckles skimmed along Cecil's jaw. "Don't ever run from me, pup. If we have problems, we work them out. I'm old school. Give me time."

Cecil played with Maverick's hair that was lying over his shoulder. Twisting it around his fingers. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for your guys to have to come looking for me. I was scared is all."

"I don't care how angry I get at you. I will *never* lay a hand on you in anger. Understand?" Maverick assured Cecil quietly.

Cecil nodded as Maverick pushed his bangs out his eyes, laying a kiss to his forehead.

* * * *

Maverick woke to a loud thudding noise. His bedroom windows vibrated. Yanking the covers back, he threw on a pair of jeans, leaving the top of button undone. When he opened his bedroom door, the noise pierced his ears. Curious, Maverick followed the music to the den. The sight before him confused him momentarily.

Then a smile spread across Maverick's face. Cecil was jumping up and down to the music as he jerked around his hands, playing his game. Cody's whole body was moving with his hands, eyebrows furrowed in concentration. Jasper was yelling for Cecil to kick Cody's ass.

The loud rock music blaring in surround sound from the receiver actually went along with the game as though it was part of the experience. Hawk and Kota were shooting pool and looked as though they were enjoying themselves as well, barking at each other about what pocket they were going to knock their ball in.

His den had come alive. The once stuffy manor was now animated with the beat of his mate's heart. Maverick crossed his arms over his chest, leaning against the archway, happy to see his mate coming out of his shell. He watched Cecil lurch forward, the tip of his little pink tongue sticking out of the left side of his mouth, deep in concentration. His hips hitched from side to side. Maverick watched that tight little ass, his cock hardening.

"Eat my dust, fucker!" Cecil yelled in loud whooping excitement. Maverick was shocked to hear cursing coming from him. He cleared his throat.

The game paused, and Jasper hit mute on the stereo.

Cody threw his hands up in a defensive gesture, "Little guy already had a potty mouth. Wasn't me." He defended himself to Maverick.

"Snitch." Cecil snapped at Cody in a bantering way.

"Wanna play?" Cody tossed his controller at Maverick, going to the bar to grab a beer. Maverick tilted his head as Cecil picked up a dark bottle, taking a long swallow. He glimpsed the label and smiled at the label identifying it as root beer. Cecil was trying to fit in.

The game was un-paused, and Maverick was struggling to figure out what to do. His man just kept running in circles, his gun shooting concrete walls and the ground. He even shot the ceiling.

This shit was harder than it looked. The music shattered the room once again, lending to the ambience. Maverick growled when his man was shot down, blood dripping down the screen. Cody jumped in the air and caught the controller after Maverick threw it at the television.

"You'll get it. Takes practice." Cecil pulled at Maverick's shirt, wanting a kiss. Maverick leaned down, giving him a quick one.

* * * *

Lonny pressed the pillow over his head. The music was giving him a splitting headache. He had never heard such garbage before. He

threw the pillow, grabbing his temples. Anger flared his nostrils as he thought that the little menace had to go.

* * * *

Cecil had Maverick playing again. He wasn't going to let him give up. This was one thing he could offer his mate—the chance to share a common interest. Maverick was playing against Jasper, talking more trash than even Cecil did. He had threatened to kick Jasper's behind, along with disembowelment, noosing and a few threats of capping his ass. It was hilarious.

"Thanks. I haven't seen him this relaxed in over a century." Hawk was standing behind him, his hands behind his back. He winked at Cecil.

Cecil hadn't had a chance to talk to this fierce warrior. That's what came to mind when looking at the statuesque man. His shoulders were as wide as Cecil's leg was long. He wasn't bulky, but chiseled. He emanated power and authority.

"I like seeing him like this." Cecil really couldn't think of a reply. He felt intimidated. He wanted to move away but didn't want to let the guy know he was afraid of him. Never let 'em see you sweat. What commercial was that from?

Cecil squawked as he was hauled into the air, his arms flailing out. What the heck?

"Come here, baby." Maverick put his arm under Cecil's rump, carrying him into the den. How embarrassing. All the guys were here.

He punched Maverick in the shoulder, whispering in his ear, "Put me down. They'll think I'm a big baby." Cecil looked around to see them all with smirks on their faces. Great. *Thanks for emasculating me, mate.*

"Do not fear anyone here." Maverick nipped at his ear as he spoke softly. "You are safer here than anywhere on this earth. These guys," he pointed to all the men standing there, "would give their lives for

you.” Maverick said the last part louder with a voice of authority, as if decreeing it so.

“You fear me, Cecil?” Hawk had stepped beside him, his eyes questioning.

“No,” Cecil responded defensively. He wasn’t giving these giants the upper hand.

“Good. Let’s play.” Hawk swiped the controller from Jasper before the redhead even realized what had happened.

“Hey, I was playing! Just because you’re my Commander doesn’t mean...whatever.”

Hawk laughed as Jasper dropped on the couch, pouting.

“Come here, baby. You have to learn to share your toys. It’s time for patrol anyway.” Cody kissed the pouting lip, teasing Jasper.

“Are they mates, too?” They seemed to fit naturally. Cecil wanted a playful, bantering relationship with Maverick. His mate seemed so uptight. Rules, rules, rules. Yuck.

“Amazingly, no.”

Watching those two made Cecil hornier than hell. Still in Maverick’s arms, he teased Maverick’s neck. “Want you.” Cecil giggled as Maverick swung around and ran them to their room.

Chapter Seven

Cecil slid down Maverick's body, landing on his feet. As Maverick began to undress, Cecil stilled his hands. "Don't move." Maverick nodded, curious.

His mate shimmied his T-shirt up to expose one nipple, licking his finger then circling the hardened bud. He gyrated his hips as the T-shirt lowered to cover the brown disc, and then he lifted the opposite side, repeating the action. This time he pulled the shirt up and off, propelling it like helicopter blades in flight. He tossed it at Maverick, hitting him in the face. Maverick stood there with his jaw hanging open, not even noticing the soft object assaulting him.

Cecil flicked his wrist and the top button of his jeans popped open. He pirouetted around, shimmying his twin globes in a rapid motion. His hands slowly ran down his legs, allowing his butt to poke out further as he grabbed his ankles, and he shook his hips again.

Maverick was lust-filled. His mate was actually performing for him. He opened his jeans and pulled his cock free, grabbing his steel shaft, slow stroking it as he watched in fascination.

Cecil rocked his hips as he slowly stood, grinning a mischievous smile over his shoulder. Maverick gave him a big goofy smile. He saw Cecil's hands working in front of him, but he was unable to see exactly what they were doing, Maverick wanted to watch, begging with his eyes for his mate to show him.

Cecil hitched a thumb in the waistband on his right side. Slow as molasses, he revealed one glorious mound and then snatched the fabric up.

Maverick whined.

Cecil repeated the same to the left waistband, this time kneading the exposed flesh. Maverick was leaking pre-come onto the carpet, his bulbous head enlarged and his cock throbbing.

Cecil shimmied his jeans to his knees, bending over and spreading his ass cheeks. Maverick took a step, but Cecil pulled the jeans back in place, wagging his finger to reprimand Maverick for moving.

Maverick stepped back.

Cecil lowered the denim again. He spit on his fingers and began to stretch himself right there in the middle of the room.

Maverick licked his lips and whined louder.

Cecil walked over and grabbed the end of the bed, balancing himself as he fucked his fingers. Maverick fumbled the cock in his hand as Cecil toed his jeans the rest of the way off. His hips rocked as he grabbed his cock, still impaling himself.

Maverick couldn't take it anymore, he crossed the room and knocked Cecil's hands away from his erotic play, pushing the smaller man up and onto the bed, spreading his knees, but Cecil rolled away and said, "I want to ride you."

Maverick's cock leaked another rope of pre-cum. He flipped onto the bed, spreading himself wide eagle for his mate's adventure.

Cecil licked his lips, crawling slowly up the apex of Maverick's legs. Cecil's tongue trailed up Maverick's inner thighs with his journey. The tip flicked Maverick's balls then traced a path, circling under and around, sucking one in at a time. His trail continued to the base of Maverick's cock, flicking it like a snake's tongue. Cecil pushed Maverick's thighs further apart, latching onto the base with a powerful suction, drawing the skin up. Maverick groaned loudly, grabbing his mate's head. He hadn't seen Cecil like this before, and he loved it.

Cecil ran his tongue up the large, winding vein and then descended back to the base. His hands splayed on Maverick's inner thighs, keeping them apart. Cecil's tongue ran the length a few more times before he attacked the head, diving into the slit and rimming the

perimeter around the helmet. Cecil consumed Maverick's cock before releasing and continuing up to Maverick's navel. His mate licked around his navel, and his small hands skated up Maverick's sides, pulling himself up further with the action.

Maverick thought he would lose his mind. Cecil was slowly torturing him. The urge to turn Cecil over and slam into him was strong, but this was his mate's time, his show.

His mate sucked at his nipples, making them pebble. Cecil nipped at each, slightly biting into them then sucking them in, tonguing the hard tips. His mate kissed his way to the middle of Maverick's chest and up his neck, licking the hollow in the center of his collar bone. His cock ground into Maverick's stomach, leaving wet kisses of pre-cum behind. His mate cupped the back of Maverick's head as he ground into Maverick's stomach, biting his neck.

Maverick reached into the side drawer, grabbing the bottle of lube and dumping it onto his cock. He threw the bottle and grabbed Cecil's waist, gently pulling him down until the tip of his dick kissed puckered hole.

"Baby, please. I'm so close already."

Maverick grabbed his cock, holding it for his mate as Cecil impaled himself. Maverick held his hands up, and Cecil laid his palms in them, using this as leverage as he rode him. Cecil's feet were planted firmly on the bed on either side of Maverick's hips. His mate pushed on the balls of his feet as his cock bobbed freely, pre-come slapping into Maverick's belly with every down stroke. Cecil's head fell back, his eyes rolling in his head. Maverick was in awe of his mate's actions and the sight of his baby enjoying his cock.

Maverick was on the distant planes of another realm, a realm of sexual bliss. His mate's rhythm picked up, slamming his ass down harder onto Maverick's pelvis. The echoing sound of skin slapping rivaled the storm outside.

Maverick let go over Cecil's hands, digging his fingers into his hips as he plunged up into a tight, sweet sheath. Cecil grabbed

Maverick's forearms, making those cute grunting, whining noises again, louder this time. Oh, fuck, nothing in life felt better than this. A violent storm was raging inside Maverick, feelings and sensations crashing throughout his whole body. The overwhelming surges made a tear fall from his eye, and his canines dropped from the powerful and encompassing feelings.

Cecil dropped to Maverick's chest, exposing his neck, pushing it at Maverick's mouth. Maverick struck, locking Cecil in place as his hips rocketed into his ass. Maverick growled and pulled harder at his neck. Cecil cried out, shooting his fluids onto Maverick's chest. His mate was glorious.

Maverick's orgasm went beyond this world, and his balls hurt from straining so hard on each eruption. He screamed to the thunder outside, a wail of carnal pleasure. Maverick's seed was exploding inside his mate's sheath. Maverick licked at Cecil's neck, closing the wound. He wrapped his arms around Cecil, squeezing him in a bear hug.

"Holy. Shit." Maverick panted.

Cecil lay on Maverick's chest, falling asleep within seconds.

* * * *

It had been a month since Cecil had mated Maverick. He had gotten to know the entire Sentry group pretty well. Cody and Jasper were still his favorites. Maverick's house had turned from a pool shooting, dart throwing, card playing, and sports watching den to a hip, rock 'n' roll, gaming place to be. The warriors forgot they had their own homes to go to. Some came in from patrol and crashed right there on one of two couches in the room.

Cecil had finally won the war of fixing his own food. He still didn't like Maverick spoiling him with gifts, but that was a fight he didn't want to repeat.

Ever.

He only asked that Maverick not go overboard, though his mate didn't listen. He still struggled to maintain his independence. It was hard when he was always escorted by one of the Sentries anywhere he went.

He was out with Tank today. The warrior lived up to his name. He was the size of a Sherman tank. Tank had brown hair that was military cut. His eyes were such a deep brown they were almost black. Cecil had asked how tall he was. Tank was an astounding six foot seven, almost as tall as Maverick. The ginormous male was three hundred and twenty pounds with not an ounce of fat on him.

They were at the recreation center where Cecil had begun to volunteer five hours of his time every Friday. He had thought Maverick would argue with him about it. Surprisingly, he thought it had been a great idea. Tank helped the little kids by lifting them up to shoot baskets or they all tried to climb on him like a jungle gym. Cecil had requested Tank on these weekly trips, knowing the mountain actually had a soft heart for the poverty stricken youths.

There was one adult here that had wrapped himself around Cecil's heart.

Johnny.

One of the counselors had confided in him that the young man was mildly retarded and always kept to himself when he was at the recreation center. Cecil singled him out when he heard this, wanting the guy to have at least one friend.

It had been a slow process of befriending him at first. Johnny didn't trust anyone. Cecil would sit with him as Johnny drew pictures or beaded necklaces. He sat quietly, handing him the next colored pencil or shiny bead. One day Johnny had finally spoken to him. "I like the pink ones. It's my favorite color."

Since then, Johnny stood by the door on Fridays, waiting anxiously for Cecil's arrival.

* * * *

Cecil had brought Johnny a gift this week. He had searched every craft store he could. Finally, he found the item he was looking for. Cecil had found the letters of Johnny's name in imitation pink diamonds. He took them to a jeweler and had tiny holes drilled into the letters, so Johnny could make a necklace of them. Usually the necklaces were donated to the hospital for sick children, but he wanted Johnny to keep this one for himself.

The first day Cecil visited the place, he noticed the crafts were of slim selection. Relating this to Maverick, his mate took it upon himself to contact the local craft store and bought a wide selection in bulk, anonymously donating the purchase to the recreation center. Cecil kept a list of depleted items to be replenished on an as needed bases.

Today he saw Johnny waiting in his usual spot, his blond hair in disarray as he rocked from foot to foot, searching every car that passed for Cecil. He was a stunning young man. Johnny's eyes were a stormy blue-gray, growing darker when Johnny was unhappy. Cecil had never seen eyes that color before. Cecil didn't like the malnourished look the guy had. His bones protruded at his wrist. Cecil wondered if the rest of his body was that emaciated, but Johnny always wore long sleeved turtle necks that hung loosely from his frame.

"Cecil!" Johnny spotted him coming from the parking lot. A wide grin spread across Cecil's face as he approached his friend. The honey blond curls bounced as Johnny jumped up and down.

"I got something for you. You can't donate this, okay? It's just for you." Cecil held up a black velvet pouch, dangling it in front of his friend's eyes. Johnny grabbed for it, but Cecil made him wait until they were seated at their table. He pushed back all the construction paper as he emptied the bag to reveal his gift.

"It's pretty pink glass letters."

Cecil organized the letters until the young man's name appeared.

"Hey! That's my name. Johnny." He pointed to each letter, pronouncing them.

"We can make the necklace, and you can wear it around your neck. I even brought you a special chain to put them on." Cecil pulled the thin, twenty-four carat chain from the bag. He handed it over and watched as Johnny concentrated on his task. Once he was done, Cecil attached it with the tiny clasp. It lay perfectly at his neck. He took Johnny to the men's room to show him.

"It's pretty." Johnny ran his fingers along the letters, spelling each one again. A wide grin appeared as he swung around to grab Cecil in a big hug. Cecil's eyes misted as he patted his friend on the back.

"I'll wear it forever," Johnny said.

* * * *

Maverick picked up another rubber band from his desk, loaded it onto his finger then shot it across the room. It smacked against the wall then fell into the waste paper basket.

He was so damn bored. Cecil was down at the recreation center, volunteering his time. That left Maverick counting how many paperclips he had in his drawer. Twenty-five.

Maverick reloaded his finger as Hawk walked into his office, his rubber assault smacking into the Commander's chest.

Hawk quirked a brow.

"You come to me on the day my mate is at the rec center asking a favor?" Maverick did his best impression of the Godfather.

"Are you okay, Maverick?"

Maverick tossed his outstretched arms onto his desk as his head fell between them. "Nope." His lips popped on the letter *P*. "I want my mate. I'm bored."

"Why don't you volunteer with him?"

Maverick lifted his head to stare at Hawk as if he were daft. "Uh, maybe because my size would give those human kids nightmares."

Maverick sighed as he thought of the strip-tease Cecil had performed for him. His mate may not have been a professional, but Maverick wouldn't trade that night for all the money in the world. His clumsy moves and teasing eyes had set Maverick's blood on fire.

"Then I suggest you find a hobby."

Maverick soured his face up, mimicking Hawk silently. He knew he was acting childish, but since he mated Cecil, life had been exciting, almost as if the little man had breathed life into stale lungs. Now, when his mate wasn't around, Maverick was lost.

Tossing his pile of rubber missiles back into his desk drawer, Maverick stretched as he stood. Alpha Jackson of the Eastern pack had been dormant lately. Not even his peanut gallery he called a pack was stirring up trouble, so there was nothing to do.

Nothing at all.

As Maverick walked from his office, he was attacked by rubber missiles to his back. He smiled, knowing Hawk finally had a sense of humor. The man was more serious than an undertaker. As solemn as one, too.

Maybe he would take a ride on his motorcycle. The air was chilly but not so much that he couldn't enjoy it with his thick leather on. Besides, shifters' body heat ran a little higher than humans, so his skin could take it.

Grabbing his leather and helmet from his bedroom, Maverick headed outside.

Chapter Eight

Maverick smiled as Cecil opened wide for another bite. Fuck, if his mate wasn't sexy with those amethyst eyes of his. Plucking another grape from the bowl, Maverick slid it across his mate's bottom lip.

"Open wide, baby."

Cecil complied, flicking his tongue across the thin skin of the fruit. Maverick moaned. Unable to resist, he pulled the fruit away and replaced it with his tongue.

Maverick pushed the bowl aside as he rolled to hover over his mate. They were lying in their bed, enjoying a lazy Sunday morning.

His cock twitched when his mate sucked his tongue in, giggling as he gave him sloppy kisses. Cecil wasn't the same man he met a month ago. His mate no longer flinched when one of the warriors yelled or Maverick became upset. This was a good sign.

Maverick pulled one of the pillows from above Cecil's head, tucking it under his mate's ass.

Cecil laughed. That was a sound Maverick would never tire of hearing. "What are you doing?"

Maverick licked his lips as he stared at the sight splayed out before him. A slim, firm body with nestles of mahogany curls surrounding an erect and glorious cock. He smiled evilly at his small mate, lowering himself until he was eye level, saying hello to the gorgeous pulsing shaft.

He fisted the cock, bringing it to his lips as he opened wide. The member was warm, the pre-come salty. Maverick hummed as he took his mate's cock until his nose was touching those wiry curls.

Cecil writhed below him, gasping and grunting, pulling at Maverick's hair. Maverick hollowed his cheeks, pulling Cecil's shaft from his mouth in one long, tightly suctioned move.

"Oh." Cecil breathed, pushing his cock back toward Maverick's mouth, pulling at his long, black strands. Maverick twirled his tongue around the crown then pushed the cock back down his throat.

"Stop torturing me!" Cecil cried to the ceiling as he bucked and squirmed. Maverick chuckled around his mate's cock. He slid his hands under his mate's ass, using his mate's own body to push and pull Cecil's shaft in and out of his mouth.

"Maverick." Cecil cried out as he stiffened, he butt cheeks clenching in Maverick's hands while hot come shot down Maverick's throat.

* * * *

Maverick came into the bedroom after a long meeting with the Sentries, spotting his mate lying on the cool tiled floor, his eyes closed and his skin pale.

He yelled for Kota to call the wolf's physician. Picking his mate up, Maverick took him to the bed, covering his mate then running to the bathroom for a cold cloth. Cecil's weak pulse worried Maverick more than anything. He laid the cloth across Cecil's forehead, stroking his face with his fingertips.

Twenty minutes later the portly doctor entered the room. He examined Cecil, taking blood samples and examining his entire body. He clucked his tongue a few times, shaking his head and mumbling to himself. He finally tucked the covers back around the frail looking Cecil, going to the bathroom to wash his hands.

The doctor emerged, his eyebrows furrowed "I have been a doctor for six hundred years, and believe me when I tell you your mate has been poisoned. It's a mild one, meant only to make him sick. It will run its course in a day and flush itself out. His vomiting took care of

most of that. I recommend plenty of fluids and electrolytes for the vomiting. No solid food till his stomach recovers.”

Maverick's head snapped back as if someone had slapped him. Poisoned? Who would poison his mate? How? How had someone gotten in here to do it? Maverick's head fell back as he howled and barked out his pain and anger. Hawk and Kota ran into the room, their eyes darting around at Maverick's outburst.

“How? Do you know how he was poisoned?” Maverick's hand was flat against the wall, holding his weight as he felt his knees buckle. This wasn't happening. Fuck! How had someone gotten into his home? He went to the side of the bed, staring down at the sleeping man. Cecil was lying on his side, his hands tucked under his cheek. He looked so peaceful, but pasty.

“If I had to guess, I would say powder. It must have been sprinkled on something he ate. It would have taken awhile for it to have its desired effect.” The doctor gathered his things, placing a hand on Maverick's arm. “He'll be fine, plenty of rest and get those liquids in him so he doesn't dehydrate.”

With that, the doctor left Maverick with his ailing mate. Maverick crawled on the bed, twisting to lie on his side, running his fingers through the patch of hair over his mate's face. He traced the outline of his nose and lips, his chin and neck.

“Did you say poison?” Hawk asked in an astonished voice.

“Yes, poisoned. I want the kitchen checked. The whole damn house. I want everyone questioned. Find him, Hawk.” Maverick hissed.

Hawk inclined his head, turned on his heel and walked out.

“Anything you need?” Kota was leaning against the wall, his ankles crossed, hands in his pockets. Maverick had never known his beta to lose his cool. Ever.

“No, Kota. Thanks.” Maverick turned back to his mate when the door was closed. His chest tightened with the thought that someone wanted to hurt Cecil.

He laid his hand on Cecil's hip, rubbing his thumb back and forth, more of a comfort for him than for his mate. Cecil whimpered and drew his knees up. Maverick was going to kill the one responsible.

* * * *

He was running in the woods. He had to escape. The wolf was gaining, its teeth bared. He heard snapping behind him as he jumped over a fallen tree. His heart racing, his head hurting from the pounding of adrenaline. The wolf was closer now. He could feel it. He knew if the wolf caught him, he wouldn't survive. He quickened his pace, all out running. The wolf howled as he leapt in the air, saliva dripping, and claws reaching him...

Cecil sat up screaming. His hands danced behind him as he tried to feel for claw marks on his back. Arms grabbed his, pulling him down. Cecil's head jerked around as he slapped the hands away.

Maverick.

Cecil pushed his palms into his temples. His head felt like it was beating to an off rhythm tune. His eyes squinted from the light of the lamp sitting next to the bed. His mouth felt like fur was growing on his tongue. Did he have the flu?

"Easy, baby. Lay back down. Rest."

"Gotta pee." Cecil tried to move, but his head swam while the room tilted.

Cecil felt Maverick pull him up into his arms, walking him across the room. When they reached the bathroom, his mate set him on his feet, holding onto him.

Cecil stood on weak legs, his hands shaking as he tried to hold himself. When his stream went everywhere but its intended target, Cecil burst into tears. "Make it go away. I don't want the flu anymore."

Cecil lurched forward, vomiting all over the back of the toilet and the side of the sink. He would have collapsed to the floor if Maverick

hadn't caught him.

His mate wet a clean towel, wiping Cecil's mouth. Maverick pulled Cecil back in his arms. He closed the bathroom door to contain the foul odor. His mate grabbed the blanket from the bed and sat in the cushioned chair in the corner of the room. He wrapped Cecil to his neck and cocooned him in his arms.

* * * *

"Hello?"

"Hi. This is Thomas down at the recreation center. Is Cecil available?"

"Not at the moment. Can I help you?" Hawk wondered why the recreation center would be calling Cecil. He was a volunteer. Missing Friday wasn't like missing work.

"Um, well, I needed to talk to him about Johnny." The guy hesitated. Hawk didn't like the guy's tone. With everything going on, secretiveness wasn't going to cut it. And who the fuck was Johnny? "Explain."

"Well, if you could let him know that when he didn't show, Johnny became very upset. He had an anxiety attack and had to be taken to the hospital. I just wanted to see if it was possible for him to go and calm Johnny down. He and Johnny have become close, and I thought that if anyone could calm him, it would be Cecil."

Hawk didn't like this. Was Cecil cheating on Maverick? No, Tank had been there. Tank wouldn't tolerate a wandering mate, would he? No.

"I'll pass the message on." The guy thanked him and reluctantly hung up.

Hawk knocked softly on Maverick's bedroom door. When he heard Maverick's gruff voice telling him to come in, Hawk stuck his head around the door.

"How is he?" Hawk felt for the little mate.

“Resting. Did you need something?” Maverick asked.

“I just got the strangest phone call for Cecil. One of the guys down at the recreation center called in regards to someone named Johnny. Said when Cecil didn’t show, this Johnny had an anxiety attack, had to go to the hospital.”

“Oh, god. I have to go.” Hawk watched as Cecil tried to sit up then turned green. “I have to help Johnny.”

“Lay down, baby. Who’s Johnny, and why did he have an attack from your absence?” His Alpha questioned the small mate.

“He’s mildly retarded. We became friends, and he relies on routine. I broke that by not showing. I have to help him.” Cecil explained.

“I can go and explain to him that you’re sick. Would that help?” Hawk had an image of a little kid crying and calling for Cecil. He felt like a heel for being cold on the phone with Thomas.

“Please. Can you give him my phone number so I can talk to him? Take Tank, he knows what Johnny looks like. Gonna—”

Hawk watched as Maverick hauled Cecil up, running to the bathroom, making it just in time for Cecil to toss his cookies.

* * * *

“What do you mean he brought the guy here? Hawk was supposed to give Johnny Cecil’s phone number, not kidnap him.” Maverick demanded. What had Hawk been thinking? Obviously he wasn’t. That man’s family was going to go crazy once they realized Johnny was missing.

Maverick blew out a breath, running his hand over the top of his head. “Hawk must have had a good reason. Please let me in on it.” Maverick stood there, crossing his arms over his chest, and waiting for the warriors reply.

“Because, sir, Johnny is his mate,” Tank replied.

“Shit,” Maverick bit out, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Well, I

guess I have no choice but to defend him. When he has his mate situated, tell him to come see me.” Tank bowed his head and closed the door behind him.

Maverick sat in his leather chair behind his desk. He pulled at his soul patch, deep in thought. He knew Hawk would defend Johnny to his death. Maverick wouldn't step between the two and felt for the guy who tried. This was going to get messy.

Maverick dropped down into the chair behind his desk. He pinched the bridge of his nose as his eyes closed. What the hell was going on around here? His home had gone from stuffy and boring to chaotic. Not that he would trade it—his mate being the sole reason for his joy—but poisoning and now kidnapping?

The culprit who poisoned his mate still hadn't been found. Maverick looked at every warrior with suspicious eyes. If you couldn't trust your own pack, who could you trust?

Maverick head tilted back, staring at the ceiling once again. He found himself doing that a lot lately. Man, the light fixtures needed dusting. He sighed as he ran his hands through his disheveled hair.

A knock sounded on his door.

“I'm heading into town. Anything you need?” Cody asked as he looked at Maverick with sympathetic eyes.

Maverick waved him off. “No,” he said, “bring me the responsible person. That's what you can get me.”

“I wish I could. I'd like to skin him alive.”

* * * *

Cody swatted Jasper on the ass, “Come on, Jazz,” he said, dropping his voice to a husky whisper. “Hit the bull's-eye, and I'll suck you off.”

Jasper laughed, aiming, and let the dart take flight.

Bull's-eye.

Jasper pumped his thin, defined arm into the air. Cody waggled

his brows, walking Jasper backwards to one of the bedrooms. His adventure was short lived as a fist rattled the front door.

“Dammit.” Cody let Jasper’s hands go. *This better be a life and death emergency.*

He pulled the door open to see an angry man with his hands on his hips glaring daggers. Cody cocked his head, glaring back and wondering who the hell this asshole was.

“I was told by the hospital that my brother Johnny was here. Bring him to me.” The guy was stabbing his finger at the air in front of Cody’s face. *Oh, hell no.*

Cody slammed the door in his face. The guy began banging again. “I’ll get the police to give me my brother, and then I’ll charge you with kidnapping.” He yelled through the closed door.

Cody rolled his eyes, grabbing the doorknob and yanking it open again. He stabbed a finger down at a spot right inside the door. “Wait right here.” Cody slammed the door closed when the man did as he was told.

Cody paused long enough to give Jasper a quick kiss. “I’ll be right back.” He went in search of his Alpha, finding him in his bedroom holding a straw as Cecil sipped at the broth. His anger fled as he watched Cecil grimace at the taste. Cecil was his buddy. He wanted to find out as badly as everyone else who poisoned him. The culprit was dead.

Chapter Nine

Maverick looked up as Cody cleared his throat. "Sorry, Alpha, but there's a man at the door claiming to be Johnny's brother and demanding we relinquish him and, for the record, he's an asshole."

"Johnny's here?" Cecil pushed the mug away, sitting up straighter. His questioning look bounced between Cody and Maverick. "Why didn't anyone tell me?"

Maverick eyes skipped away from Cecil, narrowing them on Cody. He set the mug on the nightstand, turning back to his mate. "Because you need to rest. Hawk has him. He's fine."

"Why does Hawk have him? Johnny doesn't like strangers. I need to see him. What brother?" Cecil was attempting to climb out of bed, but Maverick put his arm around his waist, hauling him back. This was exactly why he didn't want Cecil to know about Johnny. His mate needed rest. He didn't need to go running to take care of someone else right now.

"I'll be back." Maverick swung his legs over the side of the bed, storming off to clean up the current mess.

He found Hawk in one of the upstairs bedrooms, sitting on a window seat, cradling a small-framed, blond-haired man. Hawk's eyes never left Johnny's as he said, "Yes, Alpha?"

Maverick knew that tone, the Commander was irritated. Well, too bad. "I have an irate brother at my front door wanting that young man returned to him." Maverick nodded his head toward Johnny.

Hawk growled, pulling Johnny closer to him. "Tell him to piss off. Johnny is mine."

"You know better than that. This has to be handled. How old is

he?”

“Eighteen. Old enough to make his own decisions.” Maverick watched as Hawk whispered to his mate. Being a Timber wolf, he had exceptional hearing. “It’s okay, pretty baby. That’s Cecil’s boyfriend.” Hawk kissed Johnny’s temple.

Maverick’s heart warmed at the frail man in the Commander’s arms. “Johnny, I need you to tell me if you want to stay with Hawk or go with your brother. Whatever you decide, I’ll make sure it happens.” Maverick got down on one knee, trying to remove his towering height as a factor from Johnny. If he wanted to stay with Hawk, he wasn’t going to have the skinny—holy shit, he was as thin as a corpse—man intimidated.

“Hawk.” Johnny mumbled into Hawk’s chest.

“So you are deciding to stay with Hawk?”

Johnny nodded.

“I need you to say yes or no.”

“He gave you his answer, Alpha. He—”

“Don’t take that tone with me, Commander. I need to hear in clearly spoken words what Johnny wants. I won’t have this coming back to bite me or Johnny in the ass. I’m looking out for him,” Maverick pointed at Johnny, “making sure his wishes are abided by.” Maverick looked at Johnny once again.

Johnny raised his head and spoke clearly. “I. Want. To. Stay. With. Hawk.”

“So be it. Hawk, get ready for a battle. I don’t think his brother is going to give up so easily.”

Hawk nodded.

Maverick went to deal with the brother at his front door. He found the guy standing with his back against the door, warily eyeing his Sentries in the den. If the brother only knew he had just walked into a pack of wolves...he probably would still act like a jerk. The guy had an air about him, one Maverick didn’t like.

“May I help you?” Maverick feigned ignorance at who the man

was. He wanted to see his egotism firsthand.

“Who are you? I’ve already talked to one muscle head. I want my brother Johnny brought to me now.” Yeah, he was still a jerk. Maverick pulled himself up to his full six foot nine inches. He would not tolerate a male, and a human male at that, coming into his home and making demands.

Wasn’t happening.

He towered over the idiot who was too dumb to realize the death threat standing right in front of him. Maverick began to wonder what Johnny’s home life was like living with this prick. Storm clouds gathered around him as he wondered if this man ever put his hands on Johnny.

The brother must have noticed the menacing aura around Maverick because he finally took a step back.

“He has made it quite clear that he wishes to remain in my home...under my protection. I suggest you leave.” Maverick felt the Sentries slowly coming toward him, feeling the static storm in the air. They crept closer, watchful.

The brother must have noticed them as well. His hand reached behind him for the door handle, “My brother isn’t smart enough to make his own decisions. I have legal custody of him, and I *will* have him returned to me.” The man turned the knob, hustling out of the front door, leaving it wide open. Maverick watched as he climbed in his car and spit gravel from his tires as he sped off.

With the insult the guy just gave Johnny, Maverick would make sure he never got his grubby hands on his brother.

“Who was that?” Remi asked standing behind Maverick.

“Some human wanting his life expectancy cut real short.”

When Maverick headed back to his mate, he found Cecil sneaking down the hall, heading in Johnny’s direction.

“What do you think you are doing?” Cecil jumped at Maverick’s booming voice. He spun around and pasted a big smile on his face.

“Just stretching the old limbs.” He pulled his arms over his head,

twining his fingers together, and stretched in an over exaggerated pull. "That's good enough for now. Guess I'll head back to bed." Cecil walked at a brisk pace back toward their room.

Maverick chuckled and swung Cecil into his arms. "Is my mate storytelling me?" He tickled Cecil's belly lightly, carefully, knowing it was still sore.

"Don't know what you're talking about. On to bed, James, and be quick about it. Chop, chop." Cecil held his head in a regal posture, trying to hide his smile.

Maverick growled playfully and did as his little dictator demanded. Instead of returning him to bed, he sat with him in the chair, pulling the comforter around him. "How do you feel, baby?"

"My belly is still a little sore, but I'm not dizzy anymore. Flu gone." Cecil snuggled down into Maverick's lap.

Maverick had demanded that no one tell Cecil he was poisoned. He didn't want his mate freaking out, and he also wanted him to continue to act normal, making the culprit think he had gotten away with it and let his guard down.

"I have all this energy and nothing to do with it." Cecil acted blasé.

Maverick knew what the little horndog was after, and Maverick was more than willing to give it. Being newly mated had him in a perpetual state of readiness, but he wanted to make sure Cecil was fully recovered before tossing him down and fucking him to near death. Cecil wasn't *fully* recovered, so Maverick would only fuck him into unconsciousness. He grinned at the thought.

Cecil's pajama pants tented in front of him, giving away his desire.

"Hmm, what's that in your lap? Does my baby want something?" Maverick nuzzled Cecil's neck, the urge to bite making his gums throb along with his cock.

"Maybe." Cecil teased, rolling his head back to allow Maverick clear access. Maverick's hand snaked down, dipping beneath Cecil's

drawstring pants. He ran his thumb over the moist head, smearing the pre-come around and squeezing lightly.

"I'd say definitely yes." Maverick's other hand slid into the sleepwear, running his finger down Cecil's crack, tapping at the puckered hole.

"Okay, yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Now fuck me." Cecil moaned.

Maverick wrapped an arm around Cecil's waist, raising him and ripping his pants off with the other hand. He sat his naked mate down, staring at his beautiful cock. It was long and thin, the head a deep red color. The thin patch of pubic hair lay softly around his prick. His balls smashed up from Maverick's lap. He reached down, running a finger around his mate's cock and taking in its beauty.

Maverick watched Cecil's prick jump at his touch, pre-cum dripping down the side of the head. He was fascinated at the intimate touch, seeing the contrast between his golden fingers and Cecil's pale skin. His mate whimpered.

"What does my baby want?" Maverick continued to slide his thumb around, smearing the wetness.

"You, holding me down and demanding compliance."

Maverick's brows shot up. The thought of dominating Cecil making his dick outline his jeans. His canines dropped, eyes glowing. "Get on the bed on your hands and knees. Keep your shoulders down."

Cecil climbed off his lap, padding over and doing as he was told. He pushed his ass high in the air, rocking his hips back in a blatant display of wanton desire.

Maverick stripped and climbed behind Cecil, pushing his hand on his back to still him. He lubed then speared two fingers into Cecil's tight, awaiting hole. "Fuck them." Maverick held his hand still as his mate began rocking back on his fingers. God, this was sexy. He held Cecil in place again, adding a third digit. "Again." Cecil began slamming back. Maverick watched in awe as his fingers were swallowed repeatedly.

“Stop. Slide your knees farther apart and offer your ass to me. Show me how much you want my cock buried deep in that tight hole.” Cecil stilled as Maverick slid his fingers out. His mate reached behind him and parted his cheeks, his pink hole presented. Maverick dipped down, rimming the puckered delight. His tongue slid in and out of Cecil, massaging his balls and lapping at the taste. It was musky and tangy. Delicious.

Maverick got to his knees, lubing then lining his cock up with Cecil still pulling his cheeks apart. It was the most erotic sight Maverick had ever seen. “You’re not allowed to come till I tell you to, do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

Maverick’s cock throbbed in his hand. He wasn’t going to last. Maverick pushed past the ring of muscle, groaning at the feel. He put his hands on either side of Cecil’s waist, watching his cock being swallowed as Cecil’s skin stretched around his shaft. Seeing his mate’s fingers so close only added to the excitement. It was a submissive offering like no other.

Maverick heard the door open. He swung his head around, “Get out!” Maverick growled around his canines.

Lonny turned and ran from the room.

What was that all about?

“Don’t move.” Maverick commanded as Cecil began to remove his hands from his separated cheeks. He pounded the flesh as his balls began to draw up tight. “Reach your arms above your head, and give me your neck.”

Cecil complied, turning his head and exposing the area Maverick wanted to sink his teeth into. Maverick dropped to his forearm, his right hand still on Cecil’s hip. He broke flesh as his teeth sank in, locking his mate in place. Cecil cried out, begging to come.

“Not yet.” Maverick growled around his teeth. He pounded Cecil so fast he thought the little guy was going to go through the headboard. His lips worked Cecil’s neck, sucking at the wound as a

tingling shot up his spine and rocketed through his balls. He threw his head back, yelling for his mate to come.

His mate screamed with pleasure as he exploded onto the sheets.

Maverick dropped his head, sealing the wound and licking at the blood that had ran down his mate's shoulder. He was high on endorphins. The rush was making his body come alive. His snapping hips slowed, and his grip loosened from Cecil's hip. He pulled his cock from the warm sheath, laying on his back and draping his mate across his chest. Cecil snuggled against him, snoring lightly within minutes.

* * * *

Cecil crawled out of the bed, grabbing a fresh pair of pajama pants and a T-shirt, closing the door softly behind him after dressing.

He searched the rooms, looking for Johnny. He smiled as he thought of his friend's lopsided grin, pretty blond hair, and quiet demeanor. Johnny brightened Cecil's day every time he saw him. He had an innocence about him that made Cecil want to protect him from the world. His big puppy dog eyes were always sad when Cecil had to go home. It broke his heart.

Cecil heard footsteps behind him. Oh, crap. He hoped it wasn't Maverick busting him again. He was determined to find his friend. This house was too big with too many rooms. It would take him forever to check each one. Cecil slipped into the nearest bedroom, hiding from the approaching footfall. Maverick said for him not to go anywhere unescorted, but he never said he couldn't wander around *inside* the house. Yeah, technicalities. Gotta love them.

"And what are you doing sneaking around this time of night?"

Cecil whirled around as his heart leapt to his throat. The voice was as deep as a rumbling earthquake, and it belonged to Tank. He was standing by a dresser, laying clean clothes on top. Did Tank live here? Cecil didn't know who lived where anymore. It seemed his house was

always full. He loved it. He had hated the silence in his old apartment, and although he loved his independence, it had been lonely.

“Uh, sleep walking?”

“Try again, squirt.” Tank’s lip pulled at the corner, his eyes smiling in merriment.

Cecil heard the shower come on. His eyes widened. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to intrude. I was looking for Johnny. Do you know which room he’s in?”

Tank looked at the bathroom door, and his eyes saddened. He looked back at Cecil and smiled. “Don’t worry about it. Go upstairs to the right, last door on the left.”

“Thanks. Sorry.” Cecil slipped out before Tank could respond. He wondered who was showering and who Tank would have as company. He didn’t know his sexual preference. Was it a male or female?

Cecil was still pondering this as he ran into a wall. He fell to his butt with an *oomph*. He looked up to see Lonny sneering down at him. Just what he didn’t need. The little snitch would run right to Maverick and tell about his escape.

“I see you’re still in the habit of hall wandering.”

Cecil pushed himself to his feet, trying to go around the snake, ignoring him. He had a friend to find. Cecil didn’t have time to listen to this. He felt a hand grab his hair as his neck began to sting. He tried to cry out, but an icy hand covered his mouth.

Darkness claimed him.

Chapter Ten

Cecil woke with a pounding headache. He tried to rub his temples, but his hands were tied. How he had gotten like this? His brain still felt like it was in a fog. There was cold, damp earth beneath him. Where was he?

“You’re awake.”

Cecil raised his head to see two Lonny’s standing in front of him. Man, one was bad enough. He closed his eyes, trying to clear his head. When he looked again, only one stood. Thank goodness.

“I’m tired of seeing you throw yourself at the man I love. I wanted to kill you on the spot when I walked in his bedroom and saw him taking you. That should have been me! You should have heeded the warning when I poisoned you. You should have left. But *no*, you continued to throw yourself at my Alpha, making him feel sorry for you and keeping you here.”

Poisoned? Cecil thought it was the flu. Holy crow! Lonny wasn’t a snake. He was a psycho. The man didn’t have a few screws loose, they were lost.

“That’s okay. You had your fun turning my home into a juvenile playroom. It’s time for you to disappear. Maverick will get over you, with my help.” Lonny kicked him in his ribs. Cecil crumbled to his side, unable to catch himself with his hands tied behind his back, his cheek smacking dirt. He refused to cry out and give this snake the satisfaction of knowing he had hurt him.

Cecil was pissed. “Look, you psycho, he’s not your mate. He’s mine. Go find your own.” Okay, not exactly a tongue thrashing, but it would do. He looked around, trying to figure out where he was and

how to get out of there. It looked like a tunnel. The walls were made of compacted dirt and tree roots jutted out, and only a lantern lit the dankness. How far away from home had Lonny taken him?

“This is an underground tunnel used hundreds of years ago by other pack members who lived in the area. It was used to conceal and torture rival pack members. So, you see, no one will be finding you anytime soon.” The crazy wolf actually cackled.

Unbelievable.

Why did Cecil get the feeling he was in a world of trouble? This was not good.

“I have to get back. When the search begins for you, I’ll need to be seen. Don’t think about escaping. These tunnels are a catacomb. You’ll be lost down here forever, and I won’t come looking for you. So if you want to eat, I suggest you stay put.” Lonny took the lantern with him, and Cecil watched the light slowly dim away. He was in total darkness. Cecil tried to let his eyes adjust, but there was absolutely no light to adjust to.

He scrambled to his feet, yelling for Maverick. His voice bounced off the dirt and died. No one was going to hear him. A noise shut him up. Cecil stopped and cocked his head, listening. Something ran across his bare feet, and he jumped back and screamed. Rats?

He knew if he didn’t make it out of here he would die. Waiting on Lonny wasn’t an option.

With his hands still tied behind him, he used his shoulder to feel his way along. Jagged tree roots and rocks cut into his arm. He felt the sting of broken skin. Sticking one foot out further as he slunk along, not wanting to fall over a cliff, if there was one. He had seen the movies and screamed at the screen as the idiots fell to their deaths. He wasn’t going to be one of those idiots.

With such extreme caution, it would take him forever to find a way out. His lungs hurt from the thick, dirt ridden air. Sweat ran down his face from anxiety and fear. He couldn’t even wipe it away with his hands. He had to use his shoulder, and then the sweat stung

the open cuts on his skin.

He fell forward, having no way to cushion his fall without the use of his hands. Cecil felt the air leave his lungs as his chest cracked against the hard earth. He laid there, tears falling from his eyes. Giving up wasn't on the table. He had to see his mate again.

* * * *

Maverick punched a hole through the wall. Where the hell was his mate? Tank said he saw him several hours ago trying to locate Johnny. Maverick and the rest of the Sentries combed the entire house.

Nothing.

He knew Cecil wouldn't leave without at least leaving a note and taking one of the Sentries with him. Something foul was going on. Did the person who tried to poison him kidnap him? How? How did his mate disappear from his own home?

"FIND HIM!" Maverick roared out. He was becoming desperate. What if his mate was being harmed right at this moment, calling out for him? Maverick tore the house apart, tossing beds and tearing closets apart. This was getting him nowhere. He barked at three of his warriors to follow him.

Tank, Remi, and Cody followed him out back. "Search for track marks or any sign that he may have been taken outside. I want him found. Do it now!"

The three wolves scrambled to find anything that would help. Timber wolves didn't have the best sense of smell, but Mother Nature compensated them by giving them superb hearing, night vision, and tracking abilities that superseded any other species. They could hear a leaf fall to the ground in autumn. They were the largest of the wolf breeds and were extremely territorial. They fought to the death to protect what was theirs, mate or land.

Cody found signs of disturbance in the grass. Broken blades,

something no other would have seen. The grass was only bent the slightest, but enough for Cody to recognize the signs. “Alpha, over here.”

Maverick studied the area that Cody had pointed out, noticing the same signs. The track led off toward the heavily wooded area. “We hunt.”

All four men shifted into their wolf forms, heading into the night.

* * * *

Cecil was exhausted. How long had he been down here? A couple hours? Days? Time was not something that could be tracked in this darkened prison. He had been walking for what seemed like forever.

Dehydrated, hungry, in pain, and urine soaked, Cecil couldn’t go on. His feet were stinging and sore. He couldn’t even feel his hands anymore. The earthen wall had become his crutch. His muscles turned to jelly. Cecil feared stopping—he may not get back up again. His wrists felt like blades were cutting into them. He had tried for the longest to free his hands, only to do more harm than good.

Cecil tripped again, this time hitting his head against the wall. He felt a warm trickle down the side of his face. Trying to push himself back up, his body wouldn’t cooperate. *Rest for a moment.* He lay on his side, slipping into a fatigue filled sleep.

* * * *

Maverick found an entrance. It was well hidden behind years of overgrown foliage. He used his teeth and claws to clear the brush away. It was located on the side of a high rising hill. How had he never seen this before? More Sentries had joined them in their tracking until there were eight in all. He howled to the sky, alerting his pack of his discovery. He heard them racing toward his call.

When all had gathered, Maverick entered with his search party at

his flank. They came into a chamber that branched into four different directions. Maverick shifted back into human form. "I want every wolf to pair up. It seems we are in some kind of catacomb. No one is to venture off by themselves. If you find anything, howl." Maverick took Cody with him, one of the best trackers he had.

All four entrances showed signs of use, so they didn't have a solid lead to follow. Maverick and Cody took the tunnel to the far right, their night vision making it possible to see in the pitch blackness. Maverick could feel them descending, going further down into the bowels of the earth.

He felt a ripple of pain throughout his entire body. He knew it was his mate, lost down here somewhere, hurt. He concentrated on the trail he was following. If he hurried his pace, he could lose it. Pulling patience from every cell in his body, he continued the slow trek deeper into the tunnel.

Maverick growled as he picked up a blood trail. It had to be Cecil's. It was fresh. He followed the twists and turns as the blood drops turned into smears that turned into one long, unbroken thread. He spotted a small mound lying at the base of the dirt wall. Maverick shifted and ran to it, finding Cecil bloody and unconscious.

His head fell back and an agonizing howl ripped from his chest. He dropped to his knees, afraid to touch his mate. He didn't know if anything was broken or what was torn. "Cecil, baby. Can you hear me?"

A whispered moan came from his mate. He could smell urine and blood. A sob escaped him.

Maverick gently reached down and pulled Cecil in his arms, cradling him to his chest. Cecil's eyes remained closed. His mate's hands were bound behind his back, Maverick turned him, seeing the piano-thin wire embedded in his skin. He would let the doctor remove it, not wanting to take a chance at hurting him even more.

Cody led the way back to the main chamber, the rest of the pack waiting. Howls and barks rent over the walls at seeing their Alpha's

mate's battered and bruised body.

Maverick took Cecil home, trying not to jostle him. The wolf physician was called once more. An IV was placed in Cecil for the dehydration. His wounds were cleaned and his wrists stitched.

Maverick watched over the doctor's shoulder as Cecil's marks were uncovered. He squeezed his eyes shut at the enormous purple bruise that covered his mate's entire chest. His wrists looked like they had been sliced with a scalpel all the way around. He had numerous cuts and scrapes all over his body.

Some needed stitches while others were cleaned and ointment applied. After what seemed like forever, the doctor went to the bathroom to wash his hands. The entire pack was in Maverick's bedroom, watching and waiting.

"He's human, so he suffered more than a wolf would have. He has two broken ribs and a multitude of cuts and scrapes. His wrists were the worst. The wire tore through his tendons. He may not recover the full use of his hands. I have an IV going to rehydrate him quickly. I also have an antibiotic solution dripping with it as well. Humans are susceptible to infection. I'll monitor him for the first twenty-four hours to make sure he's healing properly. There isn't much to do right now but wait." The doctor excused himself.

Cecil's lips were moving. Maverick leaned down to hear his mate. Usually he could hear with clarity, but Cecil was too soft-spoken, mumbling. He ordered everyone to be quiet.

"Lo...Lo...nny." Cecil fell back into unconsciousness.

Maverick's nostrils flared. His canines emerged, and his eyes shifted to crimson. "Lonny." He growled as he left his bedroom to hunt the wolf. His entire pack gasped, unbelieving that one of their own could do such a horrific act.

* * * *

Tank and Cody searched for the wolf with a vengeance. Cecil had

become like a little brother to both of them. Lonny was a dead man walking.

* * * *

Jasper had gone to Hawk, informing him of the betrayal. Hawk paced furiously, his mate sleeping comfortably in the bed. Jasper stepped back as Hawk's six foot four bulk towered over his five foot nine frame. The man reminded Jasper of an ancient warrior. The elements seemed to move with every bulging muscle Hawk rippled. "Stay with my mate. Protect him with your life. Lonny dies tonight."

Jasper nodded and sat on the window seat, safely away from the sleeping youth. He wasn't crazy enough to go near Johnny. That would send Hawk into a rage that Jasper didn't want any part of. He hadn't left the room since bringing Johnny here. When one of the Sentries brought Hawk and his mate food, they set it on the dresser away from the bed. Micah had almost lost a limb getting too close to the human. Everyone learned quickly that Hawk had gone gaga over this slip of a man.

* * * *

Maverick couldn't believe his assistant had done this. Why? Lonny had been with him for a century and a half and took care of all the financial records and set up the meetings with his pack. He ran errands for him and made sure the pantry stayed stocked. Why would he hurt Cecil?

Maverick tracked the wolf to the oversized library. He was standing in front of one of the shelves, reading some leather bound book.

"Did you find your mate yet?" Lonny peered up from his reading. His tone was indifferent.

Maverick crossed the room in two long strides, backhanding the

wolf into the shelves. He pulled Lonny up with one hand, dangling him in front of him. With his other hand, he ripped his claws across the wide-eyed traitor's chest. Blood instantly blossomed across his torn sweater vest.

"Alpha, I don't understand. What have I done?" Lonny whined in an irritating falseness. Maverick could see the feigned shock.

Bastard.

"*You* poisoned my mate! *You* kidnapped him and left him for dead in those tunnels. *You*. I want to know *why* before I kill you." Maverick bellowed in Lonny's face. Lonny paled. The look of shock was genuine this time. His assistant's face contorted from disbelief to anger.

"*I* love you, not that pathetic human. *I* have been taking care of you and seeing to your needs. *I* should be the one honored in your bed. That menace has come into *my* home and disrupted everything, taken from me the one thing I cherish most. *You*." Lonny was wild-eyed and hysterical. He was clawing at Maverick's hand to free himself from his Alpha's grasp.

Maverick threw him through the library window, shifting and jumping after him. Shards of broken glass littered the ground around Lonny's body.

Lonny got to his feet, wiping the blood from his mouth. "You love *me*, not the worthless human in there. You must realize this." Lonny stepped back, turned, and ran. He didn't get far as the Sentries surrounded him. Lonny couldn't escape. They growled, warning him not to breach the formation.

Lonny backpedaled until he was in the center. Maverick circled him, snapping his jaws, his hair standing on end and his ears tucked back. Maverick stood four feet from his head to the ground. His weight in wolf form was the largest of any Timber wolf ever born at three hundred and ten pounds, and from snout to tail tip, he was six feet long. A monster.

Lonny dropped onto his back, exposing his neck. Hopefulness in

his expression at the submissive act, probably convinced it would please Maverick and convince him not to kill the traitor.

Maverick growled, shaking his head no at Lonny. His assistant knew nothing he did now was going to get him out of this. Maverick wasn't accepting any submission, only death. Lonny got to his feet, staring wildly around for an escape. He shifted and ran for the woods like the hounds of hell were at his heels, and they were.

Maverick tackled him, tearing into Lonny's neck and ripping muscle from bone. He heard the distinctive snap and knew his ex-assistant wasn't going to recover from this. He dropped the limp body and returned to human form, Sentries shifting as well.

"I will not tolerate betrayal among my own pack!" Maverick was enraged, his index finger pointing at each and every wolf. His arm sliced from the air down toward the dead wolf. "Get him out of here. He will *not* receive the ceremonial burial. Just dump his carcass far enough away!" The wolves jumped at the command. They didn't even get dressed before hauling Lonny's dead body away. If only they could shift without destroying their clothes.

Maverick stormed back into the house, getting straight into the shower to wash away the stench that had clung to his skin. He would not lay next to his mate with traitorous blood clinging to him. Maverick took deep, calming breaths as he washed the evidence away. He had to calm down for Cecil. He refused to go to him still angry.

His head raised as the doctor quietly entered. Maverick made sure the towel was secure as he asked for privacy.

"Boy, I helped your mamma deliver you. You ain't got anything I haven't circumcised." The doctor tenderly smiled as he gave Maverick what he asked for.

Maverick smiled at the old wolf, shaking his head as he pulled a pair of sweats on. Cecil was still sleeping. Maverick breathed a sigh of relief at knowing the culprit was found and justice dispensed. Now all that was left was for his mate to heal.

Maverick carefully raised Cecil's hands, turning them over to examine the stitches around his wrists. They looked more like wrist bands, the black thread wound all the way around. Lonny had been a cruel son of a bitch. He had looped the wire like bracelets around each wrist and then a small piece had connected the two. They were so tight on his mate's wrists that Maverick was surprised his hands weren't severed off. The fact that he may lose use of them sent a clenching pain through Maverick's heart. Laying light kisses on each injury, he laid them back down.

Cecil's eyes fluttered open. Tears began to fall as he croaked out. "It hurts."

Lifting his baby in his arms was out of the question, too many injuries. Instead, his hands caressed the soft hair, pushing the flop out of his eye. Maverick gazed into those amethyst eyes. "I know, baby. Your body is healing at a faster rate than an unmated human, but it's still gonna take time."

* * * *

Cecil tried to reach up and grab Maverick's hand, but his fingers wouldn't close. He stared at his wrists for the first time in horror. He examined both, turning them in opened mouth disbelief then shoved the Frankenstein creations under the blanket, sinking back down into the bed.

"Don't, baby. They'll heal. Give it time."

"You can say that! It's not your body that's disfigured. Just...just go." How was he going to use his hands again? He couldn't even make a fist. Cecil was trying under the blanket. He tried to touch each fingertip to his thumb, but none of them reached. He lashed out in anger. "Just go! I don't want you to see me like this. Get out!" He squeezed his eyes closed. All he could see was darkness. His eyes flew open, and he realized that he would forever fear the dark now, always be reminded of those tunnels when he tried to sleep.

* * * *

Maverick gave Cecil his space. He sat in the cushioned chair in the corner, letting Cecil rant and rave, cry and shout. He knew Cecil needed this, needed to release the demons that were now haunting him. Maverick sank back into the chair, fading into the shadows of the room.

* * * *

Cody looked up when he heard Cecil screaming and crying. Tears brimmed behind his eyes. His little buddy would forever carry those scars. Hell, Cody cringed when he closed his eyes, seeing that bloody and battered form lying tied on the ground of those tunnels.

Tank wiped a runaway tear that rolled down his cheek, turning his back to everyone for privacy. Cody saw a slight shake in the big man's shoulders. He was crying. It took a heck of a lot to make a Sherman tank cry. Cody cleared the lump from his throat, taking a swig from his beer bottle. Cody, Tank, Jasper, and Remi were sitting in the kitchen, silently listening to the tortured cries of a broken man.

* * * *

Remi scrubbed his face as Jasper let the tears fall, sniffing and blowing his nose. Cecil had spent hours with him playing those damn video games. Kicking each other's butts in the shoot-'em-up games. Jasper had gotten pretty good at the driving ones. Cecil was always a hyper gamer. He bounced around, shouting threats and laughing his head off. The den didn't seem the same without him there. Jasper wanted to go to him, comfort him, but he knew Cecil wouldn't be comforted right now. Right now he was fighting a war raging inside him, one only he could win or lose.

“Come here.” Cody held his arms out, waiting for Jasper to climb in them. Cody petted his back and rocked him, kissing his temple and shushing him. Neither was ashamed of their non-mated relationship. Jasper could care less what anyone thought or said.

“He’s so little. How will he recover from this? How, Cody? He may never use his hands again, and the emotional scars, he won’t recover from them anytime soon.” Jasper asked as he lay against Cody.

“I know, baby. He has all of us to lean on. We’ll get him through it.” Cody rose from his sitting position, taking Jasper away for privacy.

* * * *

Maverick’s heart was being shredded. He listened to Cecil until his mate lost his voice. He had used every curse word invented. He tried to throw his pillow, getting even angrier when he couldn’t grab it. Maverick just sat quietly, taking the brunt of it. When Cecil finally slumped back down, Maverick went to him, tucking him in and turning the light off.

“No! Leave the light on, please. No darkness.” Cecil had a frightened child’s voice, his eyes pleading with Maverick.

Maverick nodded.

He would get a dimmer switch for the lights, always keeping a low light on for his mate. He would do whatever it took to make Cecil feel safe again. The doctor had come in to sit with his patient as Maverick began to leave. The wolf physician had given them their privacy as Cecil released his anger. Doc patted Maverick, giving him an understanding nod. He occupied the chair Maverick had just vacated. The doctor settling down for the night.

* * * *

It had been two days since Cecil's ordeal. The doc removed his stitches, claiming Maverick's were blood had done an excellent job healing him. He gave Cecil a list of exercises to do to strengthen his wrists and hands. Cecil could finally breathe again with his ribs repaired. He had to hand it to the wolves. They had the market cornered on healing.

Cecil stood in the archway, watching the guys play video games that he could no longer play. He dropped his head in shame when Maverick had to help him use the bathroom. He sat quietly as Tank or Cody fed him. He sat in that cushioned chair for hours, staring at the ceiling, trying to squeeze the rubber ball in his grasp, which continually fell to the carpet. Cecil kicked it, shouting at the stupid thing.

"Fine, don't help me, you worthless piece of rubber." How low had he sunk? Cursing an inanimate object as it rolled away.

He watched the ball, and then looked around the room that had become his self-imposed gilded cage. He blinked several times as his mind began to clear from the dismal fog it had been cloaked in.

An epiphany slowing formed. With all his yelling, his silence, and even his kicking rubber objects around, he had been slowly giving up.

His brows furrowed in anger. Cecil Walters never gave up! His parents had taught him better than that. When life threw rocks at him, he mentally pulled his boot straps up and kept pushing on. So why was he giving up now?

He wrestled with the doorknob, squeezing it between his forearms, twisting it until it turned. He stormed to Maverick's office, kicking at the door.

"How dare you give up on me?" Maverick looked stunned as he stepped aside to allow his irate mate in.

"What are you talking about, baby?"

"You! You sit in here feeling sorry for yourself, or me, whatever. You hide behind your desk like everything is okay. I haven't seen you for two whole days. You should be kicking me in my butt and telling

me to suck it up and continue on. Instead? Instead, I'm slowly slipping into a depression. Help me, Maverick. It's your job to pull me out of that abyss!" Cecil was stabbing his finger into Maverick's abdomen, serving Maverick's balls on a spoon to him.

Maverick grabbed his wrists, staring in astonishment at them. "Do you see what you're doing? Look, baby." Maverick held Cecil's wrists up to show him the three bottom fingers curled in, his thumb and index finger resembling a gun as Cecil was poking Maverick.

Cecil giggled, flexing and un-flexing those three bottom fingers. His thumb began to move as well. The index finger was the only one unyielding, but he could live with that. Cecil began to cry as he continued to let his fingers play, looking up at his mate with a smile streaked with tears. He laughed as he cried.

* * * *

"I knew you could do it, baby." Maverick embraced his mate, happy that Cecil felt he had some of his life back. It had been dark days here since the horrific event. He wanted to see his mate laugh again, jump around in excitement. Match wits with his men. He missed that. Maverick knew Cecil had to work through this, but he missed the energetic puppy his mate had become. It looked as though his mate was on the road to recovery.

"I love you, baby." Maverick kissed the top of Cecil's head.

"I love you, too, mate."

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lynn Hagen loves writing about the somewhat flawed, but lovable. She also loves a hero who can see past all the rough edges to find the shining diamond of a beautiful heart.

You can find her on any given day curled up with her laptop and a cup of hot java, letting the next set of characters tell their story.



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