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GEORGE'S TURN

LYNN HAGEN

The
ManLove
Collection



 BRAC PACK 8

Brac Pack 8

George's Turn

George has had enough of men and his old life. As a cowboy, he'd been run off enough ranches for being gay. In his new life as a diner cook, he's more than happy to play it straight. Ladies love his cowboy swagger, he loves his solitary job and his tiny apartment, and all seems to be going well—until his eyes land on a gorgeous man so unlike anyone he's ever seen.

Tank loves all the little mates running around the estate, but the gentle giant longs for his own mate to hold at night. The moment he meets the new cook, he's smitten. But flowers and candlelight dinners don't seem to be enough to convince George that giving himself to Tank doesn't have to mean giving up his manhood.

When vampires attack George, Tank must help care for him. Will George finally see that the strongest love just might be between two strong men?

Note: Each book in Lynn Hagen's Brac Pack collection features a different romantic couple. Each title stands alone and can be read in any order. However, we recommend reading the series in sequential order.

Genre: Alternative (M/M or F/F), Paranormal,
Vampires/Werewolves

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DEDICATION

To all the Georges out there. May you find your Tank.

GEORGE'S TURN

Brac Pack 8

LYNN HAGEN

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Chapter One

George pulled his truck into the space in front of the diner. He cut the engine and just sat there and stared. The diner was small as one would expect in a small town. There was a post office to the right of it. The building sat on the corner of a tiny strip of businesses.

“This is a far cry from Wyoming,” he muttered, wondering if he could do this. He was a damn cowboy. What business did he have coming out here to take a job as a cook in a small-town diner? His cousin Leon had called him about the opening, and George had jumped at the opportunity, but now that he was here, he was second-guessing his decision. He wasn't so sure he could do this.

He had grown up on a ranch and worked on one since he was old enough to walk. George thought about the last ranch he worked on as a ranch hand. This made him think of Jesse. His heart clenched at the thought of his ex-lover. George had been kicked off of two previous ranches when the others found out he was gay. He thought he had finally found a home at the Triple R.

He had to sneak around for a year with the handsome cowboy, Jesse, who swore his undying love to George. His heart was ripped clean from his chest when the other hands had found out George's sexual preference and confronted him. He expected Jesse to stand by

his side. Instead, the man had faded into the shadows like a thief in the night with George's heart.

George pushed the memory back as he opened the door to his truck, reaching over and grabbing his cowboy hat, slapping it on his thigh to rid it of the Wyoming dust that still clung to it. Placing it on his head, he sauntered over to the quaint little diner and headed in.

George sat at one of the stools at the counter, looking around the place. It seemed pretty empty. His cousin Leon knew he had a passion for cooking, so he figured this would be the perfect place for George to start a new life. A clean break. All he had to do was make sure nobody found out he was gay.

He wasn't sure if he could stay stationary for so many hours behind a hot grill, though, after roping cattle and the day-to-day life of a hardworking ranch hand. This...this was the polar opposite.

"Can I help you?" A young woman smiled from behind the counter.

"I'm here to see Frank Thomas." George mentally rolled his eyes when the waitress winked at him. She was nice enough looking for a female. Big, wide hips that probably gave birth to a few rug rats, large swollen breasts and way too much lipstick and makeup. Her eyes looked like she just stuck her face in the makeup case and shook it. Without all the gunk, she was probably pretty.

He liked the body under him flat-chested and lean with muscles. Unfortunately, he got this reaction everywhere he went. Women—and some men—threw themselves at him. Jesse had told him that he had the prettiest blue eyes and the softest blond hair. George's lips thinned with anger as he thought of the man who still held his heart. No more. He wasn't going to play the fool for anyone anymore. Some said he was blessed with good looks, but George knew it to be a curse.

Jesse had sworn he loved him and would always be there for him. George had trusted Jesse, gave him his heart, and the man had shredded it into a thousand pieces. Bastard.

George leaned his elbows onto the counter, pulling at the beard of

his goatee while he waited on Frank to appear from wherever he was.

All he wanted was a warm place to lay his head and a steady job. No drama, no confrontations, and definitely no more men. He felt old for his twenty-eight years, having been through too much in such a short time.

He had told his dad he wanted to be a chef then got his head slapped, his dad yelling at him that cooking was for females and he needed to get his ass outside and get the cow milked. His father was a big time homophobic. There was no *coming out* in Wyoming. Not if you wanted to survive after your declaration.

"You must be George Knight." A stout man came from behind the chrome double doors with his hand extended.

"Yes, sir," George shook his hand as he stood, "and you must be Mr. Thomas."

"Call me Frank. I see you met Kitty." Frank nodded toward the waitress.

"Yes, I've met her." George ignored the lustful winks. With all that makeup on, she was probably just trying to dislodge the goop.

"Do you have any experience cooking? Leon wasn't too clear on that." Frank waved George to the back. He sidestepped the waitress, trying to keep his body parts away from her as she brushed her hand close to his rear end.

"Some. I like to cook. Cooked on the ranch and got pretty good at it." George immediately took in the updated kitchen, with a twelve-burner stove and large ovens. There were wide sinks and a commercial-size refrigerator with three glass doors. Damn, this was nice.

"As you can see, everything has been updated. I recently renovated. Business isn't that good, if that's what you're thinking. Someone donated the money for the renovation." Frank waved him into a small back office, then he handed George the necessary paperwork to fill out. He sat there and completed it as Frank continued to talk.

"I have a studio apartment upstairs you can rent out. Leon tells me you come from Wyoming. Must be a culture shock going from a ranch to a small town. We aren't as populated as the city, but we do get a lot of tourists who pass through." Frank filed away his paperwork and took George back to the kitchen he'd be working in.

"Yeah, I reckon it's very different from the backwoods of the Triple R." George pushed his black Stetson hat back and scratched his head. He hoped it wasn't too big of a shock. He wanted nothing but peace and quiet. No drama. It wasn't that he was afraid. He'd fought his way out of many fights. At six three, he was no lightweight. He was just tired of having to fight.

"Well, I'll let you get acquainted with your new kitchen. I'll come get you around quitting time to show you the apartment. Get ready. Lunch rush will be coming soon." Frank slapped him on the back then left him alone.

George searched the kitchen for all the equipment he would need. He set the skillets out onto the stove along with the big pots.

"Your first order, hon." Kitty slid the order onto the counter, lingering just a bit as she watched George. He shrugged off her unwanted attention and grabbed the order, setting about cooking as the lunch rush got underway. Frank wasn't kidding. The place was packed.

He set a plate of fried chicken and mashed potatoes on the counter as he looked around the place, noticing a table with three large men sitting there. They were nice looking but not George's type. He liked his men slim and shorter than him, and being a very dominate male, he wanted submissive men. Jesse had been perfect. Too bad he was a cowardly prick.

George shook off the memory as he went back to cooking.

* * * *

Tank sat with Hawk and Kota. His Commander and Beta insisted

he go to lunch with them. When they insisted, no one argued. They said that Alpha Maverick had one of his damn dreams again and sent them all to lunch on him. Ever since Maverick claimed his mate, Cecil, he had been having dreams occasionally, sending the Sentries off on missions with the end result that someone found a mate.

Tank looked around the diner, wondering if this was the case with him. With all the wolves finding mates left and right, he was more than hopeful his would be found soon. He wanted what he'd seen at home, the love and devotion the Timber wolves showered on the mates they had claimed. They seemed to walk around in a constant state of dreamy eyes.

He wanted that.

The waitress brought their food. Damn, the fried chicken looked good. It was nice and crispy, just the way he liked it. The mashed potatoes had a hint of garlic in them. Frank must have gotten the new cook he was looking for, and he had obviously hit the jackpot. With nobody at home to cook for the pack, they had to fend for themselves. It was nice to eat a good meal instead of frozen entrees or burnt noodles. He sucked at cooking.

Tank ate and ate a lot. At six seven and three hundred and twenty pounds, he damn near ate the pantry clean at home every day. Thank god he did patrol duty. Shifting into his wolf form, he ran for miles, working the calories off.

"The food is really good," Hawk commented as he dug into his plate. Tank was tempted to steal a piece of his steak tips but really liked having ten fingers. Maybe he would order some to go. He raised his hand to call the waitress over, putting in a to-go order of the steak tips, two burgers, another order of fried chicken and a spinach salad with grilled chicken. He would need a snack for later.

"Fuck, man, where do you put all of that?" Kota joked. "I need to put in an order of fried chicken for Blair. My sunshine needs lunch."

Hawk did the same for his mate, Johnny. The fried chicken seemed to be a big hit with everyone. Kota went ahead and ordered

ten more fried chicken dinners for the other mates and their warriors at home and a chicken strip dinner for the Sentry Cody's mate, Keata. The man went gaga for chicken strips. He also remembered a smoothie for Keata as well. Although Cody was part owner of the diner, it was still nice to think of his mate when others were being taken care of.

Frank came out when the waitress had left them to place their to-go orders.

"Like the fried chicken, eh." He laughed.

"You must have that new cook. Everything was great." Hawk wiped his mouth as he stood halfway and shook Frank's hand.

"He just started today. Glad to see he's working out. Comes from Wyoming. Guess he's looking for a fresh start. Glad it's here." Frank gave the three free desserts. Cody had saved his life and helped renovate the new kitchen after the fire, becoming Frank's business partner. Cody insisted the hungry wolves pay for their meals, but Frank managed to bargain free desserts, at least for them. Tank was thankful for that and tried not to eat a whole cake himself. After all, he was a big man.

"Well, gentlemen, enjoy the rest of your meals. I look forward to seeing your mates."

"Maybe we'll bring them on our next visit." Kota shook Frank's hand as the stout man left them to eat. Frank knew of them being were-creatures. Cody had saved him from an attack of rogue wolves that had shifted right in front of Frank, attacking him and almost killing him.

"Damn, I'm still hungry," Tank complained. He eyed Hawk's plate once again. Hawk gave a low growl.

"Try it and get your hand stabbed," Hawk warned as he forked another tip and moaned as he chewed, teasing Tank.

"Dammit." Tank waved the waitress over and ordered a plate of the steak tips. "Give it to me rare and fast," he pleaded, his stomach rumbling in agreement.

* * * *

Who the hell was ordering all this fried chicken? George was barely keeping up. Another order of steak tips came in, and he tossed them on the grill with his secret seasonings and some onions. He dropped another batch of chicken in the fryer as he pulled a handful of the chicken strips out and dropped them as well. George grabbed a stack of to-go containers to put all the food in.

He tossed the spinach salad and sliced the grilled chicken to sprinkle over it, again adding his secret spices to the mix. He chopped the tomatoes, tossing them on top with crumbled blue cheese.

George slung container after container onto the counter as they became ready. He laid the plate of tips up there as well and watched Kitty carry it over to the table with the three large men. *Figures*. George watched in amazement as one of the men literally swallowed the whole plateful of tips. Holy crap!

Kitty came back and bagged the white Styrofoam containers, leaving them at the register. Well, what a surprise, the big fella paid and grabbed all the bags. If men like him came in here all the time, no wonder Frank had a new kitchen.

George cleaned up his mess as the rush receded. He wiped down his grill and counters, cleaning his equipment and stacking the dishes in the dishwasher.

Man, that was a hell of a first day. He prayed he could keep up with the dinner rush. If it was anything like lunch, then George knew he was going to be plumb tired by the time the diner closed.

“You wanna go out to the bar after work?” Kitty smiled at him from behind the counter. Shit. He didn’t want to deal with this. Telling her he was gay would stop her in her tracks, maybe, but it would create a whole new set of problems he wasn’t willing to deal with.

“I don’t believe in mixing personal with business. We’re

coworkers.” That should get her off of his back.

“We can keep it separate. I promise.” Kitty ran her tongue over her bottom lip, trying her best to entice him. George shuddered at the thought, no thanks.

“Sorry, can’t. It’s a rule I live by.” So he was lying. She wouldn’t know. Even if he slept with the opposite sex, Jesse had taught him a valuable lesson. Keep your heart and dick close. He didn’t need the entanglement. He hadn’t even been in town a whole day and already he was fighting for people to leave him the hell alone.

“Fine. Here’s your next order.” Kitty slapped the piece of paper onto the counter as she scowled at him. Rejection tended to make people a bit irritable. He would rather deal with irritability than horniness.

George grabbed the order and began the fries.

* * * *

The dinner rush was just as brutal. His fried chicken seemed to be a hit, and more orders for his homemade chili and steak tips came in as well. George was jumping around the kitchen, tossing chicken into the fryer, sautéing the tips, and stirring his chili. The cornbread came out of the oven a light golden brown. Perfect.

George had just tossed another plate up onto the window when he noticed one of the large men had returned, but now he had two smaller men with him. Was the guy always with someone new? George shook his head as he went back to his duties.

“Hey, George, I need to see you out here,” Frank yelled from behind the counter.

Just great. George didn’t have time to chat. He had cooking to do. Pulling the chicken out and laying the tips on a plate, George wiped his hands on his apron as he strolled out of the kitchen to see what Frank wanted.

“I want you to meet a friend of mine.” Frank led him over to the

big fella.

Fine. If Frank wanted to play politics, what could George really do about it? Say hello and get his ass back to the kitchen, that's what.

"George Knight, I'd like you to meet Tank Forney." Frank stepped back so George could shake hands.

Tank stared at George like he was an alien. He knew he was a mess from cooking all day, but he wasn't *that* bad.

Tank stood and let out a low growl. "Mine." He grabbed George's hand and pulled him into his arms.

"Whoa, partner. I'm not doing the two-step with ya." George pushed at Tank's chest, escaping his arms. What the hell did the guy think he was doing? He looked around to see who all had noticed another man hugging on him. His eyes darted around, but the other customers were busy eating. Thank goodness. He wasn't ready to pack up and run.

"But you're mine." Tank looked disheartened. George couldn't figure out what was going on here, but he didn't like it one bit. He turned back to the big man.

"I'm nobody's, least of all a man's. Nice meetin ya, Tank Forney." George nodded his head then went back to the kitchen. What the hell had gotten into that guy?

* * * *

"Is he really your mate, Tank?" Frank asked as he scratched his jaw.

"Yes." Tank dropped back down in the booth, his heart breaking in half. His mate didn't want him. Why would George reject him? Wasn't he pleasing to his mate?

"It'll be okay, Tank. I fought it at first, too. Give him time." Oliver patted Tank's hand.

"You did?" Tank felt a little hope spark inside him.

"Yeah, I didn't want anyone to know I was gay. You know, my

dad and all.” Oliver lowered his head in shame.

“Thanks, Oliver, and your dad was an asshole, and we all know it. Hold your head up.” Tank hated the fact that Oliver and his brother Blair were molested by their own damn father. He wanted to rip the man’s sick and twisted heart out.

Oliver smiled and began eating again. “This fried chicken really is good. Your mate’s a real good cook, so now maybe we’ll get some decent meals at home”

“Nope, the steak tips are.” Blair punched his brother in his shoulder.

“All right, you two. You need to eat up. Kota and Micah will start worrying if I don’t get you back soon.” Tank shoved another spoonful of mashed potatoes in his mouth as he watched the kitchen for any signs of his mate. The man was breathtaking. The cowboy was tall, handsome, with a beautifully proportioned body.

He especially liked George’s height. With Tank being six seven, he didn’t want to break his back bending down all the time. He loved the little mates the other warriors had at home, but he sometimes wondered how the hell they dealt with such short men.

So this was why Maverick insisted he return to the diner. He could have just come out and said the new cook was his mate. The Alpha didn’t have to be all cloak and dagger about it.

Tank could feel the pull, his wolf wanting its mate. He had a feeling he was going to have a rough way going in convincing George that fate had chosen him to be Tank’s.

Chapter Two

George looked back through the window to see Tank talking to the other two guys. Was he trying to add George to his harem of men? How many different men did he bring in here? George clenched his fists, angered that his body was betraying him. He had to admit at least to himself that Tank intrigued him. *Stupid libido.*

George slammed pots and pans around, angry that he was actually interested. What ticked him off the most was that with Tank's size, he had a feeling he would no longer be a top, and there was no way in hell he was bottoming for any man.

Never.

What did it matter? He wasn't going anywhere near Tank. He wasn't going to be run out of town or fight his way out of a mob of homophobes. He'd had enough of that to last this life and the next.

George grabbed the next order Kitty tossed up onto the window, trying his best to forget Tank Forney, which was pretty dang hard considering the feeling of wanting to rush out there and fall into the man's arms. George cursed as he slammed more things around.

"Everything okay in here?" Frank asked as he came out of his office.

"Yeah, just trying to get everything cooked," George replied.

"Let me know if it gets too much. I can always dive in and help."

"Nah, I can handle it." If he didn't stop throwing a fit, he would let on to everyone how he was feeling. That was something he'd rather keep to himself.

"Okay." Frank pushed past the double doors and walked off into the diner.

George slid back over to the window to get another peek. Tank was laughing with the two men at his table. George felt a twitch in his stomach at the gorgeous smile the guy had. It seemed to light up the entire room. He ducked down when Tank looked over his way. George scooted across the floor until he was no longer under the window then stood. Why was he acting like such a fool? Why did he care if the two men at his table were being graced by that heavenly smile?

He planted his hands on his hips as he exhaled. This was a clean break, not a romantic getaway. There could be no Tank in his life.

George's stupid brain wandered, daydreaming of a life where he didn't have to hide who he was. Did such a place even exist?

"Order up."

Startled, he came back to reality where he was standing in the middle of the kitchen he worked in and hiding who he was from the world. Rounding the island in the middle of the kitchen, he kicked his boot into the cabinet. It wasn't supposed to be hard here. His first day, and already he felt trapped. George shook his head. If Tank came at him again, he would just politely decline. There was no way he was risking anything again.

He remembered the look of pure pride his dad had when George's brother had announced he was going to be a daddy. His dad clapped Clyde's back and broke out the good bourbon. There was no way his dad would celebrate his other son announcing he was gay.

Trying to figure out why he liked men had kept him up numerous nights in his teenage years. He felt like he let everyone down.

George pushed the depressing thoughts away. There was nothing he could do about it. He was who he was whether he admitted to it or not.

Frank took him upstairs after the dinner rush had slowed to a crawl and the last of the customers were finishing up. The place was small. It had a tiny kitchenette, an open room that made up the dining room and living room. And a closet-size bedroom and a bathroom. It

was perfect for George. After sharing a bunkhouse pretty much his entire adult life, having his own—as small as it was—was heaven.

George went back downstairs and gathered his belongings from the back of his truck. It wasn't much. Two suitcases and a duffel bag. Thankfully, the apartment upstairs was furnished.

He struggled to get the luggage up the narrow steps, tossing everything inside the door. He went back down to the diner to finish cleaning his kitchen. Frank stepped in, leaning against the industrial refrigerator. "So, what did you think of Tank?"

George didn't want to talk about the mountain of a man. He had never seen a guy that big in his entire life, and he was trying to forget him.

Frank wasn't helping.

"He's okay. A bit strange." George laughed nervously, uncomfortable with the topic. "Does he always grab people he just met?"

"Nope, just you." Frank watched him, probably trying to feel him out. Well, George wasn't spilling any of his beans.

"Well, I don't know what his problem is, but I'm not into men, so he can try and complete his harem somewhere else." George wiped the same spot repeatedly. It troubled him that he was feeling jealous of those men accompanying Tank. It just didn't make sense.

"That's not his harem. Those are his good friends' boyfriends. The guys earlier with him were just friends as well." George stopped momentarily then continued to wipe down. He didn't care if Tank was free game. He wasn't taking the bait. What the heck was with Frank anyway? Was he some sort of self-proclaimed matchmaker? His curiosity was piqued, though.

"There are gay men here?" George asked nonchalantly, as if it was just a curious question.

"Yep, a whole lot of 'em. Don't bother us town folk. They contribute a lot to the community, and they're nice fellas." Frank walked out of the kitchen, leaving George to sort out this new tidbit of

information.

George absorbed what Frank had just revealed to him. Not only was the town accepting, but there were openly gay men who lived here? Even if he believed Frank, and he wasn't sure if he did just yet, Tank still wasn't his type. Those men weren't his harem. Just friends? Dammit, why did Frank have to open his piehole?

George cut the lights and dragged his tired bones upstairs, his mind in a whirl over the emotions assailing him. He thought of Jesse as he dropped down on the couch. His stomach tightened at the betrayal once more. George had loved the man, given his heart freely, and then he was crushed. He couldn't go through that again.

He dug through his duffel bag and pulled a few CDs out, opening the stereo's compact disc player up and tossing it in, and finding the song he was looking to hear. "To Make You Feel My Love" by Garth Brooks. He laid his head back against the couch, thinking of his lost love and broken heart. George quickly changed songs. He wasn't going to sit and wallow in self-pity. It was over, and he needed to move on. Leave Jesse in Wyoming and begin his new life.

His new, lonely life.

* * * *

Tank paced the halls of the Den. He wanted George. He wanted to hold him, claim him. His head hurt thinking of the possible ways to convince the cowboy that they were fated to be together. He pulled up the image of George's beautiful, crystal-blue eyes and his sandy-blond hair. The goatee was rugged, and Tank thought it added to the rough, manly look. He had a cute cowboy butt, too. A butt Tank was dying to sink into.

"Ugh." He couldn't take this. He wanted his mate. Why was he being so damn pigheaded? He should just go down there and demand that George come home with him. He would make the man see that he would love him unconditionally, treat him like a king.

“Yeah, right, and then get arrested,” Tank mumbled.

“You know, it’s a sign that you’re losing it when you start talking to yourself.” Cody walked up behind Tank.

“I’m not. Well, I am, but I’m so damn frustrated.” Tank rubbed his hands over his head. Why was he torturing himself like this? How did the other warriors handle it when they were claiming their mates?

“What’s got the giant in a tizzy?” Cody raised a brow.

“I found my mate, but he doesn’t want anything to do with me.” Tank leaned against the wall and stared up at the ceiling. Why did it have to be so complicated?

“Whoa. Who?” Cody asked in surprise. This irritated an already irritated man. Didn’t anyone think he deserved to have a mate, or did they think he was only good enough to be a babysitter to theirs? Tank pushed the thought away. He knew he was just being cranky.

“George Knight.” Tank said his name in reverence.

“Wait, my new cook?” Cody owned half the diner and had been a lousy cook for awhile until he and Frank found a replacement. The last one quit when business picked up so quickly. Tank would be forever grateful to the guy who quit. That is, if he ever convinced George they were mates.

“Yeah,” Tank blew out.

“You do know why he came here, right?” Cody squatted down next to Tank who had slid down to the floor.

“No.” He looked over at Cody, hopeful for an answer that may solve his problem.

“He’s been kicked off of three ranches when they found out he was gay and had the love of his life crush his heart by denying him when it counted. He’s bound to be scared to reveal his sexual preference.”

“You think that’s it? That’s why he denied me?” Tank stood, hope flooding him.

“I’d say so, but don’t quote me on it, buddy.” Cody stood as well, clapping Tank on his back.

Tank watched Cody walk away. So he had to find a different approach for his mate. What? How do you convince a man that hid who he was to not hide it? Well, he was right about one thing, George was going to be a challenge.

* * * *

Tank woke the next morning, making a phone call before he left for the diner. He planned on eating three square meals there every day until his mate gave in.

He waited outside until Cody came and opened the place up.

"Anxious I see." Cody opened the door and let his mate, Keata, in first, then Tank.

"Tank have mate?" Keata asked as he hopped up on the stool at the counter. Keata was from Japan. He and his cousin Kyoshi had been kidnapped off the streets and smuggled across the ocean, only to get away and end up mating two of the Sentries. He was a dear friend of Tank's. The little guy could ask Tank for anything, and he would give it.

"Yeah, but mate don't want Tank." He sat next to the short mate.

"He will. You good catch." Keata beamed up at the warrior.

Cody growled. "Flirting with my mate, Tank?"

"He started it." Tank defended with a grin. Everyone knew that aside from their Commander, Hawk, who killed anyone who looked cross eyed at his mate, Johnny, Cody was head over heels for Keata and extremely protective of him, more so than the rest of the mated wolves. Cody and Hawk took protection to a whole new level. Keata had been kidnapped by the American who originally brought him over here, and Cody went nuts tearing up the video store they had been in, shifting in plain view searching for his mate, the Prince of vampires finally finding and returning Keata.

"Just chill, Tank. Don't come on too strong," Cody offered.

Tank took a deep breath then exhaled. "I won't." He was nervous

as hell and excited at the prospect of seeing his mate again. His hands began to sweat and butterflies flapped their wings in his stomach. All the sudden, he felt like he was going to be sick. "I can't do this." Tank stood, but Keata pulled at his arm.

"Relax." Keata patted his arm.

"Yeah, okay. Relax." Tank sat back down.

"Morning, folks." George jogged down the steps from his apartment, and Tank shot off of his stool and out the front door.

* * * *

"He doesn't like people saying 'morning'?" George stared after Tank, wondering what he had said to upset the guy.

Cody stared openmouthed at the wind Tank left behind when he rushed out. "Guess not." Cody closed his mouth.

"Should I have said hello?" George eyed the door. He had decided last night that he would play things by ear, feel the town out, and maybe, just maybe, give Tank half a chance and see what happened. If they were really as gay-friendly as Frank claimed, then maybe he could have a chance at a real life here.

Guess he just found out what would happen.

"No morning person," a short man sitting at the counter defended Tank.

"Hi. Who are you?" George extended his hand only to have one of his two bosses growl at him. George shrugged Cody off and shook the little cuties hand.

"Keata, Cody's mate." He smiled.

"Mate?" He looked from Keata to Cody.

"He's from England." Cody was obviously covering Keata's mistake. But the question was, what mistake?

"But he's Japanese." George scratched his head.

"Yeah, uh, migrated?" Cody quickly went to the office he shared with Frank, removing himself before he stuck his foot deeper into his

mouth. George figured that much out, but what was he hiding?

“You really from England?” George asked Keata.

“I, uh, don’t speak English.” Keata ran after Cody.

Well, he seemed to know how to clear a room real quick. George looked once more at the door before he went into the kitchen to get things ready for the day.

* * * *

Tank sat on the steps to the post office, feeling like a real idiot.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid.” He groaned.

George was actually speaking to him, and he ran out of there like a damn pup. Tank ran his hands over his head. He needed to get back in there, but would his mate still talk to him? Standing, he brushed off his bottom and walked back to the diner.

No one was around, so he took a seat at the booth. The morning rush started, and Kitty coming over to take his order. Tank ate slow, waiting for another chance to talk to George.

A delivery person came in with a bouquet of flowers, handing them over to Kitty.

“For me?” She smiled and smelled the yellow roses.

“No, ma’am, they’re for a George Knight.” The delivery man had her sign then left.

“George, you got some damn flowers,” Kitty yelled to the back.

Tank wondered what her problem was. Was she jealous she didn’t get any? He watched George come out and look around then take the card from the metal holder. He opened it then blushed, his eyes looking to Tank before darting away.

“Who’s got the hots for you?” Kitty tried to look over George’s shoulder.

“Stop.” George shrugged her away, aware Tank was watching.

“I still think you should go out with me. I’ll make it worth your while.” She pinched George’s ass cheek.

Tank growled. So that's why she acted jealous. She wanted his mate. Tank was going to have a talk with Cody about sexual harassment on the job.

George grabbed the vase and headed back into the kitchen, looking over his shoulder at Tank quickly before he smiled and disappeared.

Tank mentally air pumped his arm. Score one for Operation Win His Mate.

When Tank's plate came, it had extra helpings of hash browns and four eggs instead of two.

"Guess his mind is on those flowers. He gave you more than you ordered." Kitty sat his plate down.

Tank pulled his lip up in a sneer then caught it. He didn't want to out George if he wasn't ready for it.

"Hungry, big guy?" Kitty winked at him.

"Always." Tank pasted a smile on that he didn't feel. He was really beginning not to like her.

Chapter Three

George had just pulled his breakfast quiche from the oven, setting it on a cooling rack, when he heard the door swish open from the diner. He looked over to see Tank standing right inside the kitchen. George looked back down at the oven, not knowing what to say.

"Hi," Tank offered first.

"Uh, hi." George straightened, looking over to the counter to see who was watching. Kitty was over at a table taking orders, not paying any attention.

"No one saw me come in." Tank rubbed his hands on the front of his jeans. George was glad he wasn't the only one nervous as hell.

"You really shouldn't be in here." He regretted the words as soon as he said them. Tank's face fell.

"Okay, sorry to bother you." Tank turned to leave.

"Wait, I—I shut down around nine. Maybe we could hang out or something." George felt like he was sixteen all over again, fumbling over words, not sure what to say. He knew he said the right thing when Tank's dark brown eyes lit up.

"Okay. I'll be back then." Tank left with a big, goofy grin on his face.

George smiled. For a big guy, he sure was insecure. He liked that. It made Tank seem less intimidating.

He whistled his favorite country song as he worked around the kitchen the rest of the day, stopping occasionally to smell the beautiful flowers Tank had sent him. Time seemed to move slowly, maybe because he couldn't stop glancing at the wall clock.

"How ya hanging in there, George?"

“So far, so good. I hadn’t anticipated such a crowd. When you said rush, I was expecting maybe half of what we get.” George chuckled as he wiped the marble top island off.

“That’s why the last cook quit. You sure you can handle it? I need to know. Before you came, Cody was cooking, and let me tell you, it was frightening.” Frank shuddered.

“Nah, I can handle the folk. Took me a minute to get a routine, but it ain’t so hard.” George wrapped the raw chicken up that he’d been marinating for lunch and stored it in the refrigerator.

“Nice flowers.” Frank quirked a brow and nodded over to George’s vase of yellow roses.

All he could do was shrug. He wasn’t about to explain anything especially when he was still trying to figure things out. “Thanks.”

“I’ll let you get back to work. Just wanted to check up on you and see how things were going.”

George leaned his hip against the counter. What would Tank want to do tonight? The guy hadn’t mentioned anything, and George wasn’t familiar with the town. Frank may be claiming it was a gay-friendly town, but George in no way was ready to use public displays of affection in front of people. He wasn’t even ready for the attention Tank was giving him.

When the clock read eight thirty, George closed the kitchen down and hit the lights. He ran up the stairs to get ready. He had thirty minutes until Tank showed up. That should be plenty of time to get his food encrusted clothes off and look presentable.

He kicked his boots off then hurriedly pulled his T-shirt above his head. Once the water was regulated, George pulled his jeans and underwear off, tossing his socks onto the pile. The shower took only moments. His nerves made him rush through everything.

George cursed when he tripped over his duffel bag. He needed to slow down. Pulling up from the floor, he made his way over to the dresser.

“What are you acting like this for?” he asked his reflection in the

large mirror that hung there. Deciding he wasn't out to impress the big guy, George just grabbed a clean pair of jeans and a T-shirt from his bag. He really needed to unpack.

Ready to go, George grabbed his Stetson from off the hook and placed it on his head. Taking one last look in the mirror to make sure he looked presentable, he cut the lights and jogged down the steps.

* * * *

Tank paced behind the diner. It was only eight thirty. He knew he was early, but he'd been too excited to sit still. He showered and shaved, trying to look his best for his mate. The lights in the diner went off, and Tank's hands got sweaty just at the thought of finally spending some alone time with George. A half hour passed, and Tank got more agitated. Then, the back door pushed open.

He could see that George had showered and was wearing clean clothes. He looked absolutely stunning. His crystal-blue eyes were twinkling as he smiled at Tank. Damn, he actually had dimples. Tank had an urge to run his tongue along the indents. It took sheer willpower not to grab his mate into his arms and molest him right behind the dinner. It wouldn't help his cause either.

"Hi." George stepped out of the door and over to his right, looking at Tank from under his long, blond lashes.

"Hey. You, uh, wanna go for a walk?" Tank rubbed his hands down the front of his jeans again, his palms stayed wet around this guy.

"Okay." George stepped closer, and Tank noticed that George was the perfect height, the top of his head reaching Tank's shoulders.

"I hear you're from Wyoming. What's that like?" He walked George toward the town square, keeping a respectable distance. For now.

"Wide-open spaces and plenty of room to ride your horse." George sighed. "I do miss that. Miss the early morning rides I took

with my horse, Daisy.”

“I never rode a horse. Is it hard?”

“Nah, just gotta know how to handle ’em. They feel what you feel, so you have to be calm around them.” George visibly relaxed. Tank wasn’t making any moves on him. It was like two old friends taking a stroll. No pressure. Tank planned on keeping it that way until his mate became accustomed to him.

“Maybe one day you can teach me.” They circled around the gazebo that sat in the middle of the park, strolling slowly, enjoying each other’s company.

“Sure, I’d like that. It’ll be nice to get back in the saddle. Can I ask you something?” George stopped and looked up at Tank.

“Okay.”

“What did you mean yesterday when you grabbed me and said I was yours? What gives?”

The scene played in Tank’s mind. He couldn’t outright tell the man they were mates. He knew he would have to in the near future, but right now he just wanted to enjoy the time they were spending together without making it complicated. “Can I wait to answer that until we get better acquainted?” Until he had the guts to tell George about his wolf.

George studied him for a moment then nodded. “Promise you’ll answer it though?”

“I promise. Can I ask you something now?” Tank shoved his hands in the front pocket of his jeans.

“Okay.” Scratching the back of his neck, his mate looked like he wasn’t sure he wanted to answer any personal questions.

“What’s up with Kitty?”

A look of relief flooded George’s face. “Is it that obvious?” George chuckled. “I think she’s trying to make me a daddy.”

“What?” Tank thundered out.

“Whoa, big fella. I said *trying*. She’s got a dozen of them runnin’ around at home. She doesn’t think I know. I may be a hick, but I’m

not that stupid." George laughed.

Tank could listen to his laugh for hours on end and never tire of it. "So, you're not interested in her?"

"Nah, ain't my type." They began to walk again, heading back toward the diner.

"What's your type?" *Please let him say me.*

"Not sure, but she ain't." Tank could tell he was hiding the fact that he was gay. Frank told him that he let his mate know how gay-friendly the town was. Well, most of the town. He remembered the scuffle the mates had in the bathroom of the diner a while back. Four cowboys from the local ranch seemed to have a problem with the sexual preference of others and wanted to make an example out of the mates. Boy, were they surprised when the mates defended themselves. Hell, Tank had been shocked.

They ended at the back entrance of the diner, Tank wishing they had taken a longer route. He didn't want to let George go. Dammit, why couldn't he just take him home and claim him? Tank wanted to stomp his foot like a five-year-old having a fit. It wasn't fair.

"Well, it was nice talking with ya. I guess I'll see you around the diner. And thanks for the roses." George turned to leave, but Tank wasn't having it. He pulled his mate into his arms, crushing his lips to the softest set he'd ever tasted. George moaned and leaned into Tank, battling for domination. Tank knocked George's Stetson off and grabbed a handful of blond hair, pulling his mate's head back and delving deeper.

George broke the kiss. "Tank."

Tank stopped the protest by kissing George again, his taste like a fresh summer morning rain. Tank got lost in the sweetness of his mate's mouth.

Tank could tell George wanted to push him away, but his mate surprised him by grabbing his face instead. Tank reached a hand around his mate's neck, pulling him closer. This must have been too much because George pushed him away, a look of mixed lust and

confusion in his eyes.

“George.” Tank reached out, but George stepped away.

“I can’t, Tank. I just...can’t.” George pulled the door open and ran upstairs.

Tank stood there, stunned. What did he do wrong? Reaching down to grab George’s hat, he dusted it off and inhaled the scent of his mate.

He had thought things were going well. George seemed like a really nice guy, a guy Tank wanted to get to know better. His heart reached out to the guy, wondering what it was like to deny who you truly were.

Never in his life had Tank thought to lie about being gay. Even when his pack turned their backs on him, he stood proud and tall, leaving them behind. To be kicked off of three ranches must have been devastating to the cowboy. Tank couldn’t even imagine someone telling him to get out. He left his pack of his own free will.

He had an urge to drive to Wyoming and kick everyone’s ass that offended his mate.

Staring up at the apartment, he was torn between just going home or knocking the door down and claiming what was his. He’d force George out of the closet. He shook his head, knowing he really wouldn’t do that.

With a sigh, Tank started walking slowly back toward his truck.

* * * *

George paced his small apartment, thinking about the best kiss he had ever had. He felt at a loss being away from Tank, and that scared the shit out of him. George hit the on button to the stereo and blasted Faith Hill’s “Free,” letting the melody take him away.

The image of that big Clydesdale of a man made his groin ache. He couldn’t seem to get his mind past that kiss. He’d never had one—or given one, for that matter—with such passion in it.

"Oh, man." George flopped down on the couch. "I'm hooked." He groaned loudly. He sat up when he remembered his hat downstairs. It was his favorite one, his only one at the moment. George slowly crept down the steps, listening for any sign that Tank still remained. When he heard nothing, he pushed the back door open. He looked down where it had dropped after that amazing kiss, but it was gone.

"Dammit," he bit out softly. He felt naked without it. It was all he had left from his mama, and he wanted it back. His mother had bought it for him on his eighteenth birthday, a year before she passed, and it brought him comfort. It made him feel closer to her, like he still had a part of her with him.

"Late for a human to be out."

George looked over his shoulder to see two men standing off in the shadows. *Human?* What the heck were these two talking about?

"He'd make a nice snack." One of them snickered.

"I don't know about that. My hide is pretty rough." George turned to face them, squaring his shoulders. He didn't run from anyone, least of all cowards who prayed on unsuspecting folk in the shadows.

"Doesn't matter. You'll do." They stepped forward, their fangs gleaming under the moonlight.

Fangs? What the hell was going on here?

George backed away, trying to make his way to the side of the building for more room to deal with these...whatevers.

"Don't run. It won't hurt...much."

George spun around and took off, rounding the corner of the diner and heading for his truck. He needed the rope that lay in the bed of it.

"I like a chase." One of them laughed with glee.

"Then come chase me, you no good cow patty." George skidded to a stop by his truck and swung his arm over the bed. Thank goodness he had left that piece of rope in there.

"What's going on, George?"

George turned his head to see Tank standing by his truck, his damn hat in the man's hand. He walked forward, stopping in front of

the big galoot.

“What’d you do, wait until my back was turned and steal it?” George reached out and grabbed his hat from Tank’s fingers.

“Now, wait one minute. You left it on the ground. I was going to return it in the morning,” Tank defended himself.

“Likely story,” George argued. He dusted the hat as if Tank’s fingerprints were smudged all over it then set it atop his head.

“Who are they?”

George looked over his shoulder to see the two men round the corner and start their way slowly. He waved them off. “Hell if I know. Something about a snack” George turned back to Tank, ticked that the man was smirking. “That hat’s special to me, I don’t appreciate no one touchin’ on it.”

Tank wagged his finger in George’s face. “I said I was gonna return it.”

“Sure ya were.” George smacked Tank’s hand away from his face.

The two men showed their fangs, circling the arguing pair.

“George, get in my truck, I’ve got vampires to deal with.” Tank shoved George at the passenger side of his pickup.

“I ain’t no damn girl, I can defend myself against...vampires?” George spun around to look at the two men, who were getting closer, their teeth long and sharp and protruding from their mouths.

“Yeah, vampires. Now stop arguing, and get inside. I won’t have my mate in harm’s way.” Tank once again pushed George to get in.

“Will you stop that?” George smacked Tank’s hands. “I said I ain’t a girl, and what’s this mate crap I keep hearing about? I swear I’ll hit you if you say something about England.”

“Dammit, I’m a wolf, and you’re my mate. I wanted to wait and tell you when I thought you could handle it.” Tank put his hands on his hips, seeming exasperated that George was being so difficult. *Well, too dang bad.*

“Mate? What the hell does that mean?”

“It means I claim you, and then you belong to me.” Tank

narrowed his eyes. "Are you going to argue with me about it?"

He glared at Tank, frowning. "Claim me? I ain't being claimed by no one, partner, least of all a Neanderthal like you." George pointed his finger up into Tank's face.

"George." Tank growled a warning.

"Don't George me." George swung around, connecting his fist into one of the vampire's jaw. Just because he was arguing didn't mean he wasn't paying attention to what the two were doing. The guy stumbled back, and that was all George needed. He swung again and again, not letting up. He saw he was having little effect on the guy, but he knew if he stopped, he'd be toast.

"Dammit, George. Get over here where I can protect you," Tank shouted to him in irritation.

"Don't." *Whack.* "Need." *Smack.* "Your." *Crunch.* "Protection." George knocked the guy on his ass. He looked over his shoulder briefly to see Tank had the other vampire by his throat, squeezing the undead life out of him.

"Watch out." Tank pointed to the one George was dealing with.

He turned around to see the guy had gotten back up. George reached into the bed of his truck and grabbed the rope, running down the sidewalk with it with the vampire close behind. He stopped, whirled the rope high in the air, and lassoed the sneaky fucker. George ran back and looped the rest of the rope around the guy, knowing it wasn't going to hold him for long.

George dragged the guy back over to Tank and tossed him on the ground. Turning to the mountain of a man, he thinned his lips. "I ain't being claimed, Tank."

"Why not? I'd be gentle. Don't let my size scare you." Tank softened his eyes on him.

"Gentle? You saying we got to have sex?" George laid his cowboy boot on the vampire's chest to stop him from getting up.

"Well, yeah. That's how I would claim you." Tank looked at him like it should have been obvious.

"I ain't no one's bottom boy. I top. That's what I do." George put his hands on his hips, blowing up a puff of air to knock away the bangs that had fallen into his eyes.

"Uh, guys. I'm not hungry anymore, so I'll just be on my way." The vampire lying on the ground tied up spoke.

"Shut up," George and Tank said in unison.

"Don't you think you need to call for backup? Ain't gonna hold him for long." George pointed behind him at his capture.

"Fine, but we're not finished with this conversation." Tank pulled out his cell phone and talked rapidly into it, sliding it back into his front pocket.

"Oh, we're done. Wolf or no wolf, claim or no claim, I ain't doin' it. You ain't toppin' me." George dropped down on the wiggling vampire and sat on his chest, and then he cocked his arm back and punched him in the face.

"What was that for?" the vamp yelled.

"Sit still." George pointed a finger at him in warning.

"Be reasonable, mate. How else am I supposed to claim you?" Tank walked over with the other vampire still in his hand.

"Guess I'll have to top you. Should work the same." He crossed his hands over his chest.

"No, it wouldn't. I have to be inside of you when I bite you." Tank threw his arms up in frustration, the guy lifting with his move.

"Why can't I bite you? Be inside of you?" George bit out.

"Duh, you have no canines, at least not long enough. Besides, I don't think it works that way."

George fell on his ass when the vampire broke the ropes and got to his feet.

"I ain't that damn hungry." He turned around and stormed off toward the woods. "Crazy-ass people around here, I swear..." he mumbled as he disappeared.

"Now see what you done did—"

"I did? You're the one being so damn difficult." Tank tossed his

capture to the ground and stepped chest to chest with his mate.

"To hell with this." The second vampire got to his feet and took off after the first one.

"Me? You're the one who wants to fuck me. No way, no how." George stepped back, crossing his arms over his chest. Telling Tank in no uncertain terms that it wasn't happening.

Headlights flooded them, and three large guys got out of the truck with a look of bewilderment crossing their faces. They looked from Tank to George, their eyebrows furrowing.

"That way." Tank jammed his thumb over his shoulder, pointing in the direction the pair had taken off in.

The three nodded and ran, shifting as they entered the woods.

"Where the hell did I move to? Brothers Grimm? Wolves and vampires. Next you're gonna tell me trolls live under a damn bridge somewhere." George paced over to his truck, leaning against it, crossing his ankles. "Seems we're at an impasse, Tank. Sorry, I ain't bottoming."

Tank rubbed his hands over his head, looking like he was ready to punch someone out. Maybe the guy should have held onto the vamp a little longer and taken his frustrations out on him. Whatever the case may be, George wasn't budging.

"Okay, just once then. Long enough to claim you? We can argue over topping after that until the cows come home," Tank pleaded.

"No." George pushed off his truck, walking back to the rear of the diner.

"George," Tank called out to him.

"No," George shot over his shoulder as he disappeared.

"Fuck," Tank yelled in frustration, loud enough for George to hear him.

Chapter Four

“I’d like to invite you to dinner at my house.” Tank stood inside the kitchen, watching George cook. Man, if he wasn’t a gorgeous sight. Tight denim jeans, midnight-blue T-shirt stretched over an impressive chest, and black cowboy boots to top it off. Tank fought the urge to toss his mate over the marble countertop and fuck his brains out.

“Okay. You do know I don’t get off until nine?” George turned around and stared at Tank, his blue eyes twinkling in the light.

Tank wanted to lick the goatee around his mouth and nip at the soul patch under his bottom lip. “Yeah. Pick you up then?”

“I can drive. Just give me your address. Shouldn’t be too hard to find.” George spoke softly, and Tank’s hard-on throbbed in his jeans. His mate looked like one of those boy-next-door types. Handsome, rugged, and drool-worthy.

“Okay, I’ll go write it down.” Tank pushed the kitchen doors open and headed back into the dining area. He reached under the counter for a scrap sheet of paper, borrowing a pen from the cup filled with them by the register.

“Got a date?” Cody asked quietly as he walked next to Tank

“Yeah, he’s agreed to come to dinner. What do I feed someone who can cook when I can’t?” Tank scribbled down the address and the directions. It was an estate buried far back from the country road, set back into the forest for privacy and room for the wolves to run and be themselves.

“Takeout?” Cody suggested.

“Never thought of that. Maybe I can get two to-go orders.”

"Tank, I wouldn't suggest having him cook what he's gonna come over and eat. Try the Chinese place in town. I hear they're pretty good." Cody chuckled.

"Right. Never thought of that."

"Tank have mate?" Keata asked from the stool by the register.

"Almost, little buddy. Almost." Tank ruffled Keata's hair as he stepped back in the kitchen and gave George the directions, both men staring at one another for a moment. Tank knew George felt the pull, and that's why he kept agreeing to see him. Now he just needed him to agree to the claiming, which was easier said than done.

* * * *

George checked the paper Tank had given him then looked back up at the massive house he was sitting in front of. This couldn't be right. The place was huge. There were at least ten pickups lining the gravel drive and three large SUVs. Did Tank have a party going on in there?

George cut the engine and opened his door. He stood there for a moment wondering if he had the right address. He spotted Tank's half-ton truck and knew he was in the right place. Taking a deep breath, he climbed the steps and rang the doorbell. He wasn't much of a party person. Maybe he could make an excuse and get out of there.

"Can I help you?" A small man answered the door. He looked like his boss's mate, Keata.

"I'm here to see Tank." George stepped back when a large man growled and grabbed the smaller man into his arms.

"Haven't I told you about answering the door, dragonfly?"

George noticed the guy's eyes swirled with different colors. It was hypnotizing. The little man laughed and kissed the larger man, hugging him close. A part of George envied the love they obviously had for one another. He wanted something like that for himself.

And to be so open with it? That was a pipe dream for George.

“He’s here to see Tank.” The little guy wrapped himself around the larger one.

“Come on in. You must be George. I’m Storm.” Storm stuck his hand out and shook George’s. “And this little man is my mate, Kyoshi.”

“He looks like Keata.” George stepped into the foyer, noise assailing him immediately. He heard whooping and loud rock music that threatened to burst his eardrums.

“You know my cousin?” Kyoshi beamed.

George’s nerves were beginning to fray with that heavy metal music. He was expecting to see kids run out of there with the loud video game noise. “Yeah, I work at the diner. He’s there a lot with Cody.” He glanced at the room with noise again. Maybe he should have popped a few aspirin before he got here.

“You must be the new cook Frank hired.” Storm led him to a room any man would be envious of, except for the loud music. There were two suede couches to the left with a poker table behind it, and four short men sat at it playing poker with...pretzels? They were using pretzels instead of poker chips. He looked off to the right and saw a large billiard table with two large men playing a game and a full bar to the left of that. A dartboard hung on the wall close to the pool table.

George looked over when he heard yelling. In front of the couches was a large flat-screen television, and two men were jumping around, shouting curses at each other while playing a video game. George wished he could find the mute button and turn the damn music off. His headache was getting worse from it.

A small man ran up to him, his golden curls bouncing as he ran, “I’m Johnny. You must be George, Tank’s mate.” He hugged George.

George stood there stunned, the little appendage hanging on to him for a brief moment before letting go. A growl ripped through the air, and George’s head snapped up to see the fiercest man that he imagined could be a person’s worst nightmare. The kind of man you

crossed the street to avoid. He had blue-black hair and stood as tall as Tank, except this guy looked like he just walked out of the bowels of hell.

"Sorry, Johnny gets a little excited." The man turned around and picked the little blond up. "What have we talked about, pretty baby?"

Pretty baby? George's head was spinning. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. He felt out of place. It was like little guys versus big guy in this place, and George was in between. Well, not all the guy's were short. Two of the guys sitting off in a corner looked to stand just a tad shorter than George. They were sitting at the poker table, and they also looked similar to one another. They must be related. One had piercings decorating his ears and bottom lip. The other had hair all the way to his waist in a raven-black color.

"You made it."

George turned around to see Tank standing behind him, smiling. Tank looked amazing. George had no clue he could be turned on as much as he was by black fatigues and a black T-shirt that had to be a size triple X. The damn shirt stretched across a chest so full of muscles that George wanted to lick his lips.

Tank wasn't even his type, but George knew a hot guy when he saw one, and he was looking right at one. He swung his head around when he heard clatter over by the pool table. Two large men were standing chest to chest with each other, the man with black-and-blond hair was snarling.

"Don't pay any attention to Murdock and Gunnar. They're just competitive." Tank chuckled. "They're harmless."

"Yeah, they really look harmless." The one with the black and blond hair stood a few inches taller than George. He looked like he was a world-champion weight lifter with all the muscles he sported.

The other one was George's height and with the same blond hair he had, only this guy was more firm, not bulky. George thought he was insane for challenging the other guy.

"Come on, let's eat." Tank led him down a hallway that seemed to

have a thousand doors. George noticed mahogany double doors that were open revealing an expansive library. These guys must be loaded. He felt slightly intimidated by that. He was just a poor country boy trying to get by, and here these guys were living it up. He wasn't jealous of their wealth. It was just overwhelming. As a poor farm boy, he wasn't used to such luxuries.

"I was going to have us eat in the formal dining room, but it seemed a little impersonal. I hope you don't mind the kitchen." Tank led him into a large open kitchen with a breakfast table that sat eight. The kitchen had green marble countertops and a chrome side-by-side refrigerator. It was beautiful. He smiled to himself when he saw that Tank had set the lighting low and had candles burning in a romantic setting.

Tank pulled his chair back, waiting for him to take it.

"I told ya I ain't a girl." George scoffed, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Humor me for tonight. Please?" Tank reached out and traced his fingers down George's forearm, causing him to get gooseflesh.

"Fine, but if you stand when I do, there's gonna be trouble." George heaved a sigh and allowed Tank to scoot his chair in.

Tank walked around to his side and began serving what looked like sweet-and-sour chicken. Did Tank cook this, or did he order it? George bit the inside of his mouth to stop the smile. He knew Tank had worked hard at this, and he wasn't going to complain or laugh at him. He appreciated the effort the man had gone through to impress him.

"I hope you like Chinese. I never thought to ask." He poured the red sauce over George's chicken, his hands shaking slightly.

"That's good." George put his hand up when Tank tried to add more chicken to his plate. "Thank you."

Tank smiled and sat back down, looking at George's plate and then back at his. He scooped a small amount of rice and chicken onto his plate.

George pointed his fork at Tank's plate. "I know you eat more than that. Don't stand on ceremony on my account. Eat up." George took a bite to cover his smile.

Tank tossed the fork down and grabbed the bite-size chicken with his fingers. He glanced up at George and chuckled as he placed another nugget in his mouth. Tank was trying really hard for him.

Tank gulped.

"You okay?" George set his fork down, staring at Tank with concern.

"Yeah, you're...just so breathtaking."

Did the big fella actually just blush? George's defensives lowered at the sight of this big galoot being so unsure and nervous. It made him feel ten feet tall, powerful, knowing he was the cause of Tank's vulnerability.

"Thanks." He shoved another forkful in his mouth, not sure what else to say. What do you say to something like that? Thank you seemed inadequate.

They finished their dinner. George helped Tank clean up while Tank protested that his guest shouldn't be cleaning. George scraped his plate and grinned at the take-out boxes he spotted in the trash. Maybe he would invite Tank to his place and cook him a nice, thick steak.

"Found me out."

George looked over his shoulder to see Tank standing so close behind him that he felt his breath on the nape of his neck.

"I had my suspicions. It was good anyway." George turned around and, closed the distance, taking Tank's lips in an unsure kiss. Tank didn't rush it this time. He kissed him back leisurely, as if sitting on a porch on lazy Sunday morning drinking lemonade. Tank's slow movements were setting George's blood on fire.

A tingle of excitement raced through George as Tank's fingers trailed up his arms. He could feel his body responding to that gentle touch, and George was frightened of this reaction, but he couldn't

push the big teddy bear away.

Tank's slow, drugging kisses were taking him to another plane.

George caught the whimper before it could escape when Tank pulled back. His lips were still warm and moist from Tank's kiss.

They both stood there for a moment, as if coming out of a trance.

"Follow me," Tank said hoarsely, grabbing George's hand and leading him down the hall and through a door.

George dug his heels in when he saw that it was a bedroom. The bed that was in the center of the room could fit three Tanks in it. He admitted that the kiss was spectacular on a mega million dollar scale, but he wasn't sure about no dang bed.

"I thought we agreed we were at an impasse." George pulled his hand from Tank's, crossing his arms over his chest. He was irritated even further when he felt his body slightly shake.

"You agreed. No pressure. Just sit and talk with me." Tank crossed the room and sat on the edge of the bed, patting the space next to him.

George arched a brow. "Ain't that a line you use on an unsuspecting girl?"

"Don't know. Never been with one." Tank gave him a mischievous grin. George swam in a sea of insecurities. His body was pleading with him to go to Tank, but his mind and heart feared what could happen if he opened himself up. Being with a man larger than him, a man who didn't hide his sexual preference, was new to him, and George wasn't so sure he could handle it.

"Fine, but don't make me smack you." George stomped over to Tank and plopped down on the bed. Once again he crossed his arms to hide the shaking his hands were going through.

Tank pulled George's arm away from his chest and ran his fingers over the back of George's hand. The giant cleared his throat. "I'm a Timber wolf, two hundred and sixteen years old, and I've been looking for my mate since I was eighteen. That's you, if you haven't figured that out." Tank smiled softly at George. "We only get one.

One mate to last us till we reach one thousand years old. If you deny me, I have another seven hundred and eighty-four years to be alone.”

“I thought you said no pressure.” His head was in a whirl. This was all too much for him to take in. That’s a long time to be alone. A wolf? One thousand years? Crap, he needed time to absorb this. “So if I let you claim me, I live that long, too?”

“Yes. You’ll never get sick, you’ll heal faster than an unmated human, and I *promise* to always make you happy and take care of all your wants and needs.” Tank kept his head down, afraid of being rejected again would be George’s guess.

“We still need to settle this bottom thing.” Damn, what should he do? He didn’t need Tank to take care of him, but to have that kind of devotion? His heart was torn.

“Just once? Let me claim you, George. That’s all I ask. We can work anything out after that.” Tank pleaded with his eyes.

George took off his hat, placing it beside him as he ran his hand through his hair. “Once?” He looked over to Tank, unsure of what he was about to agree to.

* * * *

“Promise.” Tank’s excitement was hard to contain. Was he really about to claim his mate? Would George agree to it? He held his breath as he waited for George’s reply.

“How do we do this?”

Fuck yeah! He felt as though he’d just hit the lottery. Tank pulled George into his arms, laying him gently down on his back. “Just let me love you.” Tank crawled over George. “Just once.” His body trembled, and his hands shook as he feathered his fingers over the cowboy’s tanned face.

George nodded and pulled Tank down for a scorching kiss. George wrapped his legs around Tank’s waist and opened his mouth for Tank’s exploration. As good as this was, Tank didn’t want to

waste time. The fear of his mate changing his mind had him moving away from the kiss.

Tank pulled back and unwrapped his mate's legs, pulling his T-shirt over his head and disrobing the rest of his clothes. He really didn't want to rush things, but his stomach knotted thinking of the man changing his mind at the last second.

George's eyes widened. "Is that a side of beef hanging between your legs? Oh, *hell* no. I think I may have changed my mind." George gulped audibly while staring at Tank's cock.

"Don't. Please. I won't hurt you," Tank pleaded as he reached down and pulled George to his feet, kissing his neck as he unsnapped his jeans, fishing his cock out and dropping to his knees.

"Tank," George croaked out as he pulled his shirt from over his head. Tank looked up into his mate's eyes, seeing the hesitation, fear, and lust burning in them. What had George been through to become so terrified of giving himself over?

"Just once," Tank whispered as he swallowed his mate's cock.

"Oh, fuck." George's head fell forward, grabbing Tank's shoulders as he swung his hips back and forth. Tank growled and applied suction, fucking his mouth on George's cock.

"Tank." George moaned. It sounded like an angel spreading its wings to Tank's ears.

His tongue danced with George's cock in a duel of seduction. Tank was now hopelessly addicted.

The coiled tension in his gut was too much, and Tank needed to claim what fate had given him while George was in agreement.

His mate cried out when Tank released him. That sound was like a symphony on a warm summer's night. "Strip," Tank commanded, and George didn't hesitate. He tossed his clothes off of his lean and—fuck, it was gorgeous—body, and crawled up on the bed, then lay on his back and grabbed his hardened shaft. Tank's body hummed at the sight before him.

"You gonna finish?" George smiled, and Tank lost the ability to

breathe.

"Your smile must bring out the sun every morning." His mate's skin flushed, and there was never a more beautiful sight in heaven or on earth.

Tank smiled and crawled between George's legs, lowering as he took the cock down his throat.

"Yes, Tank." George hitched his hips, grabbing Tank's head as he pumped rapidly into Tank's mouth.

Tank wet a finger then pushed gently into his mate's ass. Knowing this was the first time the cowboy was being breached, Tank let his finger rest while he squeezed George's shaft. He ran his tongue up the length of George's shaft then crooked his finger

"Holy fuck!" George shot down Tank's throat, his back arching off of the bed. He drank his fill of his mate's seed until George had no more to give.

Tank didn't stop. He licked and sucked his way down until he lapped at his mate's balls, inhaling the strong scent of pure man between George's legs.

"I don't think I can survive until sundown if you do that again." George panted out.

"Like that?" Tank grinned around his mate's balls, sliding a third finger in.

"Whoa. If you hadn't noticed, your fingers are the size of sausages. Easy, boy." George moved a little to the side. Tank was afraid his cowboy was feeling a bit full and uncomfortable. "Relax, it gets better. Promise." Tank once again found George's prostate and slid his finger across, his mate hissing and bucking his hips. Tank leaned back and lubed his cock, impatient to claim what was his. "Ready?"

"No." George grabbed the sheets, turning his face away from Tank. The shame on the man's face tore Tank's mind in two. He wanted this cowboy more than tides needed the moons pull, but he didn't want to take if it wasn't being freely offered.

“George, look at me.” Tank gently tugged his mate’s chin until he was staring into those beautiful, crystal-blue eyes. “Just once.”

George locked his jaw and nodded.

Tank pushed slowly past the ring of muscles, stopping when the head opened George wide. He gripped his mate’s hips and pushed further, watching George’s eyes for any sign of pain. If he asked, he would stop, although it would kill Tank now that he knew what an angel felt like.

Tank bottomed out and waited a moment until George’s body adjusted to his invasion. This was the guy’s first time on the receiving end, and Tank would do everything possible to make it pleasurable.

Tank wrapped George’s legs around his waist, ghosting his hands down George’s legs to ease the tension. He pulled back and then stroked long and deep. George’s eyes closed, and his head fell back, his lips parting. He moaned as he bowed his back, taking Tank to a new depth.

“Do you accept me as your mate, George?” Tank’s canines dropped, and his eyes shifted. He was terrified his mate would change his mind and leave now that he could see his wolf. What would he do if George decided not to go through with this?

“What am I supposed to say?” George groaned.

“A simple ‘yes, Tank.’”

“Yes, Tank.”

Tank was flying high. George had agreed to the claiming. He dropped to his forearms, licking a long path along the throbbing vein in his mate’s neck before he struck.

Tank felt the ribbons of their souls unwind from each of them and entwine together, their heartbeats synchronizing. They were mated now. Tank was elated.

George shouted as Tank unloaded at the same time. His brain was in a fog of lust. Tank thrust harder, wanting his seed deep inside his mate. George’s body was an addiction Tank knew he would never get enough of. Tank licked the wound closed as he panted for air. He fell

to his side, reaching for his mate.

George threw his arm over his eyes and a short breath left his lips. He shook his head back and forth as if a battle was raging inside of him. Tank pulled his arms back and waited.

George rolled over and stood, grabbing his clothes.

“George, what’s wrong?” Tank jumped up from his bed and tried to pull his cowboy into his arms. George pushed him back.

“I need time, Tank. This is a lot to wrap my head around. Please, just give me time.” George’s voice broke. He dropped his eyes and quickly dressed, never looking at Tank. “Can you please take me to my truck?”

Tank’s heart was being ripped from his chest, but he nodded and got dressed. This couldn’t be happening. He was finding it hard to breathe. His chest felt like the world was pressing against it and crushing it.

He had rushed his mate, and now he was paying the consequences. Tank held his feelings in, not showing how devastated and angry he was.

* * * *

George climbed into his truck and drove away, his heart hurting more the further from Tank he got. He needed time to himself to let his mind adjust to the fact that he was just fucked. He was just claimed. The feeling of being less than a man was strong. George was a rough and tough cowboy, but he felt like Tank’s bitch.

He punched the dashboard, cursing because he wanted to turn his truck around and run into Tank’s arms. Well, the guy got what he wanted. He claimed him, and now he could leave George the hell alone.

Chapter Five

Tank dropped onto the side of his bed, looking over at the rumpled sheets where moments ago he had held his mate. He dropped his face in his hands at the cruelty of fate. All he had wanted was what he saw in the other relationships in the house. He wanted those intimate moments, shared secrets, giggles.

Now he was left with a hollow hole that used to have his heart there. Tank clenched his fists as he stood. He wouldn't let George get away. He'd give him time to adjust, but he wasn't giving up. George was his, and nothing on earth would come between them, not even his own mate.

Tank rubbed his hands over his head as he wandered to the kitchen. He needed to think. He stood at the entrance to the kitchen, remembering the intimate dinner they shared. Tank had thought it was going so well. What had he done wrong that ran his cowboy away?

"No sad." Keata hugged Tank around the waist.

"Hey, buddy." Tank squeezed Keata then walked over to the refrigerator, eating his sorrows away.

"That bad?"

Tank looked over his shoulders to see the other mates entering the kitchen. He grabbed the leftover take-out container, wanting to go to his room to be alone. After what just happened, company was not something he wanted.

"So, we have a runaway mate on our hands?" Cecil took a seat at the table.

Tank just shrugged. He really didn't feel like talking about it.

"You know what you need, Tank?" Drew patted Tank on his back,

unable to reach his shoulders.

Tank arched a brow and looked around the kitchen, not liking the looks in the little mates' eyes. They were up to something, but he just didn't know what...yet.

"You need intervention." Blair leaned against the counter.

"Intervention?" If Cecil cooked up this plan, Tank wasn't going to like it.

"Yep." Johnny piped up. "You need us." He pointed to every mate in the room.

"And how do I need you guys?" This should be good.

"You need us to show George what it means to be a mate." Oliver gave him an evil grin.

"Oh, no, stay away from him, Cecil," Tank warned.

"What?" Cecil asked innocently.

"Whatever you're planning, don't. He's skittish enough without you guys getting him landed in jail or something worse." Tank set his food down and glared at the mates. "I mean it. Stay away from him." Tank grabbed the white containers and stormed off.

* * * *

"Do we leave him alone?" Cecil asked the other mates.

"No, no!" Keata cheered as he threw his arms in the air.

"Didn't think so."

"So then what's your plan?" Oliver asked.

"I think I'll have one of the warriors take me to the diner and then slip into the kitchen. If he's mated to Tank, he can't be that difficult, right?"

"I don't know. He ran out of here pretty fast." Blair rubbed his jaw.

"You know the warriors will forgive us." Johnny giggled. "We all have a way of making them forget they're angry."

"You got that right." Oliver chuckled. "Although I don't want to

push Micah too far. Those lectures make me want to pull my hair out.”

No matter how the warriors reacted or how far the cowboy ran, Cecil would get to George one way or another.

* * * *

George threw another plate up onto the counter, mad at the fact that Tank hadn't shown up this morning. So what was he, a one-night stand? Was he only good for a roll in the hay, and then it was on to the next claiming? Did Tank even tell him the truth about the claiming? Was he just used and tossed aside?

George slammed the pots and pans. He was angry that he had given away his manhood only to be tossed aside like yesterday's trash.

He felt used.

“Hey.”

George spun around to see one of the guys from Tank's house standing in the kitchen. He stood back, waiting to see what the little guy wanted.

“I'm Cecil.”

“Nice to meet you, Cecil.” George shook his hand, eyeing him warily.

“I got a proposition for you.” Cecil leaned against the counter, watching George.

“And what might that be?” *Oh hell, look at that evil ass grin the man was sporting.* George had an urge to find holy water and dump it on this guy's head.

“You see, us mates can't go anywhere without a warrior tagging along. This whole vampire and rogue wolf thing...” Cecil spun his hands in the air. “I was thinking, since you're tall enough, and from the looks of you, strong enough, that maybe you could be our escort.”

George didn't trust this guy. He had a gleam in his eye that he had

seen bulls have right before they charged. He had to admit, though, he was intrigued. "So what are you proposing?"

"We want to go to a strip club." Cecil gave him an innocent smile. Like a snake right before he bit you.

"Is that right? And why would I take you guys there?" George was really starting to like this little guy. He had spunk. Maybe he had Cecil all wrong.

"'Cause you're nice, and 'cause we're going crazy sitting in the house, and the warriors would never in a million years take us. Please." He gave the best puppy dog eyes George had ever seen.

"I don't know. Wouldn't your *warriors* try and skin me alive for taking you?" George wasn't into pain. He could hold his own with the best of them, but taking on those giants would be suicide.

"No, you're a mate. They wouldn't touch you. Yell, maybe." Cecil clasped his hands together in a prayer, pleading with George.

"To hell with it. When do you want to go?" He'd never really had friends before. Being in the closet made him keep a distance from people for fear of them finding out. It was a new feeling, and he liked it.

"Yes! Thanks, G. How about tonight? We can sneak out the side entrance. There's a male strip club in the city, and we'll all pair up so we're safe. Being on lockdown sucks." Cecil danced around.

"All right. I'll meet you at the side entrance at ten. I ain't waitin' around, so if you guys aren't there, tumbleweeds will be rolling behind me."

"Uh, okay. Whatever that means, we'll be there. You don't be late either. We have to be quick about it." Cecil held up his fist, George just staring at it.

"Like this." Cecil grabbed George's hand. "Make a fist." George curled his fingers in, and Cecil tapped theirs together.

"What does that mean? I ain't joinin' no damn gang." George grabbed his hand back.

Cecil fell over the counter, laughing. "No, silly, it means we

agree. Or hello.”

George eyed him curiously for a moment. “Ten. No later.”

“You got it. Now I have to get back out there before the warriors come hunt me down.” Cecil winked at him with that gleam still present and walked out of George’s kitchen.

He seemed to be agreeing to a lot of crazy shit lately.

* * * *

George pulled his pickup to the side entrance, and all seven men dove into the cab as George sped off. He had an extended cab, so the shorter men were sitting on the larger ones’ laps.

“We did it!” Johnny laughed as he high-fived Keata.

“What the hell did you guys get me into?” George steered the truck onto the highway, hightailing it out of there before he had a pack of wolves on his ass, trying to chew his tires off and eating him for a snack.

George pulled into the lot, everyone piling out like clowns coming out of a clown car.

“Everyone get a partner,” Blair yelled over the excited chatter.

Drew grabbed George’s hand. “Hi, I’m Drew. My mate is Remi.” He smiled shyly at George.

“Hi, Drew.” George tugged on Drew’s hand as they made their way into the club. Cecil pulled them all to the front row, yelling out catcalls as the first stripper danced to his number.

“You guys really don’t care who knows you’re gay?” George looked down at Drew. His head was puzzled by this.

“Nope, as long as we have our mates, the rest of the world can suck weenies.” Drew threw his head back laughing. “Get it?”

George chuckled. “I got it.”

“Hey, G, get over here,” Oliver yelled from across the room.

George led Drew over, and the mates pushed George up onto the stage. He stumbled up, tripping but righting himself. He was surprised

and unsure of how to handle this.

“What the hell are you guys doing?” He tried to climb down, but the mates blocked him. Taking a step left or right didn’t help, they just moved their bodies along with his, blocking his escape.

“Have a little fun,” Kyoshi yelled up at him while laughing.

George spun around when hands grabbed his hips. A male stripper was winking at him. He leaned forward and whispered in George’s ear. “They paid for me to dance with you. Just go with it.”

George shot a glare at the mates as he stood still, not sure what he should do. The stripper began to dance around George, shimmying up and down George’s back. The male dancer removed his top and tossed it aside, grabbing George’s hips once again. “Loosen up.” The guy grinned.

George looked back at the mates. They all had their wide eyes on him, waiting for him to have fun.

Fuck it.

George started wiggling his hips as the guy stripped his pants off. Nothing but a G-string on now. He tossed them aside and shimmied his ass so quickly George thought it looked like a bowl of Jell-O come to life.

“Go George, go George, go George.” The mates were chanting as Johnny and Keata did the robot, bumping into one another and laughing.

George got into the spirit of things, and he sashayed his hips as he strut across the stage. Even the stripper stepped aside, enjoying George’s performance.

He struck one hip out and slid his hand down the front of his shirt in a slow and suggestive manner. His eyebrow quirked, giving the mates his sexiest look.

They cheered and chanted, tossing bills at George. He was shocked to admit it, but he was having some dang fun up here.

* * * *

“Your damn mate is at it again!” The mated warriors stormed Maverick’s office, their arms crossed over their chests, glaring at their Alpha.

Maverick pinched the bridge of his nose. Cecil was going to get him impeached. “Track them with the GPS.”

“Can’t, all the vehicles are accounted for and every room has been checked,” Hawk bit out.

“Then how the hell did they get away?” Maverick’s head fell back as he stared at the ceiling. It really needed to be dusted.

“George.” Maverick said the word with confidence.

“Can’t be. He doesn’t want anything to do with me right now,” Tank embarrassingly admitted.

“Call him Go there. I bet he isn’t home and his truck is gone.” Maverick stared Tank in his eyes, demanding he do it.

“If you say so.” Tank pulled out his phone and called his cowboy.

* * * *

“Thanks.” George panted as he jumped off the stage. “I had a good time.”

Cecil noticed how he said it as though he were shocked.

“You know George, we’re all mates, and we’re all men. Just because we allow our mates to take us doesn’t mean we’re girls or anything. They love us and would give their lives for us, same as we would do for them.” Cecil slid George an orange soda.

George eyed the glass. “I was driving so I guess I have to drink it, although a cold beer would hit the spot right about now.”

Cecil smirked and sat back.

“When you hide it all your life, it’s kinda hard to let that go. I want to be with Tank, just... hell, I don’t know.” George downed the soda, wishing it was hard liquor.

“He’s a good guy with a kind heart, always looking out for us

mates. Always nice. You couldn't do any better." Cecil hoped he was getting through because he really liked George and would love to have him as part of their makeshift family.

"You gave me a lot to think about. He is sweet." George blushed. "Cecil!"

Cecil's head snapped up. Oh shit, his mate sounded pissed.

"Where's my Keata?" Cody ran to Keata, pulling him into his arms as Hawk grabbed Johnny, peppering kisses all over his face.

"Relax, G got us. He wouldn't let anything happen to us, right?" Cecil turned toward George and saw the seat was empty. Traitor.

"Can we stay?" Blair asked his mate.

"If that's what you want, Sunshine." Kota looked over his shoulder. "What do you say, Maverick? Have a little fun *with* our mates?"

Maverick eyed Cecil, never able to stay mad at him for more than two seconds. "Okay, but no touching, or I'll have to kill some strippers."

* * * *

George slid next to Tank, staring at the stage as he pushed his fingers into Tank's hand.

Tank swallowed hard, not sure how to handle this. Did he pull his mate in his arms or let him make the moves? He decided to let George lead the way.

The warriors laughed as the mates whooped and hollered, crumpling the dollar bills up and tossing them on stage since they couldn't put it in their G-strings.

Cecil leaned forward, and Maverick growled, pulling his mate back. "Cecil," Maverick warned.

"What?" He looked at Maverick innocently.

"Having a good time?" Tank asked George, as he laughed at Cecil's antics.

“Yeah, I am.” George leaned over and kissed Tank. Not a peck, but a full-blown, blazing kiss. He knew his cowboy was a little nervous doing it in public—a lot of nervous, if his stiffness was anything to go by. Tank took the kiss deeper until his mate laughed. Kind of an odd time to do that.

“What’s so funny?” Tank pulled George closer, wanting another taste. Those kiss swollen lips called to him.

“Drew.”

“You’ll have to tell me about it sometime.” Tank placed the pad of his index finger under his mate’s chin, raising it, and kissed George again. “Will you stay the night with me?” He prayed he hadn’t stepped over an invisible line and pushed too fast again.

“Okay.”

Tank wanted to grab his cowboy and run home. Instead, he sat back and enjoyed watching the little guys jump around and toss money at the performers. He wrapped his arm around his mate, thankful Cecil and the others didn’t listen to him when he warned them away from George.

Chapter Six

"I want to top this time."

Tank looked at George like he was the devil asking to barter his soul.

George waited for Tank to answer him, already feeling the animosity building inside of him. He knew Tank had never bottomed, but neither had he. He wasn't saying he didn't like it. It was different, and it had felt great, but it was his turn, dammit.

Tank nodded.

George wanted to chuckle. The man looked like he just agreed to go in front of a firing squad.

Tank must have thought he was sinking into George, please. Wait a minute, did Tank agree? "Really?" George stared at him openmouthed.

"Close your damn mouth, and I mean that literally. Nobody better find out." Tank grabbed the lube from the drawer, slapping it into George's hand.

They both fell over trying to get out of their clothes. George moved out of the way as Tank became unbalanced, tangled in his jeans, and nearly falling into him. The big galoot was too massive to catch. George would be scraping himself off of the wall.

"Swear." George grinned from ear to ear as he climbed onto the bed with Tank. "Okay, *mate*, bend over."

"Don't start, George." Tank growled as he climbed onto the bed, rolled over onto his back and spreading his legs.

"A guy's gotta have some fun..." He slapped Tank's hip. "Bend over."

“No.” Tank crossed his arms over his chest.

“Why are you being so difficult? I gave it up without an argument. Now hush and roll over onto your damn knees.” George slapped the lube bottle on Tank’s thigh.

“Why can’t we do it this way? I want to look into your eyes.” Tank pouted. George thought he looked cute as a button with his bottom lip stuck out.

“That’s so sweet...bend over.” George narrowed his eyes on Tank.

“Fine, but I get to top you next.” Tank rolled over to his knees.

“Good lord.”

“What?” Tank looked over his shoulder.

“Just, uh, wow.” George lubed his hand, spearing two fingers into Tank’s tight hole.

“Hey, I may be a big guy, but that’s virgin territory down there.” Tank grunted.

“Sorry, got a little excited.” George began a scissor-like motion with his fingers, reaching his other hand down to cup Tank’s sac.

“More.” Tank moaned.

“Thought you’d like it.” George wiggled his fingers around, trying to find that sweet spot of Tank’s.

“What’s that suppose to mean?”

“Will you stop arguing? You’re killing my hard-on.” George crooked his fingers again.

“Holy fuck!”

Found it.

“Feels good, don’t it?” George speared a third finger in, stretching his mate the best he could. “Ready?”

“No.”

“Slidin’ my snake in your hole anyway.” George slapped his ass. “Cowboy up.”

“Huh?”

“Here comes the weasel.” George pushed in, stopping when Tank

stiffened. Fuck, he was tight. He had to close his eyes and take long, slow breathes to calm his impending orgasm. His eyes slowly opened when Tank tapped him on his hip.

“Okay.” Tank pushed back a little as George eased forward.

“Tank, fuck, so tight.” George barely held it together with the enjoyment of feeling such a hot, tight ass wrapped around his cock.

“No talking.” Tank moaned.

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Hush.” Tank pushed back.

“Why?”

“George,” he warned.

“Why?” George began to laugh. He sounded like a five-year-old, but he was having fun for the first time during sex, and he liked it. Tank was something he never expected, and surprisingly was beginning to see that he couldn’t live without.

Tank began laughing with him. “Just fuck me already. And if you say why, I’m gonna knock you off of me.”

“Fine.” George latched on to Tank’s hips, slamming his cock like a bucking bronco. He changed angles, making Tank holler his name. “That’s right. Who’s dick is in you?”

“Shut up.” Tank thrust back, knocking George back with his ass and almost dislodging him.

“So, you wanna play games.” George grabbed Tank’s shoulders, lifting one leg and riding him like he was in a rodeo. Fuck yeah. He felt the tingling begin at the base of his spine. George reached under his mate, trying to get to his cock. Finally grabbing hold, he yanked along with his thrusts.

“George...gonna—” Tank’s head fell back, his ass hitching higher.

“Give it to me. Give it to Daddy.” George grinned.

“Smart ass.” Tank growled.

“Thought you’d like that.” He chuckled. “Or you can call me King George.”

George stopped talking when he felt Tank's body shiver and stiffen. He squeezed Tank's shaft as he gave one more thrust. Tank erupted in his hand, his cock pulsing as it gave its creamy prize to George.

"Tank," George shouted as he slammed harder, lights bursting behind his eyes. Tank's muscled ass had a death grip on him. He fell onto Tank's back, heaving and sweaty.

"Fuck me, man." Tank fell forward.

"Just did." George chuckled as Tank tried to swat at him.

Tank pulled George over to him, kissing his temple. "You know you're mine. I won't share."

"Yeah, 'cause lord knows I've been beating back the guys." George rubbed his goatee against Tank's nipple, getting a groan from his mate.

"What about Kitty?" Tank shifted around to look him in his eyes.

"Uh, female. Duh."

"Okay, but I'll be watching her." Tank pulled George closer. He sighed and ran the palm of his hand over his mate's chest. The man had to have the broadest chest George had ever seen.

"Not too damn close." He murmured then yawned, snuggling close to own personal heater. George glanced up, seeing a mischievous grin on the man's face.

Tank smiled. "Jealous?"

"You wish." So maybe he was, but that didn't mean Tank had to know. "Now be quiet and get some sleep or I'm gonna hogtie ya and put a gag on ya." George burrowed his head in the crook between Tank's chin and shoulder. If only he was this comfortable all the time.

* * * *

George whistled as he walked out of Tank's bedroom, but it died on his lips as a small tiger walked toward him. He could have sworn Tank said they were wolves. Maybe his mate was a little screwed up

in the head and couldn't remember which animal he was because that was definitely a tiger in front of him.

George gulped when a large wolf came around the corner to follow behind the tiger. He reached up and rubbed his eyes, making sure he was seeing things right.

Yep, they were still there.

A hand landed on George's shoulder, and he swung his arm as he turned around. One of the warriors ducked and laughed. "Don't let them frighten you."

"Sorry." George cleared his throat, a bit embarrassed that the wild animals made him edgy. "So there are cats or dogs living here?"

The man chuckled. "Hi, I'm Loco. You must be George, Tank's mate."

He shook the offered hand, never letting his eyes leave the oddball pair walking slowly toward him.

"We're wolves. Kyoshi there, along with his cousin Keata, are tigers, shifters from southern Japan."

"Hope you don't think that explains it." George laughed nervously as he scratched his head. The small tiger stopped in front of him and sat back on its haunches. It batted a paw at him like a cat would do. Was that normal for a tiger?

"I think Kyoshi wants to play." Loco chuckled. George watched as the man reached down and scratched behind the tiger's ear, the wolf giving off a low growl.

"Mr. Cute and Fuzzy over there don't seem to keen on the idea of the tiger being touched. I think I'll keep all ten fingers if you don't mind." George took a step back.

"Nah, don't mind Storm. It's a mate thing. Kyoshi loves to have his ears scratched."

And the wolf looked like he'd *love* to eat Loco. No thanks. "Um, okay. I'm gonna go, you just keep on scratching the cat. Good luck."

George turned and walked a little faster than normal, putting a great amount of distance between his body and those sharp teeth.

He walked into the den, stomping over to the stereo and changing it until he found the local country station. His ears were gonna start bleeding in a minute if he continued to listen to that guitar wailing out that god-awful music.

“Hey, what the hell is that?” Cecil covered his ears.

“It’s called music. Try it sometime.” George walked behind the bar, looking for a beer.

“I will if I lose my wife or want my dog back.” Cecil flicked the dial, putting his heavy metal back on.

“I’ll keep listening to this if I want to commit suicide.” George took his bottle of beer and walked back, changing it back to Garth Brooks.

“You want a shootout at noon?” Cecil placed his hands on his hips.

George bit back a smile. “Sundown tomorrow. Out back.”

“Fine. Until then...” He swung the dial back to Metallica. George may not listen to the music, but he was up on the popular bands.

“Until then.” George swung it back to his country song.

“Stop! I wanna kill my wife and lose my dog at the same time,” Johnny yelled.

The stereo gave a loud buzz and then went dead.

“Now look what you did.” Cecil glared at George then played with the dial.

“Me? It was that satanic music. Must have sucked out the stereo’s soul.” It took everything in George not to burst out laughing.

“What’s going on in here?” Maverick walked into the den.

George and Cecil pointed at each other.

“He did it,” they said in unison.

Maverick approached George, eyeing him up and down. “We haven’t been formally introduced. Raiding the night club to hunt the mates down doesn’t count. I am Maverick, Alpha of the Brac pack.”

“I’m George, cook of the diner.” George extended his hand.

Maverick’s lip lifted in a smile as he shook George’s hand.

"Another human with backbone. At least I don't have to consider killing you."

"Uh, thanks?" George looked over at Cecil, who was grinning.

Maverick laughed this time. "No problem. Welcome to our family."

"Hey, you didn't welcome me." Johnny pouted.

"No, Johnny, I didn't. Sorry. Welcome."

Johnny beamed. "Thanks."

Maverick shook his head. "Can I speak with you a moment in my office, George?"

"Sure. Just show me the way." George followed the ginormous man down the hall. Maverick waved him to a leather chair as he sat behind his desk.

"I know you're new to this whole mating thing and having knowledge of wolves and vampires, but I would appreciate it if you didn't let my mate, Cecil, talk you into another escape. They aren't prisoners here, but we guard our mates closely. There are those who would like nothing better than to harm or kill them. That includes you now." Maverick leaned back in his seat.

"I understand what you're saying and all, but if you don't mind me tellin' ya, they feel trapped. Maybe take them out once a month, twice maybe. Let them shake the cabin fever off." George shrugged.

"Good point. I'll take that into consideration." Maverick smiled. "I like you. You speak your mind respectfully."

"If that's all, I have a shootout with your mate soon." George stood and inclined his hat.

Maverick arched a brow. "Just don't kill him. He's mischievous, but I love him dearly.

"Gotcha." George headed back to the den.

* * * *

George crept around the corner, his assault rifle in front of him,

ready to attack. He did a quick head check into the library. He saw that it was empty, so he moved on.

Entering the kitchen, he heard the static of a handheld walkie-talkie and the commands being whispered into it.

Dropping down to his belly, George crawled around the table, aiming his gun up. Squeezing the trigger, he fired in a quick burst, jumping up to run.

“Think you can shoot me?” Maverick yelled as George skidded out of the kitchen and raced up the stairs. He knew he hit Maverick dead on, wasn’t a question about it.

Next he crept down the hallway, gun tucked to his shoulder, his eye focused in the sight as Keata came out of his room. George fired, hitting Keata in his chest.

“George!” Keata screamed, but he was already on the move.

The radio static buzzed again, and George tiptoed until he came to another room where Drew was hiding under the bed. George blasted him then ran back down the stairs, Drew screaming out that he was going to pay for that.

He entered Tank’s room, finding himself face to face with Tank’s weapon.

“Thought you could sneak up on me, didn’t you?” Tank circled around him, nodding his head at George’s gun, indicating he wanted him to drop it.

“I don’t think so.” George raised his gun, but Tank was faster, shooting George in his face.

“Ah, crap!” George ran from the room, heading to the den. Three warriors stood there with their sights on him, pulling their triggers simultaneously.

George yelled, dropping his gun and throwing his arms up to protect himself. Too late. George was soaking wet, water dripping down his hair and clothes.

* * * *

George jogged down his apartment steps. The day had been busy, and the kitchen was hot. He'd showered and was on his way to Tank's. His heart felt light. Tank made him happier than he'd ever been in his life. Just thinking about the giant made him want to laugh with joy.

He was humming happily as he made his way outside. It was a beautiful evening. Stars shone brightly in the cloudless sky. Love hung in the air around him. George chuckled. Since when did he start thinking so poetically? He grinned at the girly way he felt, and as cliché as it was, he felt like he was walking on cloud nine. The big goofy smile he was sporting was all because he had finally accepted who he was and who he wanted to be with. Speaking of, he needed to get to Tank's.

George whistled as he walked to his truck, wanting to shout that he was gay and how the big galoot was his. He had just reached his truck when he was jumped from behind, a fist punching into his kidney. His breath was momentarily knocked out of him, but he wasn't going down that easily. Whoever it was picked the wrong man to mug. George thrust his elbow back, but it felt like it hit a brick wall.

"Thought I forgot about you?"

George screamed as a searing pain tore through his neck. He threw his head back, connecting with whoever held him. Stars burst through his skull as he grabbed his neck and head simultaneously.

"Fucking human. You'll pay for that."

George felt his back opening up and blood warming his skin. He staggered as he grabbed a crowbar from the truck bed, swinging it wildly. It was the vampire from the other night. The one Tank had choked. The things fingernails were long, looking more like talons. He must have used them to rip George's back open.

The bloodsucker laughed. "Think you can beat me?"

"I may not be able to, but you won't walk away unharmed."

George grabbed the crowbar and plunged it into the vampire's chest, putting all his weight into it.

He knew he was battling for not only his life but time. The front of his white shirt was soaking up too much blood. He was bleeding out too fast. His pristine white shirt was being used like a sponge, and he could feel his jeans wet and sticky with it as well.

The vampire roared, knocking George to the ground as he pulled the crowbar free. "You bastard." The creature dropped to his knees, covering the gaping hole with his hands. He tumbled over, George kicking him to make sure he was dead, or dead again.

He knew that was one lucky-ass strike, to get him in his heart on the first try. It looked like the myth about wooden stakes was inaccurate. Somebody up there was watching out for him.

George pulled to his feet and staggered to the diner. He almost made it to the back door when he fell to his knees, his neck bleeding profusely and his back on fire. He crawled to the door and managed to get in, his vision blurring as he stumbled to the diner phone.

George grabbed a towel, pushing it into his neck to try and staunch the flow of blood, he grabbed the phone and dialed Tank's cell phone, he was getting light headed fast.

"Hello?"

"H-help—"

"George? George!" Tank yelled on the other end.

George slid to the floor, blackness surrounding him.

* * * *

"I need help. Something happened to my mate," Tank yelled into the den as he took off toward the front door. He wanted to shift, but what if George needed him to take him to the hospital?

Tank tore from the driveway, gravel spitting out and hitting the other vehicles. He made it to the diner to see his mate's truck. *Oh god, there was so much fucking blood.* It was splattered on George's truck

and the sidewalk. Tank didn't think he had ever seen so much in one place in his life. The vampire from the other night was lying on the ground. Tank roared as he picked the body up and slammed it into a tree, watching it fall limply to the ground.

If he hadn't let the vamp get away, his mate wouldn't be hurt. Or maybe worse. Tank stormed into the diner, following the path of blood. George was slumped down behind the counter. His neck looked chewed open. *Oh god, no!*

He ran to George, pulling him into his arms, Tank howled when his hands felt the sticky blood on his mate's back. "Somebody help us!" Tank screamed as he rocked a lifeless cowboy in his arms. "Please, no," he choked out.

"Let's go, Tank. We gotta get him to a hospital fast. The Medic Center is close." Gunnar pulled at Tank's shoulder. He knew they had precious little time. George would bleed out if they didn't get him there fast.

"Okay." Tank wiped his eyes as he carried his mate in his arms, running him out the door and jumping into Gunnar's SUV. "Hurry. I can't lose him." Tank pulled his T-shirt up and wiped his face clean of snot and tears. He stared at the man lying lifeless in his arms. *There's so much fucking blood.*

"We ain't losing anyone tonight, buddy." Gunnar floored it, running every stop sign and light. He whipped the truck in front of the Center as Tank jumped out, screaming for someone to help him.

A young doctor raced toward Tank, pulling George from his arms. Tank fought to keep his mate with him.

"I can't help him if you don't give him to me." The doctor touched Tank's arm gently.

"Okay, but make him better." Tank let out a sob as the doctor wheeled him away.

The warriors came running into the Medic Center, surrounding Tank.

"What happened?" Maverick laid his hand on Tank's shoulder.

“Fucking vampires. Will he change now? Be one of them?” Tank hadn’t thought of that before, but now it was the only thing on his mind besides his mate pulling through.

“I’m going to call Prince Christian and find out. Hang in there, Tank. He’ll pull through.” Maverick walked out to make his call.

Tank threw his head back and a howl ripped from his chest. It was so thunderous, the nurses ran behind the desk, cowering.

Gunnar grabbed Tank’s arm. “Pull it together. I know you’re hurting, man, but you can’t do that here.”

“Get the hell off of me.” Tank yanked his arm away from Gunnar, slamming the front doors open and walking out into the night.

Chapter Seven

The mates sat somberly in the den, waiting on word about George.

"I didn't even get my shootout." Cecil grinned behind tears.

"He'll make it. We just broke him in." Kyoshi patted Cecil's arm.

"I'll listen to every damn sappy country song he plays if he pulls through." Cecil wiped his eyes. He had really taken a liking to the cowboy. The guy was definitely different and fun to be around. Cecil didn't even want to contemplate the possibility of anything happening to the man.

They all turned their heads when the front door slammed open. Tank stormed through the house.

If Tank was here, slamming things, did that mean...?

"I need to call Maverick." Cecil jumped up and ran down the hall to his mate's office, dialing with unsteady hands.

"Cecil?" Maverick asked when he answered his phone.

"Yeah, how is he? Why is Tank here?"

"We don't know yet, baby. But I'm glad we know where Tank ran off to. I'll keep you informed."

"Thanks." Cecil felt like crying over not having his mate with him at a time like this. It brought home how easily he could lose him.

"Maverick?"

"Yeah, baby?"

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

Cecil hung up, relieved that Tank's appearance didn't mean George was dead. He made his way back to the other mates, their eyes questioning Cecil.

“They don’t know yet.”

“I thought...” Drew sobbed.

“Me, too.”

* * * *

Jason looked out of the kitchen window. What the hell was Tank doing? Shouldn’t he be at the hospital? He stepped outside, watching the manic movements Tank was making.

“Want some help?”

Tank looked at him as if he were a ghost. “I...yeah.” The warrior wiped his tears on his shirt and began to clear away the brush. Whatever he wanted done, Jason would help.

* * * *

George woke up in the hospital, feeling like a bull had kicked him a hundred times. He reached up and felt gauze. There were bandages covering the entire right side of his shoulder and neck. His back hurt like hell, too.

“Hey.”

George looked up to see Tank standing by the window, his eyes misty. Was his big galoot crying? “Hi.” He gulped out his reply. His throat was dry, and all he wanted was for Tank to hold him. “Am I...?”

“Maverick called the Prince of the vampires. You won’t turn. You may become thirstier and crave your meat a little bloodier, but no sucking blood.” Tank walked over and ran his knuckles down the side of George’s face. “How do you feel?”

“Like shit.” George tried to reach up, but he was connected to too many damn wires. “Get this crap off of me.” He tried to tug the dang thing lose, but it wouldn’t give. There was too much tape holding it down.

"Can't. You need it." Tank stilled George's flailing arms.

"No, I don't. Now unhook me, or I'm gonna do it myself." He pulled the white thingy off of his finger, ready to snatch the IV from his arm. He was determined to get out of the hospital and forget being a victim. It was humiliating lying here with all these tubes sticking out of him. He was fine.

"Stop it. You need it. Do I have to tie you down?" Tank smacked his hand away. "There is a difference between being fine enough to leave and just plain stubbornness, and you're the most stubborn man I've ever met."

"Don't be abusing the invalid." George glared at him. George wasn't sure what those narrowed eyebrows meant, but he was getting out of here whether Tank wanted him to or not.

"You're not a damn invalid, just scratched up." Tank grabbed his wrists, wrestling with him to let go of the tubes. "If you don't calm down, you're gonna do even more damage."

"Dammit, Tank, I feel fine. I got cookin' to do." George looked pointedly at his mate. "I can't just lay here playing sick." George turned his head, not wanting the invincible Tank to see the pain in his eyes. He had thought he wasn't going to make it, that he would never see his Tank again, argue with him, make love to him or be made love to. He wasn't going to say all that out loud. He did have his pride.

"Seriously? You were attacked and bitten by a vampire, left for dead, and all you're worrying about is food?" Tank rolled his eyes. "You're unbelievable."

"Just get me out of here." George stopped fighting, his eyes pleading with Tank to take him home, take him anywhere else rather than leave him here.

"Why can't I say no to you? This is against my better judgment, George. You need to stay here and get well."

"I can get well at home just as well as here." George grinned. He knew he won this round. Tank may be a big intimidating man to most, but to George, he was a big teddy bear.

* * * *

Tank cleared his throat. "I'd like for you to move in with me." He grabbed the chair by the hospital bed and took a seat. A fight was coming. He could feel it in his gut.

George once again struggled to sit up. "I'll make you a deal. You smuggle me out of here and I'm all yours."

Tank's brows shot up. Was his cowboy giving in that easily?

George's head fell back onto his pillow. He was staring up at the ceiling as he spoke. "I know I've given you a rough time. I never meant to."

"I kinda understand." Tank stood and readjusted George's sheet so it fit snug around his body. He wasn't sure what to say. Was it his cowboy fighting as he emerged from the closet, or was it his sparkling personality?

"I've never been vain, but be honest, how hideous am I now?"

Tank sat back, his fingers tense in his lap. He prayed his mate wasn't going to fall into a depression. "You look like God himself kissed you on the forehead."

George stared chuckling, his eyes sparkling with laughter. He turned his head and stared at Tank. "Trying to get into my pants?"

"Trying to get into your heart," Tank teased. He was being serious, but George hadn't made a declaration yet, so he wasn't going to put any added pressure on him by saying the L word, not yet at least, but this was close enough.

"So, are you springing me or what?"

Tank shook his head. "You need to get better."

His mate narrowed his eyes at Tank. "If you get me out of here, I'll forget the scorecard *and* move in with you."

The man knew how to drive a hard bargain. "Let me see what I can do."

* * * *

"I can do it," George snapped as Tank tried to help him into their bed. He had finally talked the stubborn man into moving in with him. Tank agreed to spring him from the hospital if he did. He wasn't beyond blackmail if it got his mate in his bed every night. Besides, that tiny apartment felt claustrophobic. George needed room to breathe, room to move that fine ass around.

His neck healed in record time. Prince Christian said it would, and damn if he wasn't right. It looked like the attack never happened. But Tank liked taking care of him, so George would just have to deal with it.

"I know you can. Just let me take care of you." Tank tucked him in, sitting down next to him. "You scared me."

"I'm tougher than that." His mate scoffed.

"If you're tougher than that, come here." Tank pulled him up, walked George backward, and then hit the play button on the CD player bought just for George and his love of music.

"What are you doing?" George leaned back, his eyes searching. Tank would never get enough of looking into his baby blues. His mate was a spitfire, but Tank wouldn't have him any other way.

"You'd like to know, wouldn't you?" Tank grinned as he pulled George into his arms, and the melody began to play.

"That's Faith Hill's 'Beautiful.'" George gulped. "I'm floored that you know any country song, especially one so romantic."

Tank rocked back and forth with his mate in his arms, nuzzling George's neck. "I love you, George," Tank whispered into his neck. He knew he was pushing the boundaries by saying it, but it had slipped out as he thought of how close he was to losing his cowboy.

"I—I."

"You don't have to say it back. I just wanted you to know." He whirled George around, smiling as his mate laughed out loud. He pulled George back into his arms. "You mean the world to me. Never

scare me again.” Tank pulled him tight to his chest. The thought of never holding his mate again terrified him. He would hold the beautiful man in his arms forever if he thought the guy wouldn’t curse him out for it.

Tank held him close, running his hands up and down George’s back as the song echoed through the room.

“Wasn’t planning on it.” He danced Tank backwards until his legs hit the bed. “Your turn,” George said softly.

Tank growled as he pulled George free of his clothes, stripping his own off in record time.

George dropped to his knees, looking up into Tank’s eyes before he stuck his tongue out and licked the head of his cock.

“George.” Tank moaned.

His mate parted his lips and sucked him in deep, palming Tank’s sac in his hand as he licked the heavy vein that ran under his cock.

Tank ran his fingers through his mate’s hair, encouraging him to take him deeper. George relaxed his throat muscles and took Tank to the base.

“George,” Tank shouted, his hips snapping in an erratic rhythm. “Close.” His eyes rolled back, the feeling overwhelming him. His body buzzed with excitement, knowing this was *his* George on his knees. No more one night stands, no more empty beds to wake up in. George owned him heart and soul.

Tank remembered the one-night stand from long ago. It was the night Cecil was kidnapped. The lonely feeling of knowing the guy he had snuck in wasn’t his mate had hit home when the Alpha’s mate had burst into the room. Thank goodness the guy he had brought home had been in the shower when the interruption had occurred.

Tank never had to feel that loneliness again. That ache one got in their chest knowing the person you were with wasn’t your mate and wouldn’t be sticking around.

George pushed Tank onto his back and jumped on him, taking him back into his mouth.

"Yes, George, yes, yes," Tank babbled as his mate tried to suck him through a hose. "Uh!" Tank howled as his release flooded George's throat.

"Fuck me." George grabbed the lube from the drawer, tossing it at Tank. Ah fuck, those words had Tank's cock coming back to life in a world record time.

"Impatient?" Tank readied him and slid home.

"Oh, hell." George went wild, he bucked back, slamming his ass against Tank as he grabbed his cock and jacked it frantically.

"Baby, I'm so damn close." Tank slammed his hands down on either side of George's hips and pistoned into him.

Tank's hands slid over George's cowboy butt, squeezing each mound. He had wanted to do that since first laying eyes on his mate. The tempting orbs had Tank ready to bite them.

His canines dropped, and his eyes shifted. He caressed the planes of George's back, his fingertip tracing each vertebra down George's spine.

He blanket George's back and lapped at his shoulder. Tank wasn't going to bite him. He fought the urge knowing what his mate had just gone through.

"Do it." George tilted his head, his voice quivering.

"Are you sure?"

"Now dammit, do it now." George bucked back, driving Tank to the edge.

He sank his canines in, and his brain exploded with the all-consuming flavor of George.

"Oh, God." George bowed his back. Tank closed the wound and yelled out his release as George wiggled underneath him.

"Fuck, I'm a girl now." George grinned as he fell to the bed. "You made me like being a bottom, love it now as a matter of fact."

"At least you're a good-looking one," Tank teased, curling around his cowboy and pulling him close.

"Shut up." George swatted at him from over his shoulder. "You

tell anyone I said that, and I'll lasso ya to the bed."

Tank chuckled. "That sounds more like pleasure than a threat."

"That's 'cause you ain't right in the head."

* * * *

Johnny and Drew laughed as George threw the controller down.
"How the heck do you fellas play this crap?"

"Is the game beating you?" Blair chuckled from the pool table where he and his brother were playing a game.

Johnny picked the controller up. "You have to try. You'll get the hang of it." He liked George and his big cowboy hat. He was funny and kind and didn't treat the shorter men like he was better than them.

George eyed the controller as if Johnny were handing him a snake. "It won't bite. Try it, please." He grinned when George took it.

"How do you play this dang game?"

"You have to shoot me before I shoot you." Johnny showed him how to use the controller. George grunted and then nodded.

"I think I can handle that."

Johnny bounced around in his favorite pink boots as he battled the cowboy. George was getting the hang of it, so Johnny had to step his game up.

"Oh, no, you don't, you little toad." George laughed as he overtook Johnny's man and killed him. The cowboy whooped while taking his hat off and hitting it on his thigh. "Gotcha."

"Beginner's luck." Johnny giggled. "You want a smoothie? I learned how to make them. Cody showed me." Johnny went behind the bar and pulled the blender out. He carefully counted out eight ice cubes and deposited them into the blender. *Remember to put the lid on before pressing start.* He repeated in his head. Next he added some strawberries and bananas, tossed in a few Cheerios—because it wasn't a smoothie without them. He kept a small bag of them stored next to the blender. Johnny grabbed the bottle of honey and carefully

measured out one teaspoon, letting it drizzle into the blender. The last thing he added was yogurt.

Was that everything?

Deciding that it was, he placed the lid on and hit the button, listening to it whirl around.

"Looks good." George nodded at the spinning drink as he took a seat on the stool. Johnny couldn't talk. He was watching the clock. *Three, two, one.* He pressed stop and smiled at George.

"It's ready." Johnny grabbed two large glasses from the shelf and poured the smoothie into each glass. "Let me know if you like it." He spotted a whole Cheerio in his glass and panicked, glancing at George to try and see if his drink had any visible ones. He began to hum to himself as George drank.

"This is good." George saluted his glass to Johnny and got up. Johnny let out a relieved breath. He didn't know how to do the Heimlich if the cowboy began to choke on a Cheerio.

Chapter Eight

“Where are we going?” George let Tank lead him to the kitchen and out of the back door.

“No peeking.” Tank had blindfolded him, saying something about not wanting to ruin the surprise. George held his mate’s hand, feeling as though the world was finally right. It was scary as hell coming out of the closet for all to see, but with Tank at his side, he braved it.

“Is it much further, Papa Smurf?” George chuckled. He loved teasing this big bear of a man.

“Smarty-pants, you can take the blindfold off now.”

George pulled the bandana off of his eyes and stumbled back. He had to be seeing things. *No way*. If he ever had any doubts about how Tank felt about him, well, this right here cemented it.

“I love you.” Tank grabbed George around the waist. “You like?”

“Tank,” George whispered as he walked toward the corral. Two beautiful Tabiano Tennessee Walking Horses were standing there peacefully. He reached out and petted one down her nose.

“I even built a stable for them. It’s heated. I bought saddles and all that. Had an expert help me pick out everything we’ll need to ride.”

“I love you,” George blurted out, emotions bombarding him. He could already feel the wind in his hair. “I...wow.”

Tank cleared his throat, ignoring George’s declaration. George was glad. He didn’t like all that emotional stuff, but the moment was so overwhelming to him that it just came out.

“Ready to teach me how to ride?”

“Hell, yeah.” George couldn’t contain his excitement. He set the water container down that he had to carry with him now for his never

ending thirst, but he didn't care. As long as the good lord gave him more time with Tank, he'd carry around a damn cooler for the rest of his life.

They rode the back forest, racing through the clearing, George had never been happier in his life. Tank made him feel whole, complete. He didn't care anymore who knew he was gay, as long as he had Tank. He finally understood Drew's words. Let the world suck a weenie.

Tank looked lost atop his horse but managed. George held his head back and enjoyed the sun shining down on it. *Was there anything more peaceful in life?*

"I think we should head back," Tank said after riding through the multitudes of clearings for a few hours.

George nodded and turned his horse around, guiding the beauties back to the barn.

They pulled the saddles and blankets off, taking the bits from the horse's mouths, and brushed them down. George showed Tank how to care for the gentle creatures. He fed them and made sure they had water. He made certain the temperature was perfect before he closed the doors.

"Thank you, Tank." George pulled the big oaf into his arms as he hugged him tight. "I'll never forget this."

Tank led him back into the house, George heading to the den.

"I believe *someone* owes me a showdown." George pulled Cecil up into his arms as he spun him around.

"G, stop it." Cecil giggled.

"Sundown, buddy." George set him on his feet, going over to the bar for a beer.

"Come on, G, play with me." Drew held out one of the controllers.

"I think my time with Johnny was plenty enough. I want to keep my record of one win." George swaggered over, setting his bottle down as he grabbed the controller from Oliver. "But then again, bring

it on.”

George struggled to race his car across the city and beat Drew to the finish line. He came in second, which shocked him. He beat the computer cars. Drew beat him, but George had fun. He played until Tank came and stole the controller from his hands.

“Hey, I was playing.” George slapped Tank’s hand.

“You do have to cook tomorrow,” Tank reminded him.

“Yeah, yeah.” George tapped knuckles with Drew. “Peace.”

Tank stared at him with his mouth hanging open.

George swished his hips as he walked past Tank, pushing his mate’s mouth closed. “You wish.” He stopped swaying his hips and went back to his swagger.

“Not really.” Tank followed behind him like a puppy.

* * * *

“Look, Kitty.” George pinched the bridge of his nose, really tired of her coming on to him. “I’m gay. Always been gay, always will be.”

“If you don’t want to go out, just say so. You don’t have to lie.” Kitty spat at him.

“I ain’t lying. I also know about all those rug rats running around. I ain’t playing daddy to no one.” George pushed past her, heading to the kitchen. This was ridiculous. Why should he have to explain himself? Weren’t there laws against sexual harassment on the job? Some people just didn’t know how to take no for an answer. Took it as a personal insult to themselves.

“Bastard.” Kitty picked up a napkin dispenser and threw it at George’s head.

“Get in my office now,” Cody barked out, glaring at Kitty as he pointed to the back of the kitchen.

“I didn’t do anything,” she argued, crossing her arms over her bosom.

“Now.” Cody looked over at George and nodded for him to get

back to work.

Ten minutes later Kitty came out, ranting and raving. "I'll sue you for this." She grabbed her coat from under the counter and stormed out of the diner.

"Looks like we're gonna need a new waitress. I fired her." Cody went over to the milkshake machine and made his mate a strawberry smoothie.

"I know someone, but it's a guy," Loco volunteered.

"I don't care, as long as he doesn't hit on any mates or mated warriors and knows what he's doing."

"He's a fast learner." Loco vouched for him.

"Bring him in. I'll see how he does, no guarantee." Cody leaned against the counter, watching his mate slurp down his smoothie.

"Thanks." Loco left the diner.

"His mate?" George asked.

"Don't know, maybe. I guess we will find out." Cody went back to his office as George headed into the kitchen. He watched the clock, excited about riding tonight with Tank. He thought about Jesse for the first time since mating Tank. His heart didn't hurt, and his stomach didn't cramp. Tank made him happy, made him a better man. George was proud of who he was now and the friends he made in the process. It was liberating not to have to hide. No one looked down on him, threatened, or kicked him out.

"Uh-oh. Tank gonna eat all food." Keata chuckled as Tank came through the door. George really liked Keata. A little girly looking, but his innocence was refreshing. Of course, trying to understand him was a challenge.

"That's okay, Keata. He gets anything he wants." George smiled as Tank wrapped him in his arms. "Love you, you big lug."

"Love you, too, George." Tank reached into the box he had brought in with him.

"Whatcha got?" George tried to peek past Tank's shoulder.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Tank laughed as he held his hand

behind his back. "Close your eyes."

"Why?"

"George, please?" Tank begged.

"Why?" George chuckled but closed them. He felt something being wrapped around his shoulders. Tank lifted his arms and pulled something around him tightly. "What are you doing? Better not be a bra." He could hear Keata giggling. Great, it probably was.

"Okay, open them." Tank stood back, admiring his work.

George looked down but really couldn't see what it was. He walked over to the chrome doors, staring at his reflection. "How does it work?"

Tank adjusted the leather straps. The contraption reminded George of a gun holster, but instead of a gun in the sheath, it was a water bottle. Thank god it wasn't a bra, or he would have had to have a showdown with Tank instead. "I rigged it so all you have to do is pull the hard plastic straw up, lean your head down a little and voilà, your thirst is quenched. Your hands are free now, no more carrying your bottle around."

George threw his arms around Tank, wiping his eyes into his mate's shirt to hide the tears. He wasn't no dang girl after all, and he wasn't going to be caught crying like one. "Thank you," he mumbled into Tank's chest.

Tank walked backwards until they were through the kitchen doors. "You're welcome. Now stop hiding those tears. Nobody in here but us."

"What tears?" George wiped at his eyes.

"You must be drinking too much water because it's starting to leak out from your eyes," Tank teased him.

"You're seeing things." George swatted a hand at him.

"I want to show you something after your showdown with Cecil." Tank pulled George into his arms.

"You showed me. I like it." George smiled into his chest. "No need convincing me."

"Perv, that's not what I was talking about." Tank smiled as he tucked his knuckle under George's chin, lifting his head for a kiss.

"Fine. Since you're not showing me your side of beef, what is it?"

"You wish. Just be ready." Tank swatted his ass before leaving his mate to work.

"Tease," George shouted from the kitchen.

Cody chuckled. "Harassing my employees?"

"Nope. That's why he's complaining." Tank grinned as he pushed the door open and left the diner. George stood in the doorway and grinned, watching his big bear walk out.

* * * *

"Ten paces then turn and shoot." George narrowed his eyes at Cecil.

"Make peace with Tank. You're going down," Cecil challenged.

"Backs to each other," Blair instructed in his sheriff's uniform. "No cheating."

"Damn, sunshine, you'll have to wear that to bed tonight." Kota growled.

Blair put his index finger to his lips. "Shush, I was planning on it." He winked at his mate before clearing his throat and turning to the dueling pair.

Oliver stood off to the side wearing scrubs and a medic coat, a black bag clutched to his chest.

"I think I'm having a heart attack. Check my cock," Micah teased Oliver. His mate rolled his eyes but blushed.

"Ready?" Blair shouted. The warriors were all standing by, the mates huddled around. Johnny bit his nails, jumping from foot to foot.

"Kick butt," Keata cheered.

"Just get on with it," George complained.

"Fine...now!" Blair called out, stepping back and out of the way as the two counted their ten paces. George's legs were longer, taking

him further away.

They spun, and Cecil's chest exploded with colored lights. He dropped to the ground, his eyes closed as he lay there.

Oliver ran over and hit the button to stop the lights from flashing on the downed man's chest. He reached into his black bag and pulled out a sticker, slapping it on Cecil's head.

"Hey, what's that?" Cecil asked as he pulled the sticky paper from his forehead and looked at it. "Loser?" Cecil crumpled the sticker up, tossing it aside.

"I'm the winner." George jumped around doing a happy dance. He stilled when Tank came forward, pulling his laser tag vest from his chest. "I get to listen to my country music. I get to listen to my country music." George sang out his taunt.

"I want a rematch." Cecil pouted, mad because he lost.

"Baby loser," Micah shouted.

"Okay, enough teasing my mate." Maverick chuckled as he pulled Cecil from the ground. "Met your match."

"Nah, I let him win." Cecil pulled the straps off, holding his arms up for Maverick to pick him up. Maverick bent down, pulling his mate into his arms. "Come on, I'll let you win."

"What are we playing?"

Maverick laughed evilly. "You'll see." He carried his mate off as the crowd broke up, Micah swearing to Oliver that something ached on him and that his mate needed to give him mouth to cock.

Kota walked into the house with his hands held in the air, Blair pointing his pop gun at his back.

George shook his head and laughed as he watched the last of them enter the kitchen.

"Ready, Mr. Winner?"

George turned, seeing Tank standing there looking hesitant. His curiosity getting to him, he followed. What would make his mate look so uncertain?

"I want to show you something." Tank pulled him past the tree

line, pulling his clothes off once they were out of sight of the back door.

"I told you I've already seen it, gorgeous, too." He watched as Tank revealed all his glorious skin. "We're screwing in the woods?"

Tank wiggled his brows. "After." Taking a deep breath, he added, "Now don't be afraid."

Nodding, George watched as his mate transformed into a wolf. Good lord, the wolf was the size of a pony! He wasn't going to lie to himself. He was a bit frightened. His mate was huge.

Deciding he could handle this, George ran his hand over Tank's wolf form. "Show off."

Bowing down, Tank lifted his head up to his mate. "Are you serious? You want me to ride you?"

The wolf nodded.

"I didn't bring a saddle." George teased but slid onto the large wolf's back. "No reins."

Tank huffed then stood.

"Don't go trying to buck me off."

Tank trotted along, carrying them deeper into the woods. George leaned his head back as he fisted Tank's scruff. The night was clear, and stars were out everywhere. This may not be the open range, but it was peaceful nonetheless. He could hear crickets and see small animals scurrying away.

He thought about Wyoming and the warm nights he'd slept under the stars, wondering how his life was going to turn out. Nothing close to this had entered his mind. He was a mate to a were-creature, and he was going to live one thousand years. That was a lot to take in, along with the fact that he now had vampire traits in him.

A far cry from Wyoming indeed. He shifted slightly as Tank walked over a fallen log, being careful not to unbalance his load. George ran his right hand over Tank's head, scratching behind his ear as he looked up at the stars. "It's a beautiful night, Tank."

Tank stopped as George watched the deer sniff the air then take

off running.

“Bully.” He chuckled.

Tank pulled his muzzle back. George knew his mate was smiling. They arrived at a small clearing, Tank lowering himself. Sliding off, George stretched his legs.

Tank shifted back, standing there as naked as the day he was born, and George drooled over the sculpted lines and muscles flexing as Tank reached out to him.

“You like it?” Tank asked as he pulled George down.

“Still think you need a saddle.” He grinned.

Tank growled, pulling George on top of him as he lay on the ground. “Ride me.”

“Ain’t it your turn?”

Tank shrugged. “No clothes. I left my scorecard in my pants.”

Rolling his eyes, George sighed, “I guess so.”

His mate reached up, tickling him on his ribs. George fell over laughing, trying his best to scoot away. “Uncle!” he cried.

“Get undressed.”

“Bossy.” George stuck his tongue out but shed his clothes.

“Damn, you are one delicious-looking man.” Tank patted his belly, indicating George to sit on him.

George stepped over Tank but didn’t lower himself. Instead, he hitched his hips from side to side, his heavy and erect cock bobbing around. “You want some of this?”

“You know it, mate. I want to feel your tight ass around my cock.”

“Keep talkin dirty, you may just get it.” George’s voice had dropped to a husky tone.

“Sit on my cock, cowboy. Ride me like a rodeo.”

George’s eyes hooded. “Close enough.” He lowered himself, spitting on his hand and reaching back to stretch his hole.

“I want to watch.” Tank panted.

George climbed off, turning on all fours so Tank could watch his

own fingers push into his puckered hole.

“Fuck, baby, you make me want to eat your ass.” Tank swatted his fingers aside, licking his hole, sucking then tongue fucking him.

“God, no one’s ever done that.” George arched his back, spreading his knees a little further apart. Tank slid two fingers in as he licked around them.

“Going to lose it. Better stop.” George breathed out.

Tank pulled his fingers away, adding more spittle before lying back down. “Saddle up.”

George mock punched him in the chest before mounting him. He leaned forward, guiding the side of beef to his ass. His hole opened wider. He felt fuller having sex this way. “Still not a girl.” He moaned.

“Never thought you were.” Tank planted his feet, grabbing George by his hips as he surged up. George fell forward, his palms connecting with Tank’s chest. His fingers dug into Tank’s chest, the thrill of the ride coursing through him. He leaned down and took Tank’s mouth in a passionate kiss. Tank’s fingers wrapped around George’s neck and back, thrusting harder as George whimpered into his mouth. It was way too easy to get lost in the way Tank made love to him.

George broke the kiss and reared back, crying out into the night as he came.

Tank thrust harder, his back bowed and off the ground, trying to bury himself deep inside George then exploded. “George!” he shouted as his cock pulsed deep inside George’s ass. Tank thrust quick bursts into George. Collapsing down, his arms fell to either side of him, spread eagle.

“You owe me two now.” George smiled down at Tank. In his twenty-eight years, he had never been happier.

Tank filled that lonely void he hadn’t realized he had until leaving his home state. Sure, he had messed around with Jesse, but something was always missing, maybe the fact they had to stay hidden bothered

him more than he ever admitted to himself.

George rested on his mate's chest, breathing rapidly. Tank was still inside of him, not softening all the way. He took comfort in having a connection so intimate with his wolf.

Tank pulled George up, ready to slide free.

"Don't."

Tank nodded and skated his hands over his shoulders, back, and his hips. "Do you miss home?"

George turned his head sideways and stared off into the forest. "I used to have to sneak around, hide who I was. My home had wide open spaces and a horse I could ride." George kissed Tank's chest then stared into those deep brown eyes. "Now I can be who I want, no hiding. The forest has a lot of clearings, and I have a beautiful horse waiting at home for me. So no, I don't miss Wyoming."

* * * *

Tank hugged him tight, allowing his mate to squirm out of the embrace to look him in his eyes again. "I also have a really great guy that I know for sure will have my back and never deny me."

"You sure I'm really what you want?" Tank asked as he ran his hands through George's silky blond hair.

"Uh, fella, your cock is still up my ass. I'm pretty sure."

Tank ran his fingertips down George's face. "I was so afraid you would deny me. I wanted to claim you right there in the diner when Frank introduced us."

"I feel so special." He grinned.

"Do you miss him?"

George drew his brows together. "Who?"

"The man who broke your heart." It pained Tank to ask his mate, but he wanted to know, wanted to know if his lover was sharing his heart with another. He would have no choice but to deal with it. He wouldn't like it, but you can't help who holds your heart. He knew in

time George would give Tank all of him.

“Jesse? Hell no, it doesn’t hurt anymore to think of his betrayal. That’s how I know I’m over him. Besides, got me a big galoot to love. No time for closet cases.”

“Closet cases, huh? Gets claustrophobic in there I hear.”

“Stifling.” George brushed his lips across Tank’s. With the romantic way his cowboy was acting, Tank was fully hardening again. George began to move around, pushing at Tank’s chest as he rode him slowly. Tank hissed, placing his hands on George’s sides as he helped him.

“You know where I lay my head. Feel free to grope me in my sleep anytime.” Tank cried out as he came again, George tumbling right behind him.

“You can bet on that.”

THE END

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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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