



Saved By My Mate (Twisted Oak Pack: First Responders #6)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: He'll do whatever it takes to save his fated mate.

Dillon

The last thing I remember is being excited to get out of our small hometown with my best friend, Mabel.

Then everything went black.

I wake up in the hospital with a splitting headache and a strange bite mark on my neck.

A bite mark I know I didn't get in the car accident.

Jensen

I've finally found my fated mate, and she's dying.

So, I do the one thing I can to save her.

I bite her.

I try to explain why and tell her about shifters once she's awake and stable, but that talk doesn't go well.

Now I'm bound to my fated mate, and she hates me.

I know I can prove to her that we're meant to be.

If I can only get her to give me a chance...

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ONE

Dillon

I groan as I blink my eyes open and stare up at the ceiling. It takes me a minute to realize that I'm in a hospital and that the annoying beeping is the monitor next to me.

The last thing I remember is the wolf and Mabel screaming.

Then everything went black.

Mabel. Where's Mabel?

I shift in the bed and wince. Every part of my body hurts, and I whimper as I try to sit up.

A man rushes forward. "Easy. Take it easy."

I blink and stare up at the strange man. I search my brain, trying to figure out if I know him, but he's unfamiliar.

"Did I hit my head?" I blurt out.

He nods. "Yeah, your head and about every other part of your body."

I wonder what he means by that, but it's not a priority.

“Mabel. She’s my friend. Is she here? Is she okay?”

“She was released late last night and is with my friend, Miles. She’ll be back as soon as visiting hours start.”

“She was okay, though? She’s all right?”

“Yeah, she had a few bruises and cuts and a broken rib, but she’s all right.”

“Thank God,” I breathe, relaxing on the bed again.

“Do you need anything? I’ll call the doctor.”

“Water,” I croak.

He hits the button for the nurse’s desk and sits in the chair next to my bed. I want to ask him who he is, but before I can, the door opens, and a nurse bustles in.

“Hi, dear. Welcome back,” she says with a kind smile. “You’ve been out for some time.”

“I have?”

She nods. “It’s almost seven in the morning, and you came in yesterday around noon.”

I lost that much time?

“Oh.”

“How are you feeling? Can you rate your pain on a scale of one to ten?”

“Um, two or three. It’s a dull ache.”

“That’s good,” she says, her gaze darting to the man.

They share a knowing look, and I frown. So many questions are running through my brain.

Why was I out for so long? What are my injuries? If I hit every part of my body, why don’t I feel worse?

I try to remember what happened, but it’s all a blur.

I remember leaving Idaho with my best friend, Mabel.

We were finally making our escape from our small town.

We were excited, talking about where to stay for the night.

I remember the car starting to overheat and us turning off the highway.

We planned to stop in a little town, check on the car, stretch our legs, and grab a bite to eat.

I remember turning onto a dirt road and looking for something. But what?

I search my memory, feeling anxious the longer it takes to remember.

What was I looking for? We were talking about getting gas and food and I...

My wallet! I was grabbing my wallet to pay for the gas. I looked out the window and saw that weird wolf with yellow eyes. I swear they were almost glowing, but that’s

ridiculous.

Then the crash happened.

The monitor beeps like crazy as I recall the details,

The stranger steps forward, leaning over me, concern in his intense blue eyes. “Take a deep breath.”

“The wolves,” I whisper.

His eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “Wolves?”

“They ran in front of the car.”

“We know. Mabel told us about them.”

I take a deep breath, trying to remember what happened after the accident, but come up blank.

I remember everything before the accident, so I know I don’t have memory issues.

Unfortunately. Because I have more than a few childhood memories I’d love to erase from my mind.

I was born in Idaho. My mom raised me, though “raised” is a generous way to describe growing up with her.

I was the result of a one-night stand—one of many for my mom.

She couldn’t remember who my biological dad was, and I gave up looking for him

when I was eleven.

Chances are that he wasn't a great guy. My mom's taste in men was always questionable.

She jumped from one guy to the next, broke up marriages, and paid more attention to her latest boyfriend than me.

When I was older, it stopped bothering me so much that we weren't close.

What I hated was when her dates tried to mess with me.

Some seemed to like tormenting me, but a few flirted with me or tried to break into my room at night.

I was old enough to know how inappropriate their behavior was and tried to tell my mom a few times, but she never believed me. She never protected me.

I lived in fear of what they might do to me.

So Mabel and I planned our escape. We were raising ourselves, working part-time jobs, and doing everything possible to save money.

Mabel's dad was never around. He would leave for months at a time on a bender before returning to crash at their house.

He worked long enough to get a paycheck and then disappeared again.

I was worried about being attacked at my house, so I spent most of my time with Mabel.

Our lives were always easier when he was away.

“Do you want to get up and try to use the bathroom?” the nurse asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

“Yes, please.”

“Okay. Take it slowly,” she says, helping from the bed.

The man takes one of my arms as I slide off the hospital bed and shuffle toward the bathroom door.

“Got it from here?” the nurse asks.

I nod.

The man looks like he wants to follow me into the bathroom, but I close the door before he can try. What’s up with him? His uniform tells me he’s an EMT, but what is he doing here? Surely, an attractive guy like that has a girlfriend or family waiting for him at home.

I take care of business and wash my hands, wincing at my reflection in the mirror over the sink.

My face and arms are covered in bruises and cuts.

I run my finger gently over a scratch on my forehead, and my gaze catches on a mark on my neck.

I frown, tugging the hospital gown lower to see it more clearly.

“Is that a...”

Fuck. It is.

It’s a bite mark.

How the hell did that get on my neck? Did one of the wolves bite me?

I run my fingers over the mark and shiver as sensations flood my body.

A knock sounds at the door. It opens before I can say anything, and the man steps in behind me.

Our eyes lock in the mirror.

My hand falls from the bite mark. “How?”

He swallows hard. “I can explain.”

I frown. “Explain what?”

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TWO

Jensen

My mate turns to face me, her expression guarded.

I curse myself.

Fuck, none of this is going how I imagined it would.

I always thought my fated mate would also be a shifter. We would smell each other and be mated instantly.

Instead, I found my very human fated mate when she was dying. I bit her before I even learned her name or the color of her eyes. Now we're mated...but not. She doesn't know what I am. She doesn't know anything about me, and I don't know a damn thing about her except that we're meant to be together.

My wolf paws at me, and I take a deep breath.

How the hell am I going to explain all of this to her?

“Did the wolves at the accident...bite me?”

I hesitate. Part of me wants to lie and say yes so I can win her trust and convince her to stay with me. But I can't do it. A relationship built on lies will never work.

“No, not those wolves.”

“What does that mean?” She sounds panicked.

“Come and lie down, and I’ll explain everything.”

I hear the nurse, Mrs. Webster, a coyote shifter in our pack, slip out of the room and send up a silent thank you as I help my mate back to bed.

I pull my chair closer to her bedside and scrub my hands down my face. “I’m Jensen. I was with the ambulance at the scene. I pulled you out of the car.”

“Thanks for that.”

I nod and swallow. “I bit you.”

She stares at me, and I hold her gaze.

“It was the only option,” I explain when she remains silent.

“Why was biting me even an option?” she demands.

My wolf paws at me again, eager for me to get on with it. “There’s so much I have to tell you.”

This won’t go the way we want, I warn him.

He snorts. She wants us.

I close my eyes. She won’t in a minute...

Dillon crosses her arms over her chest, and I steel myself for her reaction.

“I’m a shifter. A wolf shifter.”

She stares at me blankly.

Keep going! my wolf orders.

“I can shift between human and wolf form.”

Still nothing.

“And shifters have fated mates. One person they’re fated to be with.”

She doesn’t blink.

“I know that sounds crazy, but it’s true...and you’re my fated mate.”

“So, you bit me because you think you’re a wolf and we’re meant to be,” she deadpans.

“I bit you because it was the only way to save your life. You were dying. Fuck, when we came up on that scene...it was so bad. Then I smelled you and realized that we were fated mates. You were in rough shape, and your condition deteriorated in the ambulance on the way here. They wheeled you in for surgery, but your injuries were...severe.”

I swallow hard as I remember how panicked I was when I found her. I knew she was dying. I couldn’t handle it. I’d found my fated mate and wasn’t about to lose her. I couldn’t handle that. So I did the only thing I could—I bit her.

Dillon shakes her head. “But I feel fine.”

“That’s because I bit you. Shifters have advanced healing properties, and they transferred to you. It’s the reason why you’re awake right now. The reason you’re not in excruciating pain.”

Her expression is blank. “Right.”

She’s not giving me anything. She’s closed off and won’t trust me easily.

I clear my throat. “I know that this is a lot to take in.”

She laughs, but it lacks humor. “Not really. You’re crazy. I’ve been around crazy.”

“I’m not. I’ll prove it for you.”

“This should be good,” she mumbles.

I stand, tug off my shirt, and reach for my pants. She slams her hands over her eyes as I strip.

“Watch.”

She peeks out from between her fingers. As soon as her eyes meet mine, I start to shift.

The hair on my body grows, my teeth and nails elongate, and in seconds, I land on my paws in front of her hospital bed.

“Holy shit!” she squeaks.

I step forward, nudging her leg.

She jerks away. “Okay, you’re not crazy. I am. Maybe I hit my head harder than anyone realized.”

I shift back and pull on my clothes. “You didn’t. It’s real. Everything I said is real.”

“No offense, but I just met you. I don’t trust you, even if we are meant to be or whatever.”

“We are.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“We’re already mated. When I bit you, I claimed you. You’ll have my mark for the rest of your life.”

“Great,” she mutters.

“You’re upset.”

Dillon snorts. “You think?”

“Why? Tell me, and I’ll fix it.”

“You can’t! This is all...It’s too much! I mean, I was in a car accident. I wake up with some strange man by my bedside and find out that he’s a wolf, he bit me, and claims to be my fated mate. You say it like this is a done deal.”

“It is,” I point out. “We’re already bonded.”

“Yeah, because you chose it! Where was my choice?”

I frown. “You were unconscious.”

“God! You don’t get it.”

“Then explain it to me.”

“No. Get out. I want you to leave.”

“I can’t do that.”

“So what I want doesn’t matter?”

I feel like shit. “I’ll call Miles and Mabel. Visiting hours start soon, and Mabel will be here.”

She ignores me as I stand and head out into the hallway. I call Miles to tell him Dillon is awake, and he says they’re on their way.

My wolf paces inside me, anxious to return to our mate, but I can’t walk back in there. Not right now.

Miles and Mabel step off the elevator a few minutes later and head my way. Mabel smiles at me distractedly before she heads in to be with her friend. I sigh as Miles leans against the wall next to me.

“How are things going?”

I shake my head. “Badly.”

“Did you tell her about us?”

“Yeah. I shifted for her and everything. She’s pissed.”

“She’s pissed that you’re a shifter?”

“No? I don’t know. She just seems pissed with me in general. She’s mad that she didn’t get to choose. When I pointed out that she was unconscious and on the brink of death, she got even more upset.”

“Hmm.”

“How are things going with your mate?” I ask him.

“Well, I think. I don’t know. We went home, and she kind of passed out. She seems to be warming up to me, though...maybe.”

“They’re both closed off and distant,” I comment.

Miles nods. “Wonder what their lives were like before yesterday.”

I swallow hard, and my wolf whines as we think about what they might have lived through.

“Tucker will be here soon to ask them questions about the accident,” Miles says.

“Think it was the Red Fog Pack?”

He shrugs. “I’m headed in. You coming?”

“Yeah.”

I follow him, preparing for round two with my mate.

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THREE

Dillon

It's been two days, and Jensen hasn't left my side for more than a few minutes. If this were in any other situation, I'd think I found my Prince Charming—but this isn't a fairytale.

It's hard to wrap my head around everything that's happened in the last few days.

Sometimes, I feel like I'm being unreasonable.

I mean, the guy saved my life. I should be happy and thanking him.

But I can't seem to get past the fact that I had no choice in any of this.

He did what he wanted with me and my body.

He marked me forever and expected me to be cool with it.

"Can I leave?" I ask the nurse as she comes in.

"Not yet, dear. The doctor says tomorrow. We need your red blood cell count to improve a little more."

I groan, plopping back in the hospital bed.

I've been cooped up in here for way too long and I'm going stir crazy.

I want to stretch my legs and move around a bit, but every time I so much as lift a finger, Jensen is there, offering help or asking if I need something.

I know he's being helpful, and a part of me thinks it's sweet how he dotes on me.

But another part is waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Jensen seems like a good guy, but I've seen people's masks drop too many times to let my guard down completely.

No one is this perfect. No one treats strangers like this unless they have an ulterior motive. I learned that from my mom's boyfriends.

What angle could Jensen be working?

"Do you need anything?" the nurse asks.

"No, I'm good."

"Let me know if you do," she says before she heads out.

I roll my head to the right and give Mabel puppy dog eyes.

"Please break me out of here," I beg.

She smiles. "One more day. Twelve more hours. You can make it until then."

She's right. It's already late. Hopefully, when I wake up tomorrow, they'll do one more test and let me leave.

“Can you feel it?” Mabel whispers.

I frown. “Feel what?”

“The mating heat.”

“The what?”

“Jensen didn’t tell you about that?”

I sigh. “He might have. I’ve been trying to ignore him.”

Mable sighs, giving me a look. She wants me to trust Jensen. She thinks he’s a good guy. But I can’t let my guard down.

“You should give him a chance,” she says softly.

“You know what he did,” I snap.

She flinches slightly. “I know. I also know why he did it. Why he had to do it. And I’m glad he did.”

I stare at her in shock as she blinks away tears.

“You were unconscious, Dillon. You didn’t see the car. You didn’t see yourself. There was so much blood everywhere, and you wouldn’t wake up! I’ve never been so scared. I thought you were dead.”

“I wasn’t,” I argue.

“You were dying , Dillon. I get that it’ll take time to trust Jensen, but you need to

stop pushing him away. Give him a chance to make it up to you. Ask the doctors for your records, and you'll see all your injuries and how dire they were."

Mabel clears her throat and changes the subject. "The mating heat happens every full moon."

"Tonight," I say, looking out the window at the moon.

"Yeah. Miles said it's like an intense pressure to mate. Like an extreme attraction to each other. He said we'd be desperate to be together."

"Hmm," I say noncommittally.

The truth is that I can feel everything she's described. I've been fighting it all day.

"I can feel it," she says quietly.

"So can I."

"Are you going to..." She trails off.

I swallow. "No."

She nods, no judgment in her expression.

Mabel and I have been through everything together. We're not just best friends. We're sisters.

"Are you going to?"

She bites her bottom lip, a blush staining her cheeks. "Yeah, I think so. Miles is

incredible. He's attentive and sweet and generous. Everything I could want in a man."

"Lucky," I say wistfully.

She gives me a look. I ignore it.

"You ever think that maybe this is the universe's way of making up for our shitty childhoods?"

I lean my head back and stare up at the ceiling. "We had parents who never gave a shit about us. We had a whole town who ignored us. Then we came here, and bam! Suddenly, we have two men who are obsessed with us and would do anything to make us happy."

Resentment bubbles in my stomach, and I hate it. I'm happy for Mabel. I really am. She deserves someone like Miles. The guy worships her and would do anything to make her happy or see her smile. I wish that things weren't so complicated for Jensen and me.

"Maybe it is. You deserve someone who can see how amazing you are," I tell her.

"So do you."

She squeezes my hand, and I smile.

"Maybe I'll find a guy like that someday," I say as the door opens and Jensen and Miles walk in.

"A guy like what?" Jensen asks, heading straight for my side.

He hovers, scanning my body and the monitors like he's checking on me.

“Like Miles,” I say, and he glares at his friend.

Miles and Mabel don’t even notice. They’re too busy making eyes at each other. I smile as I watch them.

Jensen clears his throat. “Do you need anything?”

My stomach growls. Before I can say anything, he sets a sandwich on the table beside my hospital bed.

“Is that a?—”

“Burger. Medium rare, ketchup, mayo, lettuce, pickles, and grilled onions.”

My stomach growls again, and my mouth waters. I don’t have to say or do anything because Jensen is already moving the table over my lap and taking the food out of the bag.

“Thanks,” I grumble.

He nods. “I got you fries and a chocolate shake.”

Damn, he’s good.

I pop a fry in my mouth and close my eyes. It’s so good to eat something other than the food from the hospital cafeteria.

I focus on my food and try not to look at the handsome man hovering over me. But it’s hard, almost impossible, with how I’m feeling.

The mating heat.

I tried to play it off when Mabel asked me if I could feel it. The truth is...it's overwhelming. All I can think about is Jensen and being with him.

I've never wanted to date or kiss anyone before.

I never had a crush on any of the boys in my class or town.

But since I woke up in the hospital, Jensen is all I can think about.

Whenever he's near, I light up like a damn Christmas tree.

My blood heats, and my core clenches and becomes wet.

My heart rate speeds up, which is embarrassing, considering I'm attached to the hospital monitor beeping with my heartbeat.

"We're going to head out," Mabel announces. She's tucked into Miles's side, smiling blissfully. It's so good to see her so happy and in love. I'm delighted for her.

We could have that, too, my subconscious whispers.

My gaze shifts to Jensen to find him watching me. His gaze is heated, and I realize he can feel the mating heat, too.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I tell Mabel.

She nods. "First thing in the morning."

"Have a fun night."

She grins mischievously over her shoulder as they head out.

“Do you need anything?” Jensen asks, stepping forward to fluff my pillows again.

“The pillows are fine,” I tell him in exasperation.

“They look flat. You’d be more comfortable with different ones. I’ll order some.”

“That’s not necessary. I’m being released tomorrow,” I remind him.

“I’ll get more for you.”

“I don’t?—”

But he’s already walking to the empty hospital bed next to mine and grabbing the pillow. He fluffs it and tucks it behind my head.

“Thanks,” I say dryly.

“Of course,” he says happily.

He seems so happy to be taking care of me. It’s weird, a foreign concept for me. Growing up, I was always the one taking care of myself.

“You can go home. Get some rest,” I suggest.

You’re testing him, my subconscious whispers. You want to see if he’ll leave like everyone else.

He settles on the chair beside my bed. “No, I’m fine here,”

“That chair can’t be comfortable.”

“It’s fine.”

“So am I. You don’t have to stay. If I need anything, I’ll call one of the nurses.

“I help you.”

“But you don’t have to,” I argue.

“I want to. You’re my mate. Taking care of you and anything you need is part of it.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why is that part of it?”

“It just is. Fated mates means more than being partners or husband and wife. It’s more than love. It’s an unbreakable bond. At least from my side.”

“How can you be so sure? People change their minds all the time. Things change. Feelings change.”

“This won’t. It’s a constant.”

“So you’re always going to follow me around, fluffing my pillows and whatnot?”

“I’d like to do more than that for you.”

“Sex,” I say flatly.

He blinks. “Yes, but not just that. I want to take care of all of your needs. I want to

feed you, provide for you. I'll take care of you when you're sick and do whatever I can to cheer you up when you're down. Hell, I hope you're never down around me. You should always be smiling and happy."

"What if that's not what I want?"

"Then I'll change. I'll be whatever you want."

"No, I mean, what if I don't want to be with you?"

My question elicits an immediate reaction from Jensen. It's like I've punched him. He looks shocked and crestfallen.

"What did I do wrong?"

I want to take it back. I want to tell him about my mom and growing up in Idaho, but I can't. I don't trust him yet. And I don't trust what I'm feeling.

Is this lust because of the mating heat? Or do I have genuine feelings for him?

Either way, I want him. I'm already wearing his mark, so I might as well reap the benefits.

"This is all a lot," I murmur. "I don't know what to think right now. All I can focus on is this feeling."

"What feeling?"

"Need. I...ache."

He licks his lips, and the tension between us fills the room. His eyes are locked on

me, glowing in the dimly lit room. “Mate...”

I take a shaky breath. “I need you.”

Jensen is in motion in an instant. He stalks to the door and flips the lock.

I shiver in anticipation, sitting up in bed as he walks toward me. “Jensen, I’ve never...”

“Me neither. We’ll be each other’s firsts.”

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He slides his down my arms, and any inkling of doubt about doing this disappears.

I move so I'm kneeling on the hospital bed, bringing us eye to eye.

My nipples tighten into hard peaks as we breathe each other in.

The full moon gleams through the window behind Jensen, and I close my eyes, giving in to the mating heat.

I wrap my hands around his neck, and he grips my hips, tugging me closer. Then his lips land on mine, and I'm lost. Lost in the sensation of his hard body against mine, in his lips, in the way he makes me feel.

My pulse throbs in his bite mark on my neck as I kiss him back, opening my mouth for him. He slips his tongue inside, and I groan as I taste him.

"Mine," he mutters against my lips.

"Need you," I gasp.

He growls as he kisses his way down my neck. His lips brush over the bite mark, and I cry out, heat blazing through my body.

Jensen's hands move over my body, molding my curves. The thin hospital gown is easy enough to pull off, leaving me in only my panties.

"Your turn," I pant.

He steps back and practically rips his shirt over his head.

I drink him in, licking my lips as my gaze skims over his muscles. “So strong,” I whisper.

He smirks as he pushes his pants and boxers down.

My eyes drop and widen when I see his cock. “So big.”

“It’ll fit,” he assures me.

I eye him dubiously. “I’m not so sure about that,” I mumble.

He smiles. “It will. Are you sure you’re not in any pain?”

I blink at the change of subject. “No. No pain since I first woke up. I’m all healed.”

“Good.”

That’s the only warning that I get before he grabs my thighs and flips me onto my back.

“Ah!” I gasp as I land on the thin mattress.

“God, you’re so damn sexy. How did I get so lucky?” he says almost reverently as he cups my breasts.

I’ve never felt sexy or pretty. Most people in town overlooked me, and I dressed down at home so I didn’t catch the eye of my mom’s boyfriends.

I’ve been in a hospital gown or covered in blood since Jensen first saw me, and he’s

acting like I'm the most beautiful woman he's ever seen.

I like it.

Scratch that. I love it.

I watch his face. His eyes darken, and I've never seen him so enamored.

My panties are soaking, and I squirm on the bed. "Jensen."

"We've got all night, mate," he promises.

I huff impatiently, and he chuckles.

His eyes lock with mine as he licks one nipple, then the other. My breath hitches, and it takes everything in me to remain still as he explores my body.

His hands trail lower, and I writhe under him.

"Jensen, please," I plead.

"I've got you, mate."

He grips my soaked panties and tugs them down my legs, letting them drop to the floor.

Then I'm bare beneath him.

"Look at how wet you are," he breathes, running one thick finger through my slippery folds.

The tip of his finger circles my clit, and I cry out, arching into his touch. My hips are restless on the mattress, chasing his touch. I grip the thin blanket to steady myself, but I know it's useless when Jensen drops to his knees.

He buries his face between my legs, and I sob his name as he licks me, moaning as he swallows every drop.

“So damn tasty,” he moans.

“Oh God,” I choke out.

His hands grip my thighs, holding me in place as his mouth moves over me. He licks up my center, sucks my clit into his mouth, and grazes his teeth over the sensitive pearl, rolling his tongue over it and repeating the same pattern.

He’s driving me crazy. Each stroke of his tongue pushes me closer and closer to my orgasm.

An alarm goes off nearby, but I barely register it. All I can focus on is Jensen and his talented mouth.

His tongue circles my snug opening, and I wiggle under him. I’m so close. So, so close. But I need...a little...more.

“Jensen,” I pant.

He moans, sucking my clit into his mouth, and I shout his name as I reach my peak.

“Jensen!”

He licks me through my release, catching every drop of my juices greedily.

“Oh!” I gasp as he licks my sensitive clit.

“So damn good,” he growls.

I hum my agreement.

He rises to his feet and stares down at me. His gaze is dark and needy. He looks like a beast, a warrior about to get his reward.

I lick my lips, reaching for him. “I need you.”

He nods, coming down over me. His hands rest on either side of my head, and I twine my arms around his neck, pulling him down until he’s pressing me into the bed. I love his weight on me.

His cock nudges my opening, and we lock eyes. I freeze as he pushes into me an inch.

“Are you sure?”

I nod. “I’m sure. I want you.”

He smiles, and I tighten my hold on him as he leans down to kiss me. I can taste myself on his lips, and I moan as he slips his tongue into my mouth to tangle with mine.

His hips push forward, and he breaks through my virginity, seating himself fully inside me.

He’s so big. I wiggle, trying to adjust to his thick cock stretching me.

“Okay?” Jensen asks.

I take a deep breath. “Yeah. I’m good.”

He starts a slow, steady pace, letting me get used to the rhythm. I tentatively meet his thrusts, and it doesn’t take long before we’re moving together in perfect sync. His dick rubs my clit with each pass, making my core coil tighter each time, like a toy being wound up.

Jensen breaks our kiss and nuzzles my neck. He licks over the bite mark on my neck, and that’s all it takes. I go off like a bottle rocket, moaning his name as he pounds into me.

“Fucking hell, mate,” he grunts.

I cling to him as he hammers into me. I’m mesmerized by the look on his face, and I watch as he falls apart for me.

“Dillon,” he groans as he comes.

I suck in a sharp breath at the way he says my name. It’s like I’m his talisman. Like I’m the only thing keeping him tethered to Earth.

Like he loves me.

My brain skitters away from that thought as he pulls out of me and shifts me on the bed.

He wraps his arms around me, pulling me into his chest, and I rest my head on his shoulder as we catch our breath.

My eyes grow heavy, and I close them for a minute.

Soon enough, I drift off, safe and satisfied in Jensen's arms.

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FOUR

Jensen

Holding Dillon while she sleeps is like coming home. My wolf and I are so happy to finally have our mate. I wish our first time hadn't been in a hospital bed, but I have a lifetime to make it up to her.

Our next time will be even better . We can do it in our bed.

I smile as my wolf licks his lips in anticipation.

I knew finding my fated mate would be a blessing, but I never realized how amazing it would feel. It's like I'm finally complete. The antsy feeling is gone. I don't need to search for anything or anyone now I have her. As soon as I found her, she became my whole world.

I glance at the clock to see it's after eight.

Miles will be here soon to pick me up for the pack meeting.

The Red Fog Pack attacked last night. Burned houses and caused another car accident.

This time, the driver wasn't as lucky as our mates.

He was pronounced dead at the scene. It's full-on war now there's been a fatality.

My wolf growls. He's pissed that something is taking us away from our mate, but we know we need to take care of the other pack to keep Dillon safe.

I stroke my mate's flame-colored hair from her face, and she shifts closer, cuddling into my side. The hospital bed is narrow, so she's plastered against me, her leg draped over mine, her head on my shoulder.

A nurse walks in and stops when she sees us. She's younger, a hawk shifter here in the pack. She gives me a knowing smile before backing out of the room, giving us privacy.

Dillon starts to stir against me as the door clicks shut behind her. She stretches and opens her pretty green eyes. Her gaze is hazy for a minute as she wakes up, and I breathe her in.

She'll be discharged today, and I'm looking forward to moving her in with me. She'll like our place. It's next to Miles and Mabel's townhouse, and I know my mate will love being close to her best friend.

"Morning," I say softly.

"Hmm," she hums, moving away from me.

She still looks half asleep, and my wolf stretches inside me. Her sweet scent is all over me, and I take a deep breath as she sits on the side of the bed and yawns.

"Are you hungry?" I ask as I sit up next to her.

"Yeah. Is it visiting hours?"

"Almost. Miles and Mabel are on their way."

I rub her back, and she tenses under my touch. My stomach drops, and I frown as I study her.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Just tired.”

“You can go back to sleep.”

She nods and slides off the bed. She won’t meet my gaze, and my good mood starts to sour.

“What is it, mate?” I ask her softly.

She flinches at the word “mate,” and my wolf tenses.

This is not a good sign, he growls.

I swallow hard. “Dillon?”

“Listen, last night...it didn’t mean anything. We were scratching an itch.”

My heart breaks in my chest. My body grows numb as I try to wrap my head around what she’s saying.

Fix this! my wolf orders, but I don’t know how.

“It meant more than that.”

She averts her gaze.

Hurt courses through me, and I try to breathe through the pain. I need a clear head so I can figure out a way to convince her it was more than sex last night. We made love. We claimed each other.

“What will it take?”

She blinks. “For what?”

“For me to make it up to you.”

“You can’t.”

“That can’t be true. Come on, Dillon. I can’t change what happened. I wouldn’t even if I could. All I can do is prove that I was telling the truth and we’re meant to be together.”

The hospital door opens, and Miles and Mabel walk in, looking deliriously in love with each other. Jealousy eats at me.

I grit my teeth and turn to Dillon. “We have to go to the pack meeting, but we’ll be back soon.”

She nods. I want to reach for her, but I curl my fingers into my palms before she rejects me again.

“We’ll be back in a bit,” Miles tells Mabel.

She smiles, kissing him goodbye. I take one last look at Dillon before I stalk from the room.

“So?” Miles asks as we head to the elevator.

“So what? You claimed your mate. Congratulations.”

“Thanks, man,” he says, practically skipping as we step onto the elevator.

I hit the button for the ground floor and we ride down in silence. It isn't until we climb into the car that Miles turns to me.

“What about you? How was last night with your mate?”

“Good, I thought. We were together last night, but this morning...I don't know. She shut me out again.”

“Shit, I'm sorry, man.”

“It'll be okay. I'll fix things.”

He nods and starts the car.

“So, the meeting?” I ask, changing the subject.

“It's going to be war,” he sighs.

“I know.”

We park outside City Hall and head inside. Almost everyone else is already there, and we sit next to Tucker and Crew.

“How's it going?” I ask, and they grunt.

Griffin and Ryker, our pack's Alphas, walk in, and the room falls silent.

“Thanks for coming on such short notice,” Griffin says. “I’m sure you’ve all heard about the events last night.”

“Our hearts go out to those we lost. If you haven’t, the signup for the casserole train is on the table out front. Please consider helping out the family that lost a loved one.”

I already signed Miles and me up for a date. I sit back in my chair and try to pay attention to the meeting, but it’s hard with my wolf pacing inside me. My thoughts are still on what happened with Dillon this morning.

“Our talks haven’t been successful, so the plan has changed. We’ll be fighting back,” Ryker explains. “We’ll take turns protecting our border and need everyone on watch duty. The signup form is going around now.”

Tucker scribbles his name in a time slot and passes the clipboard to me. I look at Miles and point to the next time slot. He nods, and I write our names there. We’ll have to go out every other day for the midnight to eight am shift, but that way, we’ll be home by the time our mates wake up.

Miles passes the sheet along, and we listen as Ryker goes over the game plan. Everyone is on edge as we file out, and Miles is quiet as we drive back to the hospital.

“Is that...” He trails off.

I look out the window to see our mates headed down the sidewalk to our houses.

“Dammit. I thought we said to stay at the hospital,” I snap.

“Dillon was pretty excited to be released. I guess I can’t blame them,” Miles sighs as he pulls over to the curb.

I hop out and head straight for Dillon. “What are you doing?”

She glares at me. “I was discharged.”

“It’s not safe out here.”

“We’re fine,” she replies, rolling her eyes.

Mabel unlocks their front door, and the girls head in. I follow behind, with Miles on my heels.

“Our place is next door,” I tell Dillon.

“I’m staying here.”

“That’s okay, right?” Mabel asks Miles.

He nods, giving me a guilty look. “Of course. Whatever you want, mate.”

I glare at him, and he gives me a helpless look. My wolf snarls and continues his pacing inside me.

“Then I’m staying here too.”

Dillon sighs and turns to follow Mabel upstairs. We go to the third floor, and Dillon chooses the first guest room, so I pick the one next door.

“You don’t have to stay here,” she snaps.

“My mate is here. Where else would I be?”

Miles and Mabel head back downstairs, and I'm left alone with my mate.

"Why can't you let this go?" she demands.

"You're my mate, Dillon. You're my everything."

She crosses her arms and looks away from me in frustration.

"I know you don't trust me right now, but I promise I'll prove we're meant to be. Just give me a chance to win your trust."

She doesn't answer, but her gaze softens slightly. For a second, I think we're making progress.

Then she turns and heads into the guest room, slamming the door in my face.

I sigh as I walk into the room next door.

Baby steps, I think.

My wolf growls in response.

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FIVE

Dillon

I wake up the next morning to Jensen standing over me.

“Jesus!” I shout, jerking back on the mattress.

“Morning,” he says, smiling happily.

“What time is it?” I croak.

“Just after eight.”

“What are you doing in here?”

“I brought you breakfast in bed.”

“Great,” I grumble.

“How are you feeling?”

“Just peachy.”

He sits on the edge of the bed, and I sigh, rolling up until I’m sitting next to him.

I know I’m being rude, but it’s the only way to keep him at arm’s length. It’s getting

harder and harder to keep my guard up around him. A part of me wants to trust him, but then I remember all the men my mom trusted and how each of them broke that trust.

“I have to leave for my shift at the station. Miles and I will be back at five. Maybe we can grab dinner tonight.”

I grunt, taking the plate of eggs, bacon, and toast from him and setting it on the bedside table.

“Do you need anything?”

“No, I’m good.”

He nods and stands. I look up at him, and he hesitates. I can tell that he wants to say something else, but he changes his mind at the last minute and smiles.

“All right. I’ll see you tonight.”

He leans down, kissing my forehead before he heads out. I watch him go, then collapse back onto the mattress.

I have every intention of going back to sleep, but a minute later, Mabel bursts into my room.

“Morning! How’d you sleep?” she asks as she hops onto the bed beside me.

“Good. Why are we up so early?”

She grins. “It’s not that early. What did you want to do today? Are you feeling sore or anything?”

“No, I’m fine.”

She sits next to me, leaning against the headboard.

“Breakfast?” I drag myself up and reach for the plate, setting it on the bed between us.

“No, thanks. Miles fed me already.”

I grab a piece of bacon. “How are things between you two?”

“Amazing,” she sighs. “He’s perfect, Dillon. I swear he knows what I want or need before I do.”

“He seems like the perfect man,” I comment.

“He is. Dillon is, too,” she says, nudging me with her knee.

“Maybe. He cooks good bacon,” I joke.

“How are things between you two?” she asks carefully.

“Weird.”

“Because you slept together and went back to ignoring him?”

I glare at her. “You know what the mating heat was like! How was I supposed to resist him?”

“Why are you still resisting him?”

“He doesn’t regret it, Mabel. He told me he would bite me again, whether I wanted him to or not.”

“He said that?” she asks in surprise.

“Not exactly those words. He just said he’d do it again.”

“Okay, and did you consider he said that because he saved your life?”

I shove a bite of eggs into my mouth so I don’t have to answer.

Mabel sighs as she leans against the pillows. “Did you look at your medical records from the discharge paperwork?”

“No, I was busy unpacking here.”

“Well, you should. It might shed some light on why he did what he did. It might change your mind.”

“Maybe.”

She sighs. “Okay. What did you want to do today?”

“I think I might look for a new car. We’ll have to file a report with the insurance company.”

“Miles grabbed the police report for us. It’s downstairs somewhere.”

“Okay, that helps.”

I unpacked last night before I fell asleep and put all my clothes away in the closet and

dresser. All my money is stacked on the dresser next to my backpack. It's not a ton, but it's enough for a decent used car.

"Any leads on a job in town?" I ask Mabel.

"No, I haven't looked yet. I've been worrying about you and wrapping my head around all this."

"Maybe we should look today. Start putting out some applications."

"Sounds good. I'll go grab Miles's laptop."

She slides off the bed and rushes out the door. I finish eating while she grabs the computer.

I set my empty plate aside and grab my phone as she climbs back on the bed.

"What towns should we look in? We might not find anything here," I point out.

"Not Red Fog," Mabel comments.

"It's scary what they're doing," I whisper.

"I just hope they put an end to it before anything else happens."

"Me too."

We're silent for a few minutes as we search job boards.

"Maybe something online? Something we could do from home?" Mabel suggests, and I know she must be coming up empty, too.

“Some of those jobs seem like a scam,” I say, showing her my phone screen for an online product reviewer listing who is somehow getting paid two hundred dollars an hour.

“Yeah, maybe don’t apply for any of those.”

We spend the morning applying for every job in a fifty-mile radius that seems halfway decent. By lunchtime, I’m sick of staring at my phone screen.

“Want to head into town and explore it a bit?” I ask Mabel. “Maybe we could ask around about places that might be hiring.”

“Miles said to stay put. He thinks things will get worse before they get better.”

I’m not exactly happy to be cooped up inside after being stuck in the hospital for days, but I don’t argue.

“I’m going to make lunch and maybe take a nap.”

I smile. “Sounds good. I need to take a shower.”

Mabel nods and grabs the laptop before heading downstairs.

I head across the hall to the bathroom and turn on the shower. Stepping under the hot spray feels amazing, and I spend a while standing under the water.

By the time I step out and dry off, the house is quiet. Mabel must be asleep. I tiptoe into my bedroom and pull on some clean clothes.

What should I do now?

I look around the room, and my eyes lock on the folder from the hospital. Mabel's words from earlier play in my head. I sigh as I grab the folder and jump back onto the bed.

I open the folder and flip through the discharge paperwork. The first few pages are what they went over with me before I left. I almost give up, but then I flip the page and see the pictures from the X-rays.

“Whoa,” I whisper as I see the broken bones.

I flip faster, scanning the report.

Multiple contusions.

Internal bleeding.

Broken bones.

Cuts.

Bruises.

By the time I'm done reading everything, I'm in shock.

Mabel told me it was bad, but I guess I thought it was shock on her part.

I mean, I felt fine when I woke up that first morning.

A little sore but nowhere near as shitty as I should have felt, considering the injuries I sustained in the accident.

Could Jensen have been telling the truth? Was biting me really the only option?

“You read it.”

I jump, my startled gaze leaping to Mabel standing in the doorway.

“Yeah,” I whisper.

“And?”

“It was worse than I expected.”

Her eyes fill with tears, and I rush to her side.

“I’m okay, Mabel. I’m okay,” I reassure her.

“Thanks to Jensen. I love you, Dillon. I’d do anything to keep you here with me. If I’d known about shifters and what they could do, I would’ve begged Jensen to bite you. Would you hate me for that?”

“No,” I whisper.

She pulls back and gives me a sad smile. “Then maybe you need to stop hating him because that man loves you as much as I do.”

Deep down, I know she’s right. I’m punishing both of us by pushing him away when being with him feels so right.

“It’s scary trusting someone with my heart,” I tell her softly.

She gives me a wobbly smile. “I know. I get it. But Jensen will take good care of you

and your heart.”

I take a deep breath.

How should I apologize to Jensen tonight?

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SIX

Jensen

“I thought your shift was earlier today,” Harris says as we join them on patrol.

“It was. Griffin asked us to join you guys. They’ve gotten a report about some sightings in this area,” I tell him.

“I haven’t heard or seen anything yet,” Harris says.

We all pause, our eyes and ears straining, but all we hear is the wind.

“Where’s Logan?” Miles asks.

“He got a call. He went that way,” Harris replies, pointing to the west.

“Should we fan out a bit?” I suggest.

Harris nods. “I’ll take this section.”

He points toward where Loan went, and Miles and I head in the other direction.

“What’s your plan with Dillon?” Miles asks.

I take a deep breath. “Just show up for her. If I consistently prove myself to her, I hope she’ll let her guard down around me.”

“Might take a while,” he points out.

“I know, but she’s worth it.”

That’s when we hear it.

Footsteps.

We tense, scanning the forest in front of us.

Two men step out from the trees.

“Red Fog,” Miles snarls.

My wolf growls. I look over at Miles, waiting to see if he’ll shift.

“Twisted Oak,” one of the men says in disgust, his lip curling as he stares at us.

My wolf begs to be let out to deal with them. I’m about to shift when Harris and Logan sprint up next to Miles and me. The Red Fog members’ gazes dart between the four of us as we circle them, closing the distance between us. By the time they decide to attack us, it’s too late.

One of the men swings at Harris, but Miles grabs his arm and swings it behind his back.

“You can’t win this,” he screams at Miles.

I snort. “We just did.”

I look over to see Logan and Harris have restrained the other man with zip ties. Harris

hands me some, and I zip-tie our guy's hands behind his back while Miles holds him still.

"Where are we putting them?" I ask Logan.

"The prison," he replies. "You want us to take them, or you want to go?"

"We'll go. We should check in at the firehouse while we're in town."

"Sounds good. Be safe," Harris says.

We march the two struggling men toward town.

Tucker and Crew are leaving the police station as we approach. They grin when they see the two grumpy men with us.

"Two more to be locked up?" Crew asks.

Miles nods. "Yeah. Have you had a lot of others today?"

"Oh, yeah. We're almost at capacity. We were on our way to talk to the Alphas and see where we were supposed to put any Red Fog members captured today."

I nod. "Tell them we're headed back out to help with patrol."

We hand the guys off to Tucker and Crew to secure, then cross the street to the fire station, where a few volunteer firefighters are on duty.

They tense up the moment we step inside, but their shoulders ease when they realize it's us.

Everyone's on edge. The whole pack is holding its breath until the Red Fog Pack is dealt with and we've laid our dead to rest.

"All good here?" Miles asks the guys.

"It's been quiet," one of the volunteers replies. "We've had reports of the Red Fog Pack members crossing by the old Malin house. I guess they're using the path there to sneak across."

"We'll head there, then," Miles says.

"You might want to bring some supplies." The volunteer tosses me a medic bag.

I thank him, and Miles and I head out.

"Maybe we should stop at home and check on our mates," Miles suggests.

"We need to help. We're off duty in three hours, so we can go home for the night. Let's get this over with."

He sighs and nods.

We head for the Malin house. The Red Fog Pack didn't burn any of the homes in this area, and now we know why—we would've seen the path they were using.

We set up on the right side of the house, and I pass Miles a water bottle from the medic bag. I twist the cap on my water bottle and chug half of it as I catch my breath.

"Maybe it would help Dillon if she talked to other shifters," Miles suggests. "There are other human mates in town. We could introduce them, and they could explain how it felt for them."

“Yeah, that might be a good idea.”

“We can ask Harris’s and Logan’s mates. Or Tucker’s and Crew’s.”

“Maybe. I just... I don’t think it’s the shifter part that’s tripping her up. I think it’s me. I didn’t give her a choice before I bit her, and no matter what I say, nothing can change that.”

“She’ll come around,” he assures me.

I smile tightly. “I hope so.”

My wolf paws at me, and we freeze when we see the men crossing onto our pack’s land.

“They have guns,” Miles whispers.

I grit my teeth. “Shift?”

He nods, and we pull off our clothes as we watch the other pack. As soon as they step out of the forest, we shift and charge toward them, catching them off guard. They didn’t realize we knew about their “secret” path.

I growl as one of them aims a gun at Miles. My paws dig into the dirt as I hurtle toward him and bite down on his outstretched arm, my teeth sinking into his flesh.

The man shrieks as I roll my body, twisting his arm until I hear bones and ligaments tear. I release his arm and go for his throat. He sprawls in the dirt, his arm dangling uselessly at his side. When he reaches for the gun with his good hand, I bite down on his throat.

He cries out weakly, and I watch the life leave his eyes. I don't like killing, but I'll do anything to keep my pack safe.

I see Miles fighting with the other man. He's bigger, but his gun has fallen to the ground, and now he has a knife. He stabs it at Miles, who narrowly dodges the blade.

I snarl, launching myself at the man. Together, Miles and I take him down. Miles goes for his throat while I bite the hand holding the knife. He drops it, and when I look up, I see he's dead.

Mile and I spin around as footsteps approach behind us, our fur standing on end, our teeth bared.

"Easy. It's just us," Griffin says.

We both relax as our Alphas appear and shift back to our human forms. I look down to see blood smeared all over my body.

"You guys are a mess," Ryker comments.

"Good job," Griffin says as he takes in the two dead men lying behind us. "Those two were pretty high up in the Red Fog Pack."

"They have weapons now. They're getting braver," Miles says.

"Or maybe their numbers are dwindling," I suggest.

"I'm guessing it's the latter," Ryker says.

"We're here to take over for you two," Griffin says. "You've been on duty since midnight. Why don't you head home to your mates? We'll take it from here."

“Are you sure?” I ask.

“We’ve got it,” Griffin assures me.

“Let us know if you need anything,” Miles says.

“Will do. Now go rest up,” Ryker orders.

We head off, leaving the medic bag with them in case they need it later.

We’re silent as we head back to the townhouse, exhausted from the long day. I hear our mates giggling as we walk up the front porch steps, and my wolf relaxes inside me.

Miles walks in ahead of me, and I listen to see what floor the girls are on.

“Second,” Miles says.

I nod, jogging up the stairs, and smile when I see Dillon dancing in the living room. Her red hair bounces, and her curves sway temptingly as she wiggles her hips from side to side.

My wolf licks his lips as she turns and our eyes lock.

“Oh, my god!” she shouts, her green eyes panicked as she rushes toward me.

“What happened?” Mabel asks Miles.

“The blood,” Dillon says, her hands running over me. “Where is it coming from? We have to stop it! We have to go to the hospital!”

I love that she's so concerned for me. I love the sensation of her hands on my body and almost don't want to tell her what happened so she'll keep fussing over me.

"It's not my blood," I tell her. "Well, most of it isn't."

She frowns. "What happened?"

"It's a long story."

"We need to get you cleaned up and see if anything needs bandaging."

My wolf rolls over inside me, happy to simply be near her.

I smirk. "We?"

She rolls her eyes. "Yes. We."

My smirk becomes a grin as she takes my hand and leads me upstairs.

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SEVEN

Dillon

“What happened?” I ask Jensen as we enter the bathroom, digging around in the cabinets until I find a first aid kit.

“We were out on patrol, and some Red Fog Pack members came onto our land. They weren’t going down without a fight.”

My heart drops as I think about what could’ve happened if more pack members had been there.

“You could’ve been hurt. Or worse,” I chide.

“I’m okay. We’ve done a lot in the last twenty-four hours. The jail in town is full of their pack members.”

“So, it’s over?” I ask hopefully.

“Not exactly. We’ve got a rough estimate of their numbers, and we’re pretty sure there are still at least fifty left, including their Alpha and higher-ups.”

Mabel and I are no strangers to living in a town filled with tension and rivals, but nothing quite like this.

“We need to get you cleaned up. I can’t see where the blood is coming from,” I

complain as I scan over his body.

Jensen has flecks of dried blood on his arms and neck. His gray shirt is stained crimson, with more smeared on his jeans.

“What the heck did you do? Roll around in a blood bank?”

He chuckles. “We shifted, and when I got dressed again, the blood ended up on my clothes.”

“You need to take a shower so I can bandage you up.”

“Got it, doc.”

I bite back a smile, turning my back as he tugs his shirt off and reaches for his pants.

“You’ve seen me naked before,” he reminds me.

Heat hits my cheeks. “I thought you might want some privacy.”

“You’re my mate, Dillon. I don’t want anything between us. No secrets. Nothing.”

Swallowing hard, I stay facing the door until I hear the shower turn on. I peek over my shoulder to see Jensen in the shower.

I turn around and clear my throat. “What’s the plan now? With the Red Fog Pack.”

“Keep up patrols. Capture those we can. Kill the ones we can’t until this is all over.”

“Is this...normal for you guys?”

“No, not really. Most packs co-exist peacefully. It’s in our nature, you know?”

“Sure. So why are you fighting with this other pack?”

“They’re territorial. The Alpha of the Red Fog Pack used to be our Alpha. He was into some bad shit, and when Ryker and Griffin came to town, they ran him out. Seems he never got over it.”

“Seems dumb. Why not just move on?”

“Some people are all about their ego.”

I nod in agreement. “My mom dated a few guys like that.”

“Yeah? Did she date a lot?”

“Oh, yeah. She was never single. Always had a date or a new man.”

Jensen peeks at me from behind the shower curtain. “Must’ve been rough to grow up like that.”

“It was easier when I got older and could sneak out.”

“No, it wasn’t,” he says quietly.

His unexpected insight brings tears to my eyes.

Jensen shuts off the shower and grabs a towel, wrapping it around his waist.

“Okay, no, it wasn’t. I spent most nights with my door locked and the dresser pushed in front of it to stop her latest boyfriend from sneaking in. My mom was rarely home,

but when she was, she didn't give a shit about me."

"Fuck, Dillon. I'm sorry, mate. So sorry."

I shrug, trying to play it off like it's no big deal. Then Jensen wraps his arms around me, and the dam breaks. The tears come, and I bury my face in his chest.

"I wish I'd found you earlier. I wish I could've protected you from all that. Hell, I wish you'd a different mom, a different dad. You should've grown up with a loving family who treated you like a princess."

He holds me tightly, and I cling to him as I sob.

"My parents died when I was young. I grew up in a foster home. That's where I met Miles," he says, rubbing my back.

"I thought you were brothers?"

"Foster brothers. We consider ourselves family, and we're best friends. Like you and Mabel."

"I'm sorry about your parents," I whisper.

"Thanks. They were good people. My dad was a mechanic, and my mom was a nurse. We were part of this little pack up north. It was tiny. Maybe three hundred people. My parents went out to get us something to eat the night we moved to a new town. A drunk driver hit them, and they never made it home."

"Oh, my god, Jensen! That's terrible. I'm so sorry."

"It was scary, you know? I was in a new home, a new town, new everything. It was

supposed to be our fresh start, but in the blink of an eye, I was all alone.”

We hold each other, lost in the past and our pain.

“I’m glad you had Miles,” I murmur.

“Me, too. I’m glad you had Mabel. And now you have me.”

I pull back, wiping the tears from my cheeks. “I read my records from the hospital.”

He seems surprised but doesn’t say anything, waiting for me to continue.

“I didn’t know my injuries were so serious. When I woke up in the hospital, I didn’t feel that bad. I thought Mabel was just stressing. I... I should’ve listened to you and Mabel. I should’ve trusted you.”

“The accident and everything after was a shock,” he says, trying to excuse how I acted.

“I know, but that was only part of it. I have a hard time trusting people, especially men.”

Jensen nods. “Because of your mom’s boyfriends.”

“Yeah. It’s just...I spent most of my teenage years fighting to be heard and have a choice.”

“And I took that away from you when I bit you.”

I nod, a lump forming in my throat.

“I’m sorry, mate. If there had been any other way?—”

“I know,” I interrupt him. “I know. I saw how bad it was in the reports. The broken bones and bleeding.”

“I thought I was going to lose you. I couldn’t...It would kill me.”

“I know. I don’t want to lose you, either.”

“You won’t.”

I step back, and my gaze falls to the cut on his side. “Oh, my gosh! I was supposed to be bandaging you up.”

I grab the first aid kit and open it, grabbing the antiseptic and bandages.

“I’ll be okay,” he insists.

I shake my head as I wash my hands. “We need to clean it so it doesn’t get infected.” I grab the antiseptic and a cotton ball and clean the small cut. “When do you have to go back out on patrol?”

“Midnight. I’ll be back around eight. In time to bring you breakfast in bed.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I want to. I love taking care of you.”

“That’ll take some getting used to,” I admit.

Jensen smiles. “We have time.”

He watches as I place the bandage on him and then lowers his arm.

“All done.” I close the first aid kit and put it back in the cabinet where I found it.

When I stand and turn to face him, I realize how close we are. Jensen is only a breath away. The bathroom suddenly feels smaller and warmer, like all the air has been sucked out.

My eyes flick up to meet his, and what I see—raw affection, desire, and something deeper that tugs at the frayed edges of my heart—makes my breath hitch.

“You okay?” he asks, voice low and rough, like gravel smoothed by time.

I nod, not trusting my voice.

His hand lifts slowly, giving me a chance to pull away. When I don’t, his fingers brush my cheek as he tucks a strand of damp hair behind my ear.

“Dillon,” he murmurs. “Can I kiss you?”

The question sends a shiver down my spine. I’ve never had anyone ask before. Never had someone treat me like I matter, like what I want matters.

I swallow hard. “Yeah,” I say softly. “Please.”

That’s all it takes.

His lips meet mine in a kiss that’s gentle at first—soft and questioning like he’s afraid to scare me off. But when I lean into him, when I press closer and slide my hands up to his bare chest, he deepens it.

He tastes like mint and something wild—like the forest after a storm. He cradles my cheek with one hand while the other rests at my waist, holding me like I'm precious.

My heart pounds in my chest, and every nerve ending lights up as I kiss him back with everything I've been holding in—fear, longing, hope. All of it pours into that kiss.

When we finally break apart, we're both breathless.

His forehead rests against mine, his eyes closed. "Mate," he rasps, voice hoarse.

"Thank you for saving my life."

"Anytime. Always. I've got you now. I'm not going anywhere."

I smile, my heart swelling in my chest. "Good," I whisper. "Because I think I'm finally ready to stop running."

His smile is slow and devastating. "Then come here, mate."

When he pulls me into his arms, I go willingly because, for the first time in my life, being held feels like home.

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EIGHT

Jensen

The towel around my waist slips as my mate steps closer, and I let it fall. My arms are wrapped around Dillon, and I'm not about to let her go to fix it.

My wolf paws at me, commanding me to claim her again.

"I need you," she whispers.

"You have me. All of me."

"And you have me. I love you, Jensen."

"Fuck, I love you, too, mate."

I smooth her fiery red hair away from her face and kiss her. She moans against my lips, and I tug her closer.

We back up, hitting the door.

She laughs, pulling away. "Bedroom?"

"Uh-huh," I agree.

I follow her out of the bathroom and across the hall to her room. I'm on her as soon as

the door clicks shut behind us.

We crash onto the bed, and she wraps herself around me. My cock rubs against her leggings, and I growl. I want to rip them off her, but I know they're her favorite pair.

Rip them. We can buy her more, my wolf growls.

Dillon breaks the kiss, sucking in a sharp breath. She wiggles against me until I pull back, and I watch as she pulls off her shirt and sports bra. I smile when I see my bite mark on her neck.

Mine.

Dillon lifts her hips and shimmies out of her leggings and underwear. She kicks them to the floor, leans back on her elbows, and stares at me. "What are you waiting for?"

I grin. "Just trying to figure out which part of you I want to kiss first."

"How about you start with my lips?"

"Good idea."

I grab her ankles, throw her legs over my shoulders, and dive head-first into her sweet pussy.

"Jensen!" she shouts in surprise.

I don't answer. I'm too busy licking up her honeyed juices. She tastes so sugary, so perfect.

So mine.

My tongue wiggles into her snug hole before I lick up to her clit and back down. Her breaths are coming faster and faster, and her thighs are shaking around my head. She's close.

I wrap my arm around her leg, and my thumb finds her clit. I press down on the little ball of nerves and rub tight circles. My tongue keeps fucking in and out of her, and it doesn't take long before she's coming all over my face.

Thank fuck because I'm close to the edge.

I lick her one last time, climb to my knees, grab my cock, and slam into her.

"Jensen!"

My wolf howls in my head.

Dillon's green eyes are dark with passion, like the forest after a hard rain. I keep my eyes on her, watching her face as I pound into her. Her tits bounce with each thrust, and her pussy clamps greedily around my length.

"I'm so close," she gasps.

I grit my teeth. I'm close, too, but I need to get my mate off before I come. Dillon always comes first.

Her nails bite into my arms, and my wolf growls. He loves that she's marking us like we've marked her.

"Harder," she begs.

I do as she asks and fuck her harder. Wrapping her leg around my hip, I rut into her

deeper, rougher, harsher.

“Oh! Oh, oh, oh!” she gasps.

One more thrust is all it takes to send her over the edge. Her juices flood my cock, and I groan her name as I follow her into oblivion. I keep moving inside her, prolonging our pleasure.

“Hmmm,” she hums happily.

I smile, kissing her softly as I pull out and collapse on my side next to her. “You’re so beautiful, mate.”

Her eyes soften. “So are you,” she says, cuddling closer.

I enjoy the quiet rightness of being with Dillon like this. My wolf curls up inside me, entirely at peace now my mate is in my arms.

I look at the clock and sigh when I see the time. “I need to leave soon.”

“For what? It’s so late.”

“Almost midnight,” I agree. “Miles and I have patrol.”

Dillon snuggles closer. “Do you have to go?”

“Unfortunately. Hopefully, this will be over soon, and we can spend more time together.”

“Hopefully,” she agrees, kissing my chest. “You think it’s almost over?”

“We think so. We’ve had around-the-clock patrols, so who knows how many more members were picked up today. We’re not stopping until they’re all caught. Then you’ll be safe. We’ll all be safe.”

“Good.”

“Are you nervous about being here?” I ask her. “Do you want to leave town? I know you guys were just passing through town.”

“We were. That was the plan, anyway.”

“It can still be the plan. We can go wherever you want.”

“No,” she says, surprising me. “We’ll stay. This is your home. The people here are your family.”

“You’re my family. You and what you want take precedence. Always,” I assure her.

“I know. I want to stay here.”

“Then we stay,” I whisper, pressing my lips against hers in a too-short kiss. “But first, I need to make it safe for us.”

She sighs as I pull away. My wolf begs me to stay. I wish I could.

We need to make sure she’s safe, I remind him.

I tuck the covers around Dillon so tightly that she can barely move. She giggles as I brush my nose against hers.

“I’ll be back in the morning. I’ll bring you breakfast in bed.”

“Hmm, I can think of a better way to have you wake me up,” she says seductively.

I grin. “Okay, I’ll do that.”

“I look forward to it.”

“Me, too.”

I kiss her soundly, and she sighs as I pull away to get dressed. I finish in a minute and kiss her goodbye one last time before I slip out of the room.

Miles is already waiting by the front door. He passes me a to-go cup of coffee, and we head out the front door.

“I heard the day shift only rounded up fifteen members,” Miles says.

“How many are left? Maybe thirty or forty?”

“We think so.”

“We need to end this tonight. I don’t want to leave my mate every night.”

“Agreed.”

“Hey,” Logan says as he joins us.

“Hey, headed out for a shift, too?” I ask.

“Yeah. Have you heard any news?”

“Fifteen members were caught today,” Miles replies.

“They must be getting pretty desperate over there,” Logan says. “Their numbers are dwindling. Harris said he heard some families packed up and left. They don’t want to be part of this war.”

“Smart of them,” I muse.

Harris approaches us on the sidewalk, coffee in his hand. “Did you hear the news?”

“What news?” Miles asks warily.

“The Red Fog Pack burned down another house and attacked a family on the east side.”

“Dammit,” I hiss.

“The family is all right,” Harris continues. “Shaken up, but they’re okay.”

Logan sighs. “That’s good.”

The atmosphere changes, growing heavy. We’re all determined to end this. Tonight.

We enter the forest and walk to our patrol locations. Miles and I head east, and Harris and Logan head west. We nod as we pass a few exhausted-looking pack members on the way to our assigned area.

Miles and I are silent as we scan the area for movement. It’s quiet for a few hours before we catch movement straight ahead. I share a look with Miles, and we tense as we watch the shadows move closer.

They step into the clearing, and I freeze when I realize who it is.

The Alpha of the Red Fog Pack.

His son steps out behind him, and a few more members file out to join them. I frown as I size them up, noticing several humans with guns.

Miles looks at me, and I know we're thinking the same thing.

We shift at the same time, howling to alert the rest of the pack.

Then, we attack.

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NINE

Dillon

“Morning,” Mabel greets me as I enter the kitchen.

“Morning,” I rasp, still rubbing the sleep from my eyes. “What time is it?”

“Um”—she cranes her neck to see the clock on the microwave—“almost nine. Why?”

“Are Miles and Jensen back?”

“No, not yet. They probably got caught up with Pack business. I’m sure they’ll be home any minute.”

“Yeah,” I agree, but I have a bad feeling in my stomach.

“Are you hungry? I can make some breakfast.”

“Not really. I’ll just have toast.”

Mabel nods and moves to the fridge to grab the orange juice. “Want some?”

“Sure.”

We move around the kitchen, making our breakfasts.

Mabel smiles. "It's kind of crazy, isn't it?"

"What?"

"This. A week ago, we were following our plan to leave Idaho and move to Los Angeles. Now, we're living in this small town. We have mates. We know about shifters. So much has changed so fast."

"Yeah, it's crazy. I think it may be time for us to come up with a new plan."

"I guess."

I raise an eyebrow. "We're staying here, right?"

"Yeah, I want to. Do you?"

"Yeah. I know we were both against small towns after our childhood, but it's different here."

Mabel laughs. "Very."

"We need to find jobs."

"I haven't heard anything back from the postings I applied to the other day."

"Me either."

"Are you staying here?" she asks. "Or moving in with Jensen?"

"He hasn't asked me."

“He wants you to. He loves you, and I know you love him.”

“I do,” I admit.

It’s scary to say it out loud and make it real. But what I feel for Jensen is real. He makes me feel safe and worthy. He’d do anything for me. He wants to do anything for me. He’s meant for me, and I’m meant for him.

I smile at Mabel. “Yeah, I’ll move in with him. If he asks.”

My gaze strays to the clock, then the front door, as if willing it to open.

The toaster pops, and I grab my toast and slather it in butter. Mabel finishes cutting up fruit to put on top of her yogurt and sits on one of the barstools. I join her, and we eat in silence, each knowing the other is anxious about her mate.

“It’s getting pretty late,” I say as we clean up and wash the dishes.

“Maybe we should call them,” Mabel suggests.

“Yeah.”

Mabel grabs her phone, and I watch anxiously as she calls Miles.

She sighs. “No answer.”

I dig in my pocket for my phone. Jensen added his number last night. I hit dial and hold my breath as it rings.

“Dillon,” an unfamiliar voice answers.

I blink. “Who is this? Where’s Jensen?”

“I’m Ryker. We haven’t met yet.”

“You’re an Alpha.” I remember Jensen telling me about Ryker and Griffin taking over their pack.

“Yeah. Listen, Jensen and Miles are in the hospital right now, but they’re?”

“The hospital!” I gasp.

Mabel sucks in a sharp breath and takes off.

I rush after her, pulling on my shoes.

“We’re headed there now,” I tell him.

“Okay, see you soon. Third floor, room 317.”

“Room 317,” I tell Mabel as I hang up.

We rush out the door and down the street to the hospital.

To where it all began.

I just hope this isn’t the end of our story.

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TEN

Jensen

It's over.

The Red Fog Pack Alphas didn't go down without a fight. We spent all night rounding up the last of the Red Fog Pack members, so the Alpha and his family were all that was left.

We thought it would be easy, but they came prepared. They hired a few humans who all had guns. Miles and I were lucky to make it out with a couple of cuts and broken ribs. A few of my pack mates are in the hospital with gunshot wounds.

The Red Fog Pack's higher-ups are all in the morgue. Their hired human help is there, too. I hate that it came to that, but my wolf and I are relieved this is finally over. Our mates and pack are safe, and that's the most important thing.

My wolf paces inside me. She's probably worried.

I wince as I shift in bed, my ribs protesting the movement. I know. The doctor is about to release us so we can go home and make it up to her.

Just leave, my wolf snarls.

"Do you have your phone?" Miles asks. "Mine's dead."

“Ryker took it. His was damaged in the fight, and he needed to call his mate, Eden.”

“He’s got to be around here somewhere,” Miles says, sitting up in his hospital bed.

We both startle as the hospital door bursts open. My wolf is on high alert but relaxes when my mate rushes in with Mabel behind her.

“Oh, my gosh!” Dillon cries when she sees me in the hospital bed.

“I’m fine,” I reassure her as she fusses over me.

“Fine? You’re in the hospital!”

“It was more as a precaution.”

She glares at me. “Don’t lie to me! What happened?”

“We were attacked,” Miles says. “We have a few cuts and bruises, a couple of broken ribs, but we’ll heal fast.”

“I was so scared,” Mabel says, hugging him tightly.

“I’m okay, mate,” he whispers.

“And it’s over. They’re all captured or dead,” I add.

“Well, that’s a relief.” Dillon sighs, but she still looks worried. “Why didn’t you call?”

“My phone is dead,” Miles says.

“And I gave mine to Ryker to make a call before I got wheeled in here,” I explain.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” Mabel tells Miles.

“Me, too.”

“We’re about to be released,” I tell the girls.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Dillon asks me softly.

“I’m fine. Better now you’re here,” I whisper against her ear.

I pull her against me, ignoring the ache in my ribs as she hugs me. She smells like me, and my wolf practically purrs as we breathe her in.

“What exactly happened?” Mabel asks.

I share a look with Miles, and we silently agree to keep the details PG.

“We were out on patrol and caught a few of the Red Fog Pack members using the trail from yesterday. It was their go-to way of getting onto our land. A lot of them didn’t want a confrontation. I guess they were forced to because they gave up without much of a fight,” I tell the girls.

My wolf paces inside me as we remember what happened next.

“It was quiet for a few hours,” Miles continues, picking up where I left off. “I think they realized they were down to the last few members of the Red Fog Pack.”

“And that’s when the Alpha and his inner circle showed up. They attacked us. It was a...bad fight.”

“A few of our members were shot, but they’ll live. The Red Fog Pack members and their friends weren’t so lucky,” Miles finishes.

“I’m glad everyone is safe now,” Dillon murmurs.

“Me, too,” I agree.

Dillon shivers as I nuzzle her neck, my lips moving over the bite mark.

The door opens again, and a doctor enters with our discharge paperwork. Dillon stands by my bedside as I sign the forms. Miles is busy doing the same. I grab my papers and Dillon’s hand, but Ryker enters before we can leave.

“Hey, man. Sorry, I lost you before I could give this back to you,” Ryker says as he hands me my phone.

“Thanks.”

“You must be Dillon,” he says, smiling at my mate.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Dillon says with a smile.

“I’ll let you two get out of here. Rest up, and let us know if you need anything,” Ryker tells Miles and me.

My wolf paws at me, and I squeeze Dillon’s hand as we head out. Miles and Mabel are right behind us as we make the short walk home.

I hesitate as I see Dillon studying my townhouse. “Do you want to see it?”

“Your house?”

“It’ll be our house if you move in with me.”

“You want me to?”

“Of course.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything,” I promise. “I love you, Dillon. I always will.”

“I love you, too.”

My wolf howls as I press my lips to hers. I smile as I pull back. “Come on. I’ll give you the grand tour.”

Then we’ll get her things and move her into our bedroom, my wolf says.

I grin in response.

As we step inside, I realize it finally feels like a home, not just a house. And that’s all because of my mate.

Dillon

Five Years Later...

I never thought I'd find peace.

If anyone had told eighteen-year-old me that I'd end up mated to a wolf shifter, raising babies in a safe town, and running a thriving art store with my best friend, I would've laughed in their face. Or cried. Or both. Because back then, that kind of life didn't feel possible. Not for me.

But here I am, five years after meeting my mate, wiping my paint-covered hands on my apron as the bell above the front door of Howl & Hue jingles and my daughter squeals from the back room.

"Mommy! Mommy, he's here!"

I glance toward the open studio space, my heart squeezing at her excitement. "He" is Jensen, no doubt stopping in to pick up the girls for lunch while Mabel and I finish inventory.

Sure enough, a second later, I hear his familiar footsteps—heavy and sure—and then his warm voice, deep with affection. "There's my little artist. Did you make something new for me?"

Our daughter, Eliza, barrels into him with a shriek of delight, throwing her arms around his legs. Jensen crouches to scoop her up, peppering her freckled cheeks with

kisses until she giggles.

“I painted you a dragon!” she tells him proudly, pointing to the drying rack near the window.

“You did?” He raises his brow. “Is it the fire-breathing kind? Or the kind that eats pancakes?”

Eliza bursts into laughter. “Both!”

I lean against the edge of the counter and soak them in—my mate and our four-year-old daughter. She has his dark hair and my green eyes, and she already bosses him around like a seasoned general. Not that he minds. Jensen adores her. He adores both of our girls.

“You’re early. Couldn’t wait to see us?” I tease, walking over to kiss his cheek.

He tugs me close for a proper one, sliding an arm around my waist. “Always. Finished my shift early. Harris took over the last hour. I wanted to see my girls and steal a few more minutes with my mate.”

“You’re smooth,” I murmur, smiling against his lips.

“I try.” He lowers his voice. “You should see what I have planned for tonight.”

“Gross,” Mabel calls from the storeroom. “I don’t want to hear about your matey shenanigans while I’m trying to count clay.”

Jensen chuckles as Eliza wiggles in his arms. “What about June? Is she ready?”

“She’s in the back room playing with Luke. Miles dropped him off this morning.” I pause. “Brace yourself. She found the glitter again.”

He winces. “That’s going to end up in my truck again, isn’t it?”

“Probably.”

Jensen heads for the kids’ area, and I turn back to the counter, where Mabel is emerging with a clipboard and a frustrated sigh.

“We’re low on watercolor pads and that weird biodegradable glitter,” she says, wrinkling her nose. “Why are we selling glitter that disintegrates when wet?”

“Because parents begged us to after Luke dumped regular glitter in the toilet, and it looked like a unicorn crime scene,” I remind her.

She snorts. “That’s right. Miles still swears there’s glitter in his tool bag.”

“There probably is.” I grin, glancing around the shop as I make a note on the restock list.

Howl & Hue is everything we dreamed of and more.

We teach art classes, host after-school programs, and sell supplies to locals and tourists.

The front of the store is filled with sunlight and color, with art hanging from every surface.

The back is our workshop and studio. And it’s right down the street from our houses.

When Mabel and I pitched the idea of converting the old bakery into an art store, the pack rallied around us.

Ryker offered the building for next to nothing, Griffin and the other members helped

us renovate it, and our mates...

Well, they insisted on doing all the heavy lifting. Not that we complained.

“Ready, squirt?” Jensen asks as he reemerges holding a paint-smeared toddler with my fiery red curls and his blue eyes. June clings to a purple dragon plushie and beams at me.

“Bye, Mama! Love you!”

“Love you, too, baby,” I call after her.

Mabel steps around the counter and kisses the top of Luke’s head. “Be good for Daddy.”

Jensen grins. “See you both later.”

“Can’t wait!” I shout as they head out.

He winks, then leans close to whisper, “I’ll have them back in two hours. Then you and I have a date in the woods.”

My breath catches. He’s been planning a surprise for our anniversary all week, and I have no idea what it is. I just know it involves a blanket, a picnic, and no tiny humans.

“Don’t be late,” I whisper.

He nods, then disappears out the front with the girls in his arms.

The door closes behind them, and the shop feels quieter. Calmer.

Mabel exhales next to me. “Is it weird that I still get butterflies when Miles comes to pick up Luke?”

“No,” I say softly. “It just means we picked the right mates.”

“How did we get so lucky?”

I think about our old lives—the broken homes, the fear, the nights we spent planning our escape from Idaho. We were two scared girls who wanted something better.

And we found it.

“It wasn’t luck,” I say. “We fought for this.”

Mabel bumps my shoulder. “Yeah, we did.”

We finish the rest of the inventory in peace, then head out the back. The girls' paintings cover the walls, and the smell of chocolate chip cookies lingers in the air from this morning’s baking disaster courtesy of Eliza, who insists she’s going to be “a baker-artist-superhero” when she grows up.

I check the clock. One hour until Jensen’s back.

I wander into our breakroom and head for the bathroom, changing into a flowy sundress and brushing the paint from my curls. I barely finish pinning the last curl when I hear the front door open and the unmistakable patter of little footsteps running amok.

Jensen appears a second later, his eyes raking over me as he leans against the doorframe.

“Damn,” he murmurs. “You’re trying to kill me.”

I smile and step into his arms. “You like it?”

“I love it. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

We leave the kids with Mabel and Miles and walk hand in hand into the woods, following a trail that leads to our spot—a little clearing near the creek.

Jensen spreads a blanket on the ground and pulls out the picnic he packed: sandwiches, fruit, wine, and two cupcakes from the bakery.

“You remembered,” I say, touched.

“Of course I did. It’s our anniversary.”

I sigh as I bite into the raspberry-filled cupcake. Five years mated. Five years of fighting and falling in love and building a life. I never thought I’d find this kind of forever, but with Jensen, forever doesn’t feel like enough.

We eat, talk, and laugh. Jensen stretches out, pulling me into his arms. We lie in the sunshine, warm and tangled together, and for a while, we don’t say anything.

Then he speaks.

“Do you remember the first time I held you like this?”

“In the hospital. I was still mad at you.”

He chuckles. “You were furious.”

“I didn’t trust anyone. Especially not a hot EMT with a wolf problem.”

“I’m still a hot EMT with a wolf problem.”

“You’re my problem,” I tease.

He grins, rolling so I’m underneath him. “I’d like to propose a solution.”

“Oh, yeah?” I arch a brow. “What kind of solution?”

“The kind that involves making another baby.”

My eyes widen. “You want a third?”

He kisses the corner of my mouth. “I want as many as you’ll give me.”

I bite my lip, heart thumping. The thought of expanding our family, of another little piece of Jensen and me running around the shop, makes my chest ache with happiness.

“Okay,” I whisper. “Let’s do it.”

We don’t make it back for a long time.