



Cuffed By My Mate (Twisted Oak Pack: First Responders #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: He just cuffed his fated mate.

Vera

Being the Alphas daughter means living under a microscope—every move, every word, every breath is judged.

I'm suffocating in the role I never chose and desperate for an escape.

So, when my father sends me on a secret mission to spy on the Twisted Oak Pack, I jump at the chance to experience some freedom.

But my assignment doesn't go as planned.

Not when I walk into town and see Crew.

And definitely not when I realize he's my fated mate.

Crew

The moment Vera walks into my station to report a crime, she steals my breath.

And my heart when I realize that shes my fated mate.

Claiming her is instinct, undeniable, and all-consuming.

But then the truth that shes the Alphas daughter, sent her to spy on my Pack surfaces.

Now, I'm caught between loyalty to my pack and the undeniable pull to my mate.

She's mine.

But can I trust her?

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:39 am

ONE

Vera

I sit in my room, my fingers twisting nervously as I listen to the low drone of my father and brother talking in the room next to mine. I know that they're talking about me. I've heard my name mentioned a few times now, and that has me on edge.

As the daughter of the Alpha of the Red Fog Pack, I'm used to people watching me. I've always hated it, though, which is why I tend to stay locked in my room. It's safer for me if people forget about me.

I wonder what they need me for. They wouldn't be talking about me unless they needed something from me. It's the only reason why they ever pay attention to me. I swear that most days, they forget that I exist, and that's how I prefer it.

I hate my family. I was told that my mom passed away when I was four, and I barely remember her. I'm not sure that I believe that she passed away, either. My dad and brother both have nasty tempers. They've killed people before, and it doesn't even faze them. I've heard how they talk about my mom, how they talk down about her, and I wouldn't be surprised if they had something to do with their death.

My bear whines inside of me, and I stand and start to pace. She's just as anxious about what they want with us as I am.

I catch sight of my reflection in the mirror and brush some of my unruly dark brown hair back behind my ears. My green eyes look tired and worried and I swallow hard

before I resume my pacing.

I hear their footsteps approaching, and I spin to face the door as they push it open.

“Vera,” my dad snaps, and I inhale sharply.

“Yes.”

“You’re going to go to the Twisted Oak Pack,” my dad informs me.

“What?”

“We need eyes in there to see what they have planned,” he tells me.

“You know that they stole Jim’s niece, Nori, before she could get here. We need to find out what else they’re going to do.”

I want to point out that they didn’t steal Nori. She found her fated mate in Twisted Oak and is there with him. I know that would only earn me a slap, so I bite my tongue.

“We’re going to send you in. You can apply for a job at the police station. Maybe you can get close to Nori and bring her home,” my brother says.

“You will bring her home,” my dad corrects him, and I swallow hard.

“Yes, sir.”

“You leave in an hour. Get packed,” he snaps before he storms out of my room, my brother hot on his heels.

I turn and grab my suitcase from under my bed. I don't bother telling them that I've had it packed for the last few months. I toss in a few more things, like my shampoo and conditioner, and then zip it closed.

The truth is that I've been planning my escape from this house and this pack for years. Ever since I turned eighteen two years ago, I've been saving up any money that I can scrounge, even checking our couches for any loose change. I've had my bags packed with all of my essentials since then too. I just never had a chance to get out of here. Not until now.

Now is my chance to break free from them. I'll play along with their plans for a few weeks until I can save up some more money, and then I'll disappear. I'll go somewhere where they'll never find me. Somewhere safe. Somewhere that can be my home.

My bear paws at me, liking that plan, and I smile.

Soon, I promise her. Soon we'll be happy and safe.

I look out my bedroom window at the pack's land. Small houses dot the hillside, and I take one last look before I turn and grab my suitcase handle. I'm not going to miss anyone or anything here. This pack and house have been more like a prison for my whole life. I was always judged and watched by people who reported my every move back to my dad and brother. I want to leave and experience freedom. I want to go where no one will care what I'm doing.

I wheel my suitcase out into the hallway and towards the front door. My dad and brother, and Jim, Nori's uncle, are hunched over the kitchen table, papers and building plans scattered all over the table. I wrinkle my nose when I see Jim. The guy is a creep, and I've always hated him. He just gives me a bad feeling.

I sneak closer and get a peek at what they're working on, but it isn't much. They turn and spot me, and I suck in a sharp breath.

"I'm ready," I tell them, and my dad nods, probably pleased to have me getting out of here so quickly.

"Call to check in when you can. We don't want them to know who you are or why you're there," my dad tells me, and I nod.

"I'll be careful."

They nod, and I turn, grab my suitcase, and head out to my old car. It was my brother's before he got a newer model. The thing barely runs, which is also why I never tried to make a run for it. I knew that this piece of junk wouldn't take me far. I'm not even confident that it will get me to Twisted Oak, and that's just the next town over.

We could run there, my bear says. She wants out, and I know that it's been too long since I've shifted and let her run, but now is not the time.

Not now. We have our bags, and I don't know what we're walking into when we get to the Twisted Oak Pack.

My bear grumbles inside of me, and I try to ignore her as I stop next to my car. I load my suitcase into the back of the car and take one last look around before I climb behind the wheel and start the car. It takes three tries before the engine turns over, and I let out a deep breath as I shift into drive and take off.

My car sputters and threatens to die a few times on the short drive to the Twisted Oak Pack. I pass the sign welcoming me and let out a sigh of relief that I've made it. I pull into town and park in front of the police station.

I glance around as I climb out and smile. This place is close to Red Fog, but it's like night and day. The people here actually seem happy as they walk around. The streets are cleaner, and I feel more optimistic as I step out of my car and head towards the front door, though that may be because I'm away from my family and the watchful eyes of my pack.

Stick to the plan, I remind myself as I grab the door handle and head inside the police station. Apply for the job, save up money, and then disappear.

I paste a smile on my face as I look around the empty station until my eyes land on one officer in the corner.

He turns around to face me, and our eyes lock as the fan blows his scent towards me. My bear and I react at the exact same time.

Mate! She screams excitedly, and I can see the moment that this man realizes it, too.

His eyes light up and he grins as he starts to race towards me.

There goes the plan, I think, as he comes my way.

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TWO

Crew

I can't believe this is happening.

Here.

Now.

I've finally found my fated mate, and I didn't even have to go looking for her. She just wandered into my station.

What are you waiting for? My bear snarls. Go claim her.

"Mate," I grunt at her as I close the distance between us.

"You," she breathes as we stop right in front of each other.

My bear is going crazy, and I can already feel my teeth starting to elongate, getting ready to bite and mark her. I can smell her arousal, and it only heightens my own. It's the night of the full moon, and the need to bite her is extreme.

"You're mine," she whispers, and I nod.

"And you're mine."

We stare at each other, my green eyes searching hers, and then we're both moving. I brush her hair away as my teeth sink into the tender skin at the base of her neck. I moan as I feel her teeth sinking into my neck, and a flood of emotions washes over me. Relief at finally having my mate, arousal, and a sense of completeness. We finally have our fated mate. We're mated.

"Where are you staying?" I ask her urgently. I need to get her alone so that we can be mated fully.

We're alone right now, my bear points out, and I like how he thinks, but I don't want my first time with my mate to be in a police station.

We can save that for a later time, my bear agrees, and I bite back a grin.

"I don't," she starts. "I just got to town, just moved here, I mean. I don't have a place yet."

"Great. You can move in with me."

"I--...okay."

"Good," I say, leaning down and kissing her cheek. "My shift is over in a few, so I'll just grab my things, and we can go."

I can't stop smiling as I go back to my desk and log off of my computer. Tucker is on call tonight, but I still grab my walkie in case he needs me for anything. Then I'm turning and heading back to my mate.

It feels crazy to even think that. I've been searching for my mate since I was eighteen with no luck. I can't believe that she just came in here, that she found me.

She must have been looking for us too, my bear points out, and I nod.

I head back to my mate and take her hand in mine.

“Ready to go home?” I ask her, and she nods, smiling up at me shyly.

“Yeah. I’m Vera, by the way.”

Smooth, my bear says. You didn’t even ask her for her name.

“Shit, sorry. I’m Crew. I just, this isn’t how I expected to find my mate. It’s throwing me off,” I admit, and she smiles.

“Me too. I just didn’t want to keep calling you my mate in my head,” she says with a laugh.

I lead her over to my car, and she looks around as we cross the parking lot.

We could take her in the backseat of the car, my bear suggests, and I ignore him.

We’re ten minutes from home. Let’s make this good for her, I tell him.

“I can give you a tour tomorrow if you want,” I offer, and she nods.

“I’d like that.”

I open the passenger door for her, and she slips past me into my car. I breathe deeply, inhaling her sweet, orange blossom scent. Once she’s inside, I close the door and then round the hood to climb behind the wheel.

“I live a few miles up the road,” I tell her as I start the car.

“I’ve never been in a police car before,” she says, looking around the backseat.

“I’ll take that as a good sign,” I say with a laugh. “I’m guessing no arrest record then?”

“No. I’m pretty boring, and I’m a total homebody. I’ve never done anything exciting or worth being arrested for.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” I tell her, and she nods.

“What about you? Any criminal history?” She asks me, and I shake my head.

“No, I’m an upstanding citizen.”

I turn the car onto my street, and we cruise past some fields and one other house before I turn into the driveway.

“This is home,” I tell Vera as I park.

“It’s nice. Really nice.”

“Where are you from?” I ask her as we climb out.

“Oh, this tiny town up north. You’ve probably never heard of it,” she says vaguely.

“How long have you lived here?”

“A few years. I moved here with my best friend, Tucker. He’s the sheriff of this town.”

“And you’re his Deputy?”

“Yep. Less responsibility,” I joke, and she laughs.

“You don’t want to be in charge?” She asks me curiously.

“Nah, I don’t mind. He doesn’t treat me as less than him, and this pack and town are so small that we don’t really have to do much anyway.”

I unlock the front door and usher her in ahead of me. She looks around, and I close the door and take her hand again.

“Come on. I’ll show you around.”

I take off my belt and set it and the walkie-talkie down on the front table by the door. Then we head further into the living room.

“So, the living room, kitchen, bathroom, and an office are all down here,” I tell her as I lead her around.

“It’s nice. Did you just move in?”

“No, I just don’t have much furniture. We can fix that now that you’re here. You can get whatever you want to decorate or fill the space. I know that it’s pretty bare.”

“A little bit, but I like the style and the wall color.”

“Thanks. Come on, I’ll show you around upstairs.”

We head up to the second floor, and I lead her down the hallway, showing her the guest rooms that are empty and the bathroom.

“And this is our room,” I tell her, nudging the door open.

We stand in the open doorway, both of us seeming to hold our breaths as she looks inside. Her eyes lock on the window, where you can clearly see the full moon, and I lick my lips.

“Vera,” I whisper, and she looks at me, her green eyes heated and filled with lust.

I’m sure that my eyes look the same.

This is probably fast to most people, but we’re both shifters. We trust fate and know that we’re meant for each other. Vera is the person that I will spend the rest of my life with. She’s perfect for me in every way. Nothing will take her away from me.

I want her and she wants me, and tonight, on the night of the full moon, we’ll claim each other.

“Mate,” she growls, and I grin as we both lunge for each other.

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THREE

Vera

The house is beautiful, but all I can think about is being with my mate. My bear is pushing me to bite him and claim him, and as the full moon rises, shining through the window behind Crew, I can't resist any longer.

We move towards each other at the same time, and he grabs my hips as our lips crash against each other. I can feel how much he wants me, can smell his desire, and it only heightens my own.

I should probably be worried about how I'm going to tell him that I am from Red Fog Pack and was sent here to spy on his pack, but I'm too lost in my fated mate to worry about that right now.

It's crazy that I found him, that he was so close and I had no idea.

Stop thinking and bite him! My bear growls at me.

Good idea.

I cling to Crew's shoulders as he backs me up a few steps. I know that I must be close to the bed now, and I moan as his grip on me tightens.

"Need you," he moans, and I nod.

“Take me.”

I reach for the hem of his shirt and tug it up. He gets the memo and pulls it the rest of the way off before he tosses it behind him.

“Your turn, mate,” he growls, and I hurry to strip.

I pull my shirt off and toss it aside and then rush to push my yoga pants down my legs.

“So sexy,” he murmurs as he reaches for me.

His skin is burning hot as he presses against me, and I moan as I tilt my head up, offering him my mouth. His lips press against mine, and I’m swept away in his embrace.

His tongue slips past my lips to tangle with mine, and I groan as I kiss him back. He tastes like coffee and chocolate, and my bear and I can’t get enough.

My arms wrap around his neck, and I press my body against his, loving the feel of his strong muscles against my soft curves.

“More,” I pant against his mouth, and he nods.

He steps back and shoves his pants down his legs, taking his boxers with them. When he bends over to pull off his socks, I hurry to strip off the last of my clothes too.

“Mate,” he rumbles, and my body heats so much that I think I might combust.

He lunges for me, and I gasp as we tumble back onto the bed.

“Fuck, you’re so perfect,” he groans as his hands stroke over my curves, molding my breasts almost reverently.

“Bite me. Claim me,” I pant, and he looks up at me with glowing eyes.

“Need to get you ready for me first,” he says.

He drops a kiss between my breasts and then starts to kiss his way lower. I’m squirming and on edge by the time he gets to my belly button. I want to tell him that I’m more than ready for him, but before I can get the words out, he’s shoving my legs wider apart and burying his face in between them.

“OH!” I shout, and he snarls against my drenched flesh when I try to pull away.

“Mine,” he snaps up at me.

I’m a breathless, panting pile of goo as Crew’s mouth moves over me. His tongue licks every inch of my wet pussy until I’m moaning his name. His tongue flicks over my clit, and I cry out, my legs trembling on either side of his head. I’m already so close, and when he pushes one thick finger inside of me, I come so hard that I see stars.

“Crew!” I scream. “Crew, Crew, Crew!”

I’m hoarse by the time that he prowls back up my body and kisses me. I can taste my passion on his lips, and I suck on his tongue, savoring every drop.

“Fucking hell, Vera. You’re so damn hot.”

“I ache. I need you,” I huff, wrapping my legs around his hips and trying to drag him closer to me, to where I need him.

His cock nudges against my dripping opening, and we both seem to hold our breaths as he pushes in an inch.

Our eyes lock, his dark green ones filled with so much lust as he gently brushes some of my dark brown hair away from my shoulder.

We seem to move at the same time, both of our teeth elongating as we bite each other's necks and bind ourselves together. Forever.

My bear roars in my head, and I'm sure that Crew's bear is reacting the same way. It's a celebration, a relief, and a luxury to finally have my fated mate.

Crew thrusts into me, and we both cry out as he sinks balls deep.

"So tight," he chokes out, and I nod.

"So big," I gasp.

He curses against my skin, and I wrap my arms around his neck, clinging to him as he starts to move. He feels so good as he pulls out slowly and then pushes back in, rutting inside of me like an animal.

It doesn't take long before his pace isn't so slow. Soon, he's pounding into me so hard that the headboard smacks off the wall. The moon shines through the open window, highlighting my mate as he moves inside of me. The light glints off his muscles, and I lick my lips when I see my bite mark on him.

"Close. So close," he grits out, and I nod.

I'm right there with him, and my nails dig into his biceps as I start to come.

“Crew!” I scream as I come.

I hear him roar my name, and then I can feel him come inside of me.

“Fuck,” he groans, and I nod in agreement as he stills inside of me.

“That was really good.”

“It was perfect,” he agrees, and then he kisses me again.

He grabs me and rolls to the side, taking me with him until I’m sprawled on top of him with his cock still buried in me.

“What now?” I whisper against his mouth.

“Now, we do it all over again.”

I grin as I put my hands on his chest and push up. Then we’re both moaning as I start to ride him. My bear has never been happier or more satisfied inside of me.

It’s going to be a long, wonderful night.

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FOUR

Crew

“And now we’re at the station again,” I tell my mate as we finish the tour of the town and pull into the police station parking lot.

“I love it. All of the stores are so cute,” Vera gushes as I park, and we both climb out of the car.

I watch the way her eyes light up as she looks around, the soft flush on her cheeks from the cool morning air. I love that she’s already feeling at home here, that she’s finding pieces of this town she can love.

My bear is lounging inside of me, happy and content now that we’ve found and claimed our mate. I get it because I can’t stop smiling either. I’ve never felt so relaxed and complete before, and I love it.

“We can go shopping later if you want,” I tell her, unable to resist indulging her.

“Maybe,” she says, smiling up at me.

Her scent shifts, and I catch the unmistakable hint of arousal beneath the crisp scent of autumn air and her natural sweetness.

My bear rumbles inside of me, licking his lips as he remembers last night with our mate. Claiming and being with her was everything we fantasized about and so much

more. She was passionate and so much more flexible than I imagined.

I shake my head, forcing myself to focus. Now is not the time to get distracted by memories of her soft moans and the way her nails dug into my back.

“It looks different in the daylight,” Vera comments as we head toward the front door of the station.

“Different good?” I ask, glancing at her.

“Yeah, it’s nice.”

I nod, pleased, and hold the door open for her.

“I never asked what brought you into the station last night,” I say as she steps inside.

“Oh, that... I was here to apply for a job,” she tells me, and I grin.

“Well, you’re hired then.”

She laughs, shaking her head. “Just like that?”

“Just like that.” I grin, loving the sound of her laughter.

“I’m serious. I’d love to work with my mate all day. We can carpool and everything.”

Her eyes widen slightly, and I realize she might be worried about spending too much time together.

“You don’t have to say yes just because I suggested it,” I add quickly. “I mean, I’d love it, but I also don’t want you to feel pressured?”

“I don’t mind,” she interrupts, smiling. “I think it could be fun.”

My bear practically purrs in satisfaction at that.

The door opens behind us, and I turn to see Tucker walking in, his sheriff’s jacket unzipped, as he rubs his hands together against the cold.

“Hey, man. How’s it going?” I ask.

“Good. You must be Vera,” he says, offering a friendly smile as he steps forward.

“That’s me,” Vera says, shaking his hand.

“She’s our new station manager,” I announce, shooting Tucker a pointed look that tells him not to argue with me on this .

He just nods. “Cool. Can you get her set up then? I need to check on a fallen tree out at the north boundary.”

“Sure thing.”

Tucker nods at Vera. “Welcome to the team. You’ll like it here—it’s easy work. If you ever need anything, just ask Crew. He’s been running this place forever.”

I roll my eyes as he heads out, and then turn back to Vera. My chest warms as I watch her take in the station, eyes full of curiosity.

I get such a feeling of happiness when I look at Vera. She completes me. She makes me whole.

“This will be your desk,” I tell her, pulling out the chair for her.

She runs a hand over the surface, nodding. “It’s nice.”

“You can decorate it however you’d like. I’ll have to get you a login for the system, so I’ll do that now, and then I can walk you through taking calls and how we file things.”

“Sounds good.”

I head back to my own desk and log in, setting her up quickly. Within minutes, I’m leaning over her shoulder, showing her how everything works.

Her scent wraps around me, warm and inviting, and I have to force myself to focus on the task at hand. My bear isn’t helping. He wants me to strip her naked and lick every inch of her.

Later, I promise him, and he grumbles but calms down.

“We could take a vacation soon,” I say casually as we head out to lunch, testing the waters.

“A vacation?” she repeats, glancing at me in surprise.

“Yeah. Anywhere you want. Do you want to go back to your old pack?”

“No!”

She says it so quickly, her voice sharp, that I stop in my tracks and frown.

I study her face, noting the tension in her shoulders and the way her fingers tighten around the strap of her purse.

“No one that you miss there?” I ask carefully.

She exhales, her gaze flickering away. “No. My mom died a few years ago, and I... didn’t have anyone else. I don’t ever want to go back there.”

Noted.

My bear growls softly in my head, instantly hating wherever she came from for making her feel that way.

I nod. “We don’t have to. We can go somewhere down south? Or up north if you like the cold more than the heat.”

She forces a small smile. “North like where? Alaska?”

I grin. “Alaska or Canada, maybe. Or if you don’t want to go that far, there are a few other places. Just not Red Fog.”

The second I say the name, she stiffens.

“What?” she asks, her voice quieter now.

I sigh. “It’s a pack a little north of here. They’re... well, they’re bad news. I’d stay away from them to be safe.”

She nods but doesn’t say anything, her expression unreadable.

Way to freak her out, my bear growls.

I didn’t mean to! I’m trying to keep her safe.

I hold the door to the diner open for her, and she slips past me, her usual lightness replaced by something heavier, something I don't like.

"It will be okay," I murmur as I press my palm to the small of her back, guiding her toward a booth. "We don't deal with them that often, and they're not that big of a problem."

She swallows hard but nods, still looking uneasy.

I hate that.

I hate seeing anything but happiness on her face.

We slide into the booth, and I hand her a menu, forcing a grin.

"Now, what looks good?" I ask, hoping to break the tension.

She smiles, but it doesn't reach her eyes.

I keep the conversation light through lunch, making dumb jokes and steering clear of anything serious, but I can tell she's still nervous.

We'll just have to take care of the Red Fog pack so she doesn't have to worry, my bear growls.

I nod.

And we need to do it fast.

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FIVE

Vera

Oh my god. He knows.

That's all I can think as Crew drops me off at the station and heads off to help Tucker with a call.

I force myself to smile and wave as he pulls out of the parking lot, acting like nothing is wrong. But the second his truck disappears down the road, I spin around and rush into the station, my heart hammering against my ribs. My steps are quick, my breath coming in shallow pants as I head straight for my desk.

I collapse into my chair and let out a big breath, my hands gripping the edge of the desk like it might be able to ground me.

What am I going to do?

I press my lips together, my mind racing with the same question over and over again, my stomach knotting itself tighter the more I think about it.

Crew brought up the Red Fog Pack at lunch. He talked about them with disgust, with anger, with hatred .

And he has no idea that his mate—the woman he just claimed, the woman he just promised to spend his life with—comes from that very pack.

The pack he wants nothing to do with. The pack that has probably caused problems for Twisted Oak before.

The pack I ran from.

My fingers tremble as I run them through my hair, trying to calm myself down. I just found my fated mate, and now I'm going to lose him.

Because there's no way Crew will forgive me for this.

I saw the disdain on his face when he talked about Red Fog, the way his hands clenched into fists, the way his jaw tightened. He hates them. Probably for good reason.

And I hate them too. Probably more than he does.

I hate my father. I hate my brother. I hate everything about the twisted, dark, broken pack they rule over.

But what will Crew do when he finds out I'm from there? What will he do when he learns the truth?

That I was sent here to spy on his pack?

That my father and brother expect me to infiltrate Twisted Oak to gather information for them?

My stomach churns.

I never intended to go through with it. I was just trying to escape. Red Fog was a prison, and coming here was my chance at freedom. I took the first out I could find,

even if it meant letting them believe I was still under their thumb.

But now, now , it's all going to come crashing down.

I had the chance to tell Crew the truth last night. Or at lunch today.

But I chickened out. Again.

I should tell him now. Before it's too late. Before he finds out on his own and assumes the worst.

I know that's the right thing to do. I know that waiting will only make it worse.

But I'm terrified .

What if he rejects me?

What if he throws me out of Twisted Oak and tells me to go back to Red Fog?

I can already feel myself putting down roots here, already feel the connection with this pack, with this home . I don't want to lose it. I don't think I could survive losing my mate and the life I was just beginning to build.

My bear whines inside of me, picking up on my anxiousness and starting to get worried herself. I try to comfort her, but it's hard when I'm still panicking.

We won't lose him, I tell her.

We can't lose him, she says, and I swallow hard.

I squeeze my eyes shut, taking a deep breath, forcing the panic down.

I have to figure this out.

And I have to figure it out fast .

The door to the station opens, and I startle in my seat, spinning around, my heart still racing. My bear is on high alert inside of me, and we both watch eagerly as someone walks into the station.

A woman steps inside, blonde hair cascading over her shoulders, her hazel eyes warm and friendly.

“Hey! You must be Vera. Tucker told me about you,” she says, walking over with a smile.

I force myself to breathe, to calm down . She doesn’t know anything.

“Hey,” I say, offering a small wave.

“I’m Nori. Tucker’s mate.”

I freeze.

Nori.

My blood runs cold, and my bear growls inside of me.

This is her .

Creepy Jim’s niece. The girl who was supposed to be delivered to Red Fog. The girl my father wanted to bring into our pack. The girl who never made it there.

The girl I was supposed to be reporting back on.

My hands clench into fists, and I struggle to keep my expression neutral as my bear starts to pace inside of me.

I can't let her know.

I can't let anyone know.

"It's nice to meet you," I manage to say, forcing a smile.

"You too!" Nori grins, plopping down in the seat next to my desk like we've been friends for years. "How are you liking Twisted Oak?"

"It's really nice," I say honestly. "Everyone has been really welcoming."

I can feel her energy—bright, warm, and so opposite of the kind of people I was raised around.

I can't help but feel relieved that she never made it to Red Fog.

They would have destroyed her.

"Yeah, you'll love it here," she says, leaning back in her chair. "Everyone loves Crew, and I know they're going to love you too."

I blink, caught off guard by the sincerity in her voice.

I don't know what to say.

I'm not used to people liking me.

To people wanting to know me.

“I hope so,” I say softly.

Nori beams. “We’re going to be good friends ,” she announces, like it’s already been decided.

I laugh, caught up in her confidence. “I’d like that.”

“We will be,” she says with certainty.

A friend .

The thought is crazy to me. I never had friends in Red Fog. Everyone was too afraid of my father and brother to talk to me. Or I was too afraid to let them close, worried they’d report back on me. But here, with Nori, I feel something I never felt in Red Fog.

Safe.

My bear nods in agreement, and I let out a big breath of relief. Nori’s phone goes off, and she glances at the screen.

“Crap, I have to get going,” she says, standing up quickly. “Let’s do lunch soon, yeah? Sometime this week?”

I nod. “Definitely. I’ll be here.”

“Great! I’ll reach out soon.”

“Sounds good.”

She gives me a little wave. “See you later!”

I watch her rush out, my heart still racing. The second the door closes behind her, my smile fades and my good mood crashes, because I just lied to my new friend.

It feels awful.

I hate keeping things from people. I hate lying . And now I’ve done it twice—to Crew, and to Nori.

You know what you have to do, my bear says, and I nod.

That settles it. I’m telling Crew when he gets back. I don’t care how scared I am. I don’t care how much I risk losing. He deserves to know the truth.

And I just hope...

I pray ...

That he takes the news well.

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SIX

Crew

“You can take tonight off,” Tucker tells me as we head back to our cruisers.

“Are you sure? It’s supposed to be my night.”

What are you doing? Take him up on the offer! My bear snarls at me.

“Yeah, I’m sure. You covered for me plenty when Nori and I first were mated. I owe you. Go spend time with your mate.”

“Thanks, man.”

He nods and claps me on the shoulder before he climbs into his car, and I do the same. I grin as I make the short drive back to the station. I’m excited to be with my mate again. I know that we were only apart for a few hours, but it was a few too many.

I park out front and jog inside, my eyes locking with Vera’s as soon as I step foot inside.

“Mate.”

She beams at me and hurries over to greet me. I meet her halfway and wrap my arms around her waist.

“I missed you,” I whisper as I bury my face in her neck and breathe in her sweet scent.

“I missed you too,” she says as she wraps her arms around my neck.

Her soft curves press against me, and I moan, my cock hardening against her.

“Let’s go home,” I whisper against the shell of her ear.

She nods, and I grab her hand with mine and wave at Tucker as we hurry out.

“See you tomorrow!” I call over my shoulder.

“Have fun!” He calls back.

I just smirk as we speed walk over to my car. I open her door for her and she kisses me softly before she climbs in.

My dick hardens in my uniform pants, and I have to adjust the length before I jog around to the driver’s side and climb behind the wheel.

“How was your day?” I ask her as we head home.

“It was good. I met Nori. She stopped by and invited me to lunch later this week.”

“Good. You’ll like Nori. She’s good people.”

“She seems really nice. I think that we’ll be friends.”

I reach over and squeeze her hand, and she threads our fingers together. She asks me about my day, and I give her the boring details about the few traffic stops that I

had—all tourists who were just passing through town—as I pull into our driveway.

“It’s nice that you get to help your pack so much,” she tells me, and I smile.

“Yeah, that’s the good part. Most of the calls just can be boring.”

We head inside, and I set my gun belt on the table by the door. Vera wanders into the kitchen, and I follow after her.

“Are you hungry?” She asks.

“Starved.”

“I can make us some dinner,” she offers.

“I’ll help you. What are you hungry for?”

“Something easy. How about spaghetti?” She suggests.

“Sounds good.”

We work together, moving around the kitchen and getting everything ready for dinner.

“We can put all of your things away after dinner,” I suggest as she plates our food.

“Okay, I don’t have much, so it shouldn’t take long.”

“Do you have more stuff back at your old place?” I ask as we sit down, and she shakes her head.

“No, just what I packed.”

“Well, we can get you some new things if you want. I’ll get you added to my accounts and get you your own debit and credit cards.”

“You don’t have to do that,” she protests, and I smile.

“You’re my mate. You’re mine, and what’s mine is yours.”

“I have some money in savings,” she says, and I smile.

“We’ll figure it out,” I promise her.

We both dig in, and we’re silent for a few minutes as we eat. My bear rolls over inside of me, and I smile.

Our mate is a good cook, he says, and I nod in agreement.

“This is really good,” I tell her, and she smiles.

“I love cooking. It has always been a great way to clear my head,” she says.

“Well, you can cook for me whenever you want to.”

She grins, her light green eyes sparkling happily, and I smirk back at her.

“What do you like to eat?” She asks.

“I’m not picky.”

“What’s your favorite food?”

“A hot fudge brownie sundae.”

“Really?” She asks with a wide smile.

“Yeah, I have a pretty big sweet tooth,” I admit.

“I used to make my own ice cream,” she tells me, and my eyebrows rise.

“Really? Is it hard?”

“No. I had a machine when I was younger, but it broke a while ago.”

“We’ll get you another one.”

I make a mental note to order her an ice cream maker and some other baking and cookware for my mate. My bear nods in agreement. He’s so happy to see her happy. So am I.

We finish eating, and I stand to clear the table and get started on the dishes. Vera joins me, and we stand side by side at the sink, working together in perfect harmony. It feels so good to be with our mate. It’s like everything has fallen into place.

“What else do you like to do for fun?” I ask her as I load the dishwasher.

“I like to read. Um, sometimes I’d watch TV. I had a little one in my room.”

“What did you do with your friends?” I ask her, and she swallows hard and looks away.

“I didn’t have any,” she mumbles.

“None?” I ask in shock, and my bear growls.

Don’t make her feel bad! He snaps at me.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. I just mean, you’re so nice and friendly.”

“I didn’t get out much.”

I want to ask her why, but I can tell that she’s starting to get upset, so I change the subject.

“Want to watch a movie?” I ask, tugging her into my arms.

As soon as our bodies touch, a flame ignites inside of me, and my eyes lock with Vera’s. I can smell her desire and my bear roars inside of me.

Claim her! He commands, and I do just that.

My lips slam down on hers, and she reacts to me instantly. She wraps her arms around me and presses her hips against mine.

“Bedroom?” She asks as I trail kisses down her neck.

“Uh-huh.”

Her hands find my pants button, and then she’s undoing the button and tugging the zipper down. When her fingers slip inside my boxers and wrap around my cock, I groan.

“Can I?” She asks, and my eyebrows rise.

“Can you... what?”

“Suck it,” she whispers, and I swear that I almost come right then and there.

“Oh, mate. You never have to ask me to do that.”

She seems encouraged by my answer, and she drops to her knees in front of me, her hands pulling my pants down as she goes. My cock springs out, and she gasps as it bobs in front of her face. I grit my teeth and have to close my eyes when she wraps her fingers around my dick and gives it a testing stroke.

“Vera. Mate,” I choke out and she licks her lips before she smirks up at me.

Then she opens her mouth and wraps her lips around me.

“Fuck!” I shout, and my hips jerk, pushing another inch into her mouth.

She swallows around me, and I curse as I try to keep from coming down her throat already. She sucks on my cock, her head bobbing slowly. She’s driving me crazy already, and she’s barely even started.

My cock bumps the back of her throat, and she swallows.

“Fuck,” I moan, my fingers tangling in her hair.

Her hand wraps around the inches that she can’t fit in her mouth, and she works me in time with her mouth. I look down at her and almost come as I see my curvy mate on her knees before me. She’s so beautiful. So perfect.

So mine.

“I’m close,” I warn her, and she sucks me harder, her hand squeezing me tighter.

My cock starts to swell, and I stare down into Vera’s pretty green eyes as I come. She swallows me down, and I groan as she leans back. My cock slips free from her mouth, and she licks her lips. I almost come again at the sight.

I hold my hand out to her, and she puts hers in mine. I pull her to her feet and then kiss her hard, pouring every ounce of love for my mate into the embrace.

My hands grip her hips, and I lift her into my arms and carry her through the house and upstairs to our bedroom.

It takes me less than a minute to strip my mate, and then I’m pouncing on her, spreading her thighs, and eating her out like a starving man.

She comes on my face a minute later, but I’m not through with her yet. I suck her clit into my mouth and roll my tongue over the little bundle of nerves until she’s coming again.

“Crew, mate, please,” she begs, reaching down and trying to tug me up her body.

I prowl up her body, and then I’m kneeing her thighs wider apart and thrusting into her.

“Fuck!” I shout.

“Crew!” Vera shouts at the same time.

She feels so good wrapped around me. She’s so tight, so hot, so wet.

I lick my lips, tasting her release. Vera clenches around me, and I grit my teeth. Her

full tits are bouncing with each thrust, and my mouth waters for a taste.

I lean down, sucking one hard nipple into my mouth.

“Oh!” She cries, and it’s like music to my ears.

I move to the other nipple and give it the same attention. Then my lips are slamming against hers, and I can feel her starting to tense as her orgasm starts to build inside of her.

I’m close too, so close, but I know that I need to get her off first.

I push back onto my heels and grab her ankles, resting them on my shoulders as I pound into her.

I can see the bite mark on her neck, and my bear licks his lips.

Lick it, he says, and I do just that.

My hips rock against hers as I lean down and run my tongue over the mark.

“Crew!” She screams, and I feel her come around my length.

Her release triggers my own, and I come with her, growling out her name as I find my release.

My arms threaten to give out, so I roll onto my side and tug my mate against me. She’s breathing just as hard as I am, and I smile as I kiss her forehead.

“It just keeps getting better and better,” I tell her, and she smiles up at me.

“I know. I didn’t know that it could be like that.”

We’re silent as we cuddle, and I rub my hand up and down her back. I think that Vera’s dozing off, but she surprises me when she leans up on one elbow and peeks down at me. She looks nervous, and it instantly puts my bear and me on high alert.

“What is it?” I ask.

“I need to talk to you,” she says, looking nervous, and I frown.

“Okay. About what?”

She opens her mouth, and my walkie-talkie goes off, the static filling the air before Tucker’s voice comes over the line.

“Crew. You there?”

“Shit, sorry,” I tell my mate. “I need to get that.”

“Of course.”

“It’s probably the damn Red Fog Pack,” I mutter as I head over to my walkie-talkie and answer Tucker.

“I’m here.”

“We have a situation,” he says, and I sigh.

“Okay, where am I meeting you?”

“The station,” he says, and I nod.

“See you in ten.”

I turn to face Vera and give her a regretful smile.

“I have to go.”

“It’s okay. I understand.”

“We’ll talk when I get back,” I promise her, and she gives me a tight smile.

“Be safe.”

“Always am.”

I kiss her goodbye and hurry to get dressed. Then I give Vera one more kiss before I head out.

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SEVEN

Vera

I collapse back onto the mattress after Crew is gone, my body still tingling from the aftershocks of pleasure. A lazy smile tugs at my lips as I roll onto my side, reaching for his pillow and burying my face in it.

He smells so good.

That deep, rich scent of pine and cedarwood, mixed with something uniquely him , fills my senses. My bear sighs, content, and I feel it too—a bone-deep satisfaction I never thought I'd experience.

I stay there for a moment, wrapped in the warmth of his scent, in the memory of his touch, and the lingering whisper of his hands on my skin.

I can't remember the last time I felt like this.

I'm... happy.

Not just in a fleeting way, not in the way that feels like it might be snatched away at any second. But truly, deeply safe.

I've never had that before.

Being with Crew is everything. A dream. A gift.

He sees me—really sees me. And more than that, he loves me. He makes me feel beautiful, and smart, and precious.

And my bear?

She's never been more at peace.

This place, this pack, him—they are our home.

It's where we're meant to be.

The shrill ring of my phone pulls me from my thoughts, and I groan, rolling onto my back and blindly reaching for it on the nightstand.

Still half-smiling, I answer without checking the screen.

“Hello?”

“Vera.”

My stomach drops.

The sharp, cold bite of my father's voice sends ice through my veins, and just like that, the warmth of Crew's bed vanishes.

I should have looked before answering. I never would have picked up if I'd known.

I sit up, gripping the phone tighter, my body tensing.

“Are you alone?” my dad asks, voice clipped, suspicious.

I clear my throat. “Yes.”

“Why didn’t you call earlier?” my brother demands in the background, his tone impatient, accusatory.

I swallow hard, my fingers gripping the sheets. “I wasn’t alone then. Crew just left.”

“Who’s Crew?” Jim’s voice cuts in, sharp and biting. “Have you seen Nori?”

I hate the way he says her name.

I don’t know why he’s so obsessed with his niece, and I don’t want to know. The thought alone makes my stomach churn.

“No,” I say, keeping my voice steady.

“Who is he then?” my dad barks.

I flinch and pull the phone away from my ear, my heart hammering.

I need to handle this. Now.

I won’t let them have control over me anymore. I won’t let them manipulate me or make me feel like I owe them something.

I have to find the courage to say what I should have said a long time ago.

“He’s my mate.”

Silence.

The kind of silence that drowns.

Then—

“NO!” My father’s roar shakes through the phone. “You are not being mates with some prick from Twisted Oak!”

I pull the phone away from my ear again as shouting erupts on their end.

I hear my brother’s voice, filled with venom. Jim is screaming something about me being a whore and a traitor.

I knew this was coming.

And yet, it still stings.

I grit my teeth and hold my ground. “He’s my mate, and I’m staying here with him. I’m not spying for you. I’m not coming back to the Red Fog Pack. I’m done with you. With all of you.”

My heart pounds, but I refuse to take the words back.

“You’ll be dead to us,” my brother warns.

I force out a slow, steady breath. “I know.”

“You’ll regret this,” Jim snarls.

His voice is different this time—there’s something personal in his anger.

Maybe it’s the fact that another girl escaped him. Maybe it’s because I was his way

in, his leverage, and now I'm gone.

I don't know, and I don't care.

I don't have anything left to say to them.

Then—

My dad's voice. Quiet. Calculating.

And somehow, that's worse.

"You've always been a stupid bitch," he sneers, his words laced with venom. "Just like your mother."

I go rigid.

My grip tightens around the phone as my breath catches in my throat.

"You were worthless to this family and this pack," he continues, voice smooth, cruel. "And you'll be worthless to them too."

A sharp, cruel chuckle from my brother follows. Tears prick at my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall.

"When your mate gets sick of you and tosses you aside," my dad continues, "don't you dare come crawling back here. You won't be welcome."

The line goes dead.

I stare at the phone in my trembling hand, my breath coming in slow, uneven bursts.

And then...

I toss it onto the bed beside me and stare up at the ceiling.

Their words circle in my head, but as I sit there, letting them sink in , I realize something.

I'm not sad. I'm relieved .

I have been cut off . I never have to go back. I never have to be Vera from the Red Fog Pack again. It's freeing . It's like taking a deep breath after being underwater for too long.

I press a hand to my chest, grounding myself in the steady beat of my heart. Now, all that's left to do is come clean to Crew. I need to tell him everything —how I got here, why I came, what I was supposed to do.

I need to lay it all out, because now, there's nothing tying me to my past.

I get dressed and head downstairs, running through what I'll say. By the time his headlights flash through the window, I feel ready .

I can do this.

I will do this.

I stand as the truck pulls to a stop. Heading for the door, my heart races. The second it swings open, I look up at Crew, my lips parting?—

But then I see him.

And my stomach drops .

His expression is wrong.

His eyes—dark, stormy, unreadable.

My bear whines inside me, pawing at me, nervous, and I know right away.

He knows .

My breath catches.

“I can explain,” I blurt out.

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EIGHT

Crew

I'm not sure what to do or what to think.

What I do know is that I can't stay here. I don't want to say or do something that I can't take back. I need to get my head on straight, and then I'll come back and deal with my traitor mate.

My bear growls inside of me. He's not happy about leaving our fated mate. I'm not either, but how can I trust her?

When I left to meet the Alphas, I thought that Griffin and Ryker were going to tell all of us about something that had happened with the Red Fog Pack, and I was right. I just would never have guessed what the news would end up being.

Vera, my mate, my love, is the daughter of the Red Fog Pack's Alpha. She's a traitor, a spy sent here to help them take us down or do God knows what else to our pack.

Getting that news was like a sucker punch to the gut. I didn't know how to react. At first I didn't want to believe it, but they showed me proof.

They had called me in ahead of everyone else to break the news to me first. Hearing it again when they told my friends didn't make it any easier.

My friends had looked at me with pity, but my bear and I were silent and emotionless

as we processed everything.

I had tried to insist that there had to be an explanation, but what could it be?

Why didn't she tell me? Why is she here? How can I trust her after this?

Why did she do this?

I was wondering that same thing for the whole drive home. I was trying to remain calm, but by the time that I parked and got out of my car, I was pissed. Furious that she had lied to me and betrayed me. Angry that my fated mate is a spying traitor.

Heartbroken that I was going to have to reject her.

My bear roars in pain inside of me, and I close my eyes. We're both in pain, and I don't know how to fix it.

Don't reject her, my bear begs, and I sigh.

We can't be the reason that our pack is in danger. We can't be with someone that we can't trust, I tell him.

He knows that I'm right, but that doesn't make this any easier.

I open the door and there she is, smiling at me, looking so happy that I'm home.

She's a good actress.

Her smile drops and I wonder what emotions are etched onto my face right now.

"I can explain," she blurts out.

“No, you can’t. You lied. About everything. About who you are. About where you came from. About who your family is and why you came to Twisted Oak.”

Her eyes glisten with tears, and I can feel my resolve breaking.

Don’t give into her, I remind my bear and myself.

She looks so sad though, my bear whines.

I grit my teeth and turn on my heel, stalking upstairs.

“Crew, wait! Please, just give me a chance,” she cries as she rushes after me.

“I can’t. How could I believe a word that you say to me after everything?”

She sobs, and it breaks my heart. I want to stop this and pull her into my arms. I want her to explain and have a good reason. I want none of this to have happened.

“Crew,” she chokes out, and I blink back my own tears as I start stuffing some clothes and toiletries into a duffle bag.

“I hope that you got what you wanted,” I say as I turn and push past her.

She doesn’t follow me downstairs. I’m not sure if I’m glad about that or not. I can hear her crying, and my heart and resolve break with each step that I take away from her, but I still force myself to continue on.

I head out to my car and toss my bag onto the passenger seat. I glance back at the house and every fiber of my being is screaming at me to go back in there and comfort my mate, but I can’t. So, I turn the key in the ignition and take off.

Where do I go now?

Tucker's house? My bear suggests, and I shake my head.

He's all happy with his mate. I can't be around that. Not right now.

He nods and curls up inside of me. He's depressed and broken inside of me, and it only compounds my own feelings, making everything so much worse.

How do humans deal with a broken heart? I wonder as I rub at the ache in my chest.

I turn out of the drive and head towards Logan's house. He lives nearby and is a good friend. He works at the fire department, so we've spent a lot of time together.

When I pull into his driveway, he's sitting on the porch, waiting for me.

"Hey. I figured you might show up here," he says, passing me a beer as I climb the porch steps.

"Thanks. Can I crash here?"

"Of course."

I nod and down half of the beer in one gulp. He leads me inside, and I groan as I sink down onto his couch.

"What did she say?" He asks me, passing me another beer.

"That she can explain."

"Okay, and what was her explanation?"

“I didn’t let her talk. I knew that I would break no matter what she said to defend herself.”

“Maybe she does have an explanation?” He suggests, and I sigh.

“Maybe. I hope so. I just... I need to be in a stronger position before I hear her out.”

“It will work out. You just have to hear what she has to say. Then we can go from there,” he tells me, and I nod.

“Just not tonight.”

He nods, and we sit in silence. My mind is going a million miles an hour, overanalyzing every minute that we spent together.

My mind goes back to before I left to head to the Alphas’ tonight. We had been in bed, and she had tried to tell me something, but I had to go. She had seemed nervous over dinner too. Could she have been trying to tell me then? Or is this all just wishful thinking?

Hear her out, my bear says, and I take another sip of my beer.

“I’ll go talk to her,” I announce. “Tomorrow.”

“Good. Tonight, though. Let’s get drunk.”

“I’m in,” I say, clinking my bottle against his.

I stare at the ceiling and try to ignore the pain as I drink with my friend. For Logan’s part, he does his best to cheer me up and get my mind off things, but it’s no use. All I can think about is Vera.

I doze off at some point, and when I wake, the sun is starting to shine, and I know what I have to do.

I take a deep breath as I push to my feet and stretch.

It's time for me to go face my mate and find out if I can forgive her or if I'm about to break my own heart.

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NINE

Vera

I jump up from the couch when I hear the knock on the front door the next morning. My bear perks up inside of me, and I know that we're both wishing for the same thing. We're both hoping that it's Crew coming back to give me a chance to explain, but deep down, I know that's not likely. This is his house. He wouldn't knock.

Still, I rush over and throw open the front door, hope building inside of me.

"Oh. It's you," I say when I see Nori standing there. "Shit! Sorry, that was rude. I just was hoping..."

"That it was Crew?" She guesses, and I nod.

"Yeah," I choke out, and then it's like a dam breaks inside of me, and I just break down.

I'm sobbing, and she rushes to wrap her arms around me. My bear whines inside of me and then curls up, tucking her head under her paws. I can feel her grief, and it kills me. I did this to her. To us.

"Oh, it will be okay," she whispers, rubbing my back.

"No, it won't! He hates me. I've ruined everything," I cry, and she hugs me tighter.

“He’ll come around.”

I nod, but deep down, I don’t think he will. She didn’t see the look on his face as he was packing up and leaving. He’s done with me.

My bear roars inside of me. She’s been devastated since our mate left. She keeps cycling between emotions. One minute, she’s devastated and curled up inside of me. The next, she’s raging and wants to track him down and force him to listen to us.

Right now, it’s the rage state.

“Thanks for coming over,” I say as I pull back and dry my eyes.

“Yeah, I heard about what happened and wanted to check on you.”

“I’m okay...or I will be okay,” I tell her.

That’s a lie, though. I’m never going to get over Crew.

I stayed up all night, hoping that he would come home. By around three in the morning, I had to come to terms with the fact that he might not. That this might be the end of us. I started packing up my things after that. I can’t go back to the Red Fog Pack, not that I want to, so I’ll have to find somewhere else to settle. That sucks, because Twisted Oak is already starting to feel like home.

“He’ll come around. I’m sure he’ll be home soon,” she says, and I nod.

She steps inside, and I take a deep breath. If this is the last time that I see Nori, then maybe I should tell her about her uncle and the bullet that she dodged.

“I know your uncle,” I tell her, and she stiffens.

“Jim?”

“Yeah. He’s part of the Red Fog Pack. Well, kind of. He’s not a shifter, but he’s a business partner with my dad and brother and is always with the pack.”

“Is he...”

“An asshole?” I finish, and she nods, looking nervous.

“Yeah,” she says softly, and I nod.

“Yeah, a huge one. He’s a creep, and I don’t know too many details, but I know that he’s wrapped up in a bunch of illegal shit. Running drugs. Trafficking people. I think...I think that’s what he had planned for you,” I tell her quietly.

She swallows hard, looking dazed, and I panic.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have told you. You’re safe here. I know that Tucker will keep you safe.”

“No, it’s good that I know. I just—I can’t believe that I almost went there. That...”
She trails off, and I nod, reaching over and squeezing her hand.

“Be careful. He’s still pissed that you slipped through his fingers. He must have had a buyer lined up for you. He’s obsessed with you. He wanted me to spy on you while I was here. I didn’t tell him anything about you!” I rush to assure her.

“Thanks. I guess I really lucked out when Tucker arrested me.”

“He what?” I ask in shock, and she giggles.

“He arrested me. When I first was passing through town, I was kind of speeding, and he pulled me over. Then he realized that I was his mate.”

“But you’re human and didn’t know,” I guess, and she nods.

“Yeah, so he arrested me to keep me here and try to convince me that we were meant to be.”

“How did that go over?” I ask with a giggle, and she laughs.

“Not great at first. Then, I don’t know. I got it. It was just so right being with him.”

“You’re fated to be together. You’re perfect for each other,” I agree, and she nods.

“He’s the love of my life.”

We share a smile, and I try to ignore the cracking in my chest as I realize that I’ve lost the love of my life.

Her phone goes off, and she sighs.

“It’s Tucker. I need to get home.”

“Thanks for coming by and checking on me. I’m glad that I got to tell you the truth.”

“Crew will be home soon, I’m sure, and you can tell him the truth then too.”

I nod, hoping that I look more confident than I feel, and walk her out. I scan the road, searching for Crew, but he’s nowhere in sight. I wait a few more minutes and then have to face the truth. He’s not coming home, and I need to leave.

I head back inside and grab my bag. I take one last look around the house before I trudge out to my car and toss my bag into the back.

It takes me three tries to get my old car to start, and I choke back tears as I pull out of the driveway and head down the road.

I make it a few miles before red and blue flashing lights appear in my rearview mirror. I frown as I pull to the side of the road. My car sputters and dies before I can shift into park, and I curse as I roll to a stop on the shoulder of the road.

I'm so busy dealing with my car that I don't notice Crew coming up to the driver's side door. Not until he rips my door open and drags me out. The next thing that I know, he's slapped some cuffs on me and is pushing me back against my car.

"What are you doing?" I gasp.

"Where are you going? Back to Red Fog?" He asks angrily.

"What? No!" I shout, and he searches my face.

"Then where?"

"It's obvious that you don't want me. I was leaving. I'm going to go find a new town. A new pack."

"You think that you can just replace me and this place?" He asks and I shake my head.

"No. I know that nothing will ever compare to you or Twisted Oak. This place was becoming my home, but I can't be here with you and not be with you."

He steps back from me, giving me a little space, and I tug on my wrists.

“Want to uncuff me?” I ask, and he shakes his head no.

“Why are you in Twisted Oak? Why did you come here?” He asks.

“It depends on who you ask.”

“I’m asking you,” he says, crossing his arms over his chest and staring down at me.

“I’m trying to escape. I hate my dad and brother. I hate the Red Fog Pack and everyone in it. It’s not safe there for me or anyone who isn’t an asshole. I was trapped there. Until my dad ordered me to come here and spy on this pack.”

His eyes harden and I shake my head before he can interrupt me.

“I never told them anything. I was never going to tell them anything. I already talked to them, and they know that I’m mated to you and that I’m never going back there. That’s all that they know about this place.”

“How can I trust that? You lied to me from the beginning.”

“I know, and I regret that so much. I tried to tell you a few times, but I was so scared. They told me that I was useless and you would toss me aside, and I was scared that you wouldn’t want me when you found out who I was or where I came from. I was scared that you would reject me. I was going to tell you, though. I swear. I tried to last night, before you left.”

He looks down for a minute, and I know that he must be mulling over my words.

“I swear, Crew. I would never do anything to hurt you or this pack. I was just

scared.”

He looks up at me, and I hold my breath. My bear is still inside of me, and we both seem to be holding our breath as we wait to see what he’ll do or say now.

“Fuck, I’m sorry, Vera. I can only imagine what it was like to grow up in that pack, with those people.”

“It was a nightmare. They acted like I was invisible most of the time, and I learned to prefer that. I just wanted to get out, but I didn’t know how. I don’t have anything,” I admit, tears spilling onto my cheeks.

He brushes them aside, and I sniffle.

“I’ll never keep anything from you again,” I promise him, and he smiles.

He kisses me softly, and I kiss him back, trying to pour all of my emotions into the embrace. It’s awkward with my hands still cuffed behind my back.

“I should have given you the chance to explain last night,” he says as he rests his forehead against mine.

“I should have told you the first night that I met you.”

“We were a little preoccupied then,” he says with a laugh, and I grin.

My hands tug against the cuffs, and he blinks.

“Shit, let me get those off of you.”

I turn and he unlocks the handcuffs and pulls them off.

“Were those really necessary?” I ask him with a smile, and he shrugs, looking sheepish.

“I panicked. I thought that you were leaving me.”

“I was, but only because I thought that you had left me.”

“We need to be better about communicating.”

I nod in agreement, and he smiles down at me.

“There’s more,” I tell him. “I need to talk to your Alphas.”

He looks grim, but he nods as he takes my hand.

“Let’s go.”

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TEN

Crew

Everyone is already gathered when Vera and I walk into the Alphas' office a few minutes later. Everyone in this room is either an Alpha, or one of the first responders who work in the Twisted Oak Pack. I look around the table, taking in everyone's steely faces.

Logan and Harris, the pack's firefighters, are whispering to each other about something, but everyone else's eyes are locked on Vera and me. Tucker smiles, knowing that I've already made up with my mate, but the rest all look a little suspicious. I'll have to put their minds at ease. Miles and Jensen, two EMTs, seem to relax as they see how I'm acting with Vera, and my bear starts to relax when we see that no one in this room is a threat to our mate.

I nod at my friends and pull out a chair for Vera next to Logan. He smiles at her, and I see my mate start to relax as I take a seat next to Miles.

"It's nice to meet you, Vera," Griffin says. "I'm just sorry that it's under these conditions."

Vera nods at the Alpha and swallows hard.

"I'm sorry for all of the trouble that my dad and brother have been causing," she starts.

“It’s not your fault,” Ryker assures her, and she nods.

“It feels...like I could have done more. I should have tried to stop them somehow.”

“I doubt that you could,” Tucker says. “They seem...determined.”

“They are,” she agrees.

“Why?” Harris asks.

“I don’t know. My best guess is that they’re pissed that they were kicked out of this pack when the Alphas came here and took over. It was embarrassing that they were dethroned in front of everyone. I thought that maybe they were trying to prove their strength by taking back this pack or at least the land.”

“I had forgotten all about that,” Griffin murmurs, and I nod.

“Me too. It’s been years.”

The Twisted Oak Pack used to be a really sketchy pack. There were a bunch of criminals here, either hiding out or working for the Alpha. When Ryker and Griffin came to town and took it over, they kicked all of the bad seeds out and really turned this place around.

I’m not surprised that Vera’s dad and brother haven’t moved on. They were always known for holding grudges.

“It got worse when you guys kept Nori. Her uncle is close with my dad and brother, and they took it as a major slight. They’re pissed, and they want her back and this pack.”

“Like hell. They’re never getting their hands on my mate,” Tucker snarls.

“No, they’re not,” Griffin agrees.

“They’ve made threats, and I’ve seen some papers. They have borders of this town’s land and some blueprints for places in town. I’m not sure what they have planned. Just that they have that stuff.”

“We need to handle this. Hit them before they come after us,” Harris says, looking pissed.

“We can’t. That would start a war,” Ryker argues.

“They want a war!” Tucker snaps, still furious about them coming after his mate.

“I know, but I don’t want to give it to them. We need to try to talk to them. Maybe we can see what they have planned, in order to stop it.”

“It won’t be any use,” Vera says. “They can’t be reasoned with.”

“We still need to try. We need to exhaust every option before we start a war and endanger all of our pack members’ lives,” Griffin says.

I nod, and I can see that no one is happy about what the Alphas have decided, but they agree. I agree with Vera, though. They can’t be reasoned with, and I think that it’s just a matter of time before we have to fight back.

“Thanks for telling us all of this, Vera,” Ryker says, and she nods.

“If you hear from them again,” Griffin starts, but my mate shakes her head.

“I won’t. I told them that I wouldn’t spy for them and that I had found my mate here, and they cut me off. They won’t reach out again.”

I squeeze her hand, and she looks at me.

“Well, you have a new pack and a new family here,” Tucker tells her, and all of my friends nod.

“Thank you,” she says softly.

I squeeze her hand again, and then I stand and pull Vera up beside me.

“We’re headed home. Let me know if anything else happens,” I say as I turn to leave.

“Will do,” Griffin says, and I tug Vera down the hall and out to my car.

I open the door for her and then crouch down next to her.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“They were all so nice. It’s crazy that my pack hates them and thinks of them like the enemy when they were so nice.”

“They have to twist it in their heads to justify doing what they want,” I tell her, and she nods.

“I know. It still sucks.”

“I know. I’m sorry that you were cut off.”

“I’m not. I never wanted to go back there. It’s like I told you. I was looking for an

escape. If you hadn't been my mate, I would have only stayed here long enough to save up some more money, and then I would have disappeared."

"Do you not want to live here?" I ask and my bear paws at me.

We want our mate to be happy, and I know that we would move without a thought to ensure that.

"I love it here. It feels like home. I just wish that it wasn't so close to my dad and brother or the Red Fog Pack."

"Me too, but we'll take care of them. You'll be safe here. I promise."

She nods and I squeeze her hands.

"I love you, Vera. I'm sorry that I didn't trust you earlier. I should have given you a chance to explain."

"It's okay. I messed up too. I should have told you when we first met."

"I promise to always listen in the future. I'll always trust you and protect you."

"And I'll always trust and protect you," she whispers.

I smile and lean in, brushing my lips against hers.

"I love you, mate," I whisper against her lips.

"I love you too," she whispers back, smiling against my mouth.

"Now, let's go home."

She nods, and I kiss her once more before I stand and head around the car. I climb behind the wheel and take Vera's hand in mine as we head home. My bear is happy and settled inside of me now that we're alone with our mate, and I smile as he looks lovingly at her.

Things might still be tense between us and the Red Fog Pack, but at least my mate and I are alright. We'll deal with her old pack soon. For now, I'm going to enjoy being with my fated mate.

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Crew

Five Years Later...

The scent of vanilla cake and warm syrup drifts through the house, wrapping around me like a blanket as I step into the kitchen. The soft morning sunlight filters in through the windows, casting a golden glow over the scene in front of me.

Vera stands by the stove, her back to me, wearing one of my old T-shirts that hangs off her curves in a way that makes my bear rumble with satisfaction. She's flipping pancakes, her hair tumbling down her back in soft waves, and I swear my heart still skips a beat every time I see her like this.

At the kitchen table, our daughter, Willow, sits with her elbows propped up, staring at the stack of presents on the counter with a determination that makes me grin.

"Willow, baby, you can't open them until after breakfast," Vera calls over her shoulder, barely holding back a laugh.

"But why ? They're just sitting there, Mommy," Willow whines, pouting.

"Because rules are rules," I say, stepping up behind Vera and wrapping my arms around her waist, pressing a kiss to the side of her neck. She tilts her head, giving me better access, and I take full advantage, nibbling softly before pulling back.

"Morning," she murmurs, leaning into me.

"Morning," I reply, squeezing her just a little tighter before letting go. "Need help?"

"You can keep the birthday girl entertained," she teases, flipping another pancake onto the growing stack.

"I think she needs a distraction." I glance at our daughter, her golden-brown curls messy from sleep, her little nose scrunched as she eyes the gifts again. "Willow, how about we play guess the present?"

She gasps, turning to me with wide eyes. "Really?"

"Really."

She practically launches herself out of her chair, running to my side, her excitement making my chest swell.

This— this —is everything I ever wanted.

I never thought I'd have a life like this. A mate, a family, a home filled with love and laughter. For so long, I never let myself believe it was possible. But Vera changed everything.

She gave me everything .

My bear rumbles happily inside of me, and I smile. The two of us have never been happier or more content, and I love it.

Willow tugs my hand, dragging me toward the counter where the gifts are stacked. "Okay, Daddy, let's do it!"

I sit on one of the stools, lifting her onto my lap. "Alright, birthday girl. Pick one and guess what's inside."

She scans the pile like a hunter tracking her prey, then points to a small, rectangular package wrapped in bright pink paper.

"This one! Hmm... I think it's...a book!"

"Good guess," Vera chimes in, glancing over at us with a knowing smirk.

"Is it?!" Willow bounces excitedly.

"I'm not telling," I tease, chuckling as she huffs dramatically.

"Mean, Daddy!"

"Alright, alright, another one," I say, nudging her.

She continues guessing, her giggles filling the kitchen as Vera finishes making breakfast. Just as she sets the plates down, the sound of tiny feet pattering across the wooden floor catches my attention.

I turn just in time to see our younger son, Caleb, stumbling into the kitchen, his chubby little legs moving as fast as they can.

"Up! Up, Daddy!" he demands, reaching his arms toward me.

I scoop him up easily, settling him on my other knee. "Morning, little man."

He blinks up at me sleepily, then looks over at Willow and beams. "Birfday!" he shouts, clapping his hands.

Willow giggles. "Yep! It's my birthday, and I get to eat pancakes first!"

"Not if you don't sit down and eat," Vera warns with a pointed look.

Willow slides off my lap so fast I barely have time to react before she's at the table, grabbing her fork.

With Caleb still in my arms, I carry him over and settle into my seat, watching as Vera brings over the stack of pancakes, covered in syrup and whipped cream.

"Alright, birthday girl," Vera says, placing a plate in front of Willow. "Make a wish before you take your first bite."

Willow grins, scrunching her eyes shut dramatically. She clasps her hands together, whispering something under her breath, then takes the biggest bite of pancake I've ever seen.

I glance at Vera, shaking my head. "Think she wished for more presents?"

"Absolutely," she laughs.

A few hours later, our backyard is filled with laughter, music, and the scent of grilled food. The entire pack came to celebrate, and now the yard is packed with kids running around, chasing each other, while the adults chat nearby.

Tucker and Nori are over by the grill, arguing about who makes the better burgers, while the rest of our friends mingle.

Vera is standing with some of the other women, a drink in her hand, her laughter ringing out over the noise.

And me?

I'm watching our daughter open presents, her face lighting up with every tear of wrapping paper.

"Oh, oh, this one !" Willow squeals, grabbing the pink package she guessed about this morning.

She rips it open and gasps. "It is a book!"

"You guessed right," I say, ruffling her curls.

She hugs it to her chest, then moves on to the next gift.

As she opens the presents, my gaze drifts to Vera again.

She catches me staring and gives me a look—one that says what? —even though she knows exactly what.

I shake my head, grinning, then make my way over to her, slipping an arm around her waist.

She leans into me instantly, her body fitting against mine like it was made to be there.

"She's having the best day," Vera murmurs, watching Willow with a soft smile.

"She deserves it."

Vera looks up at me then, eyes filled with so much love it makes my chest ache.

I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. "You happy, baby?"

Her eyes soften even more, and she nods. "More than I ever thought I could be."

I cup her cheek, tilting her face up to mine. "Me too."

She smiles, then stands on her toes, pressing a kiss to my lips.

I kiss her back, slow and deep, ignoring the whistles from Tucker and some of the others.

When we pull away, Vera rests her head against my chest, watching our kids, our family, our life .

And for the first time in forever, I realize—I have everything I've ever wanted.

And I'll spend the rest of my life making sure Vera and our kids always have this .

Love. Safety. A home.

Because this?

This is forever.