



Billionaire Wolf Needs a Fixer

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Description: He's the world's most notorious movie star. She's the crisis manager who refuses to be starstruck.

Levi Storm isn't just Hollywood's highest-paid actor. He's a grumpy alpha wolf used to controlling the narrative. But when a co-star's fatal overdose on his film set sparks a murder investigation, his golden-boy image crumbles overnight. The studio threatens to shelve his \$200M franchise, the paparazzi are howling for blood, and worst of all, someone is planting evidence to frame him.

Krista Fortune fixes things. Behind her sunshine smile, she wields words like knives and connections like a wrecking ball. Red carpets? Irrelevant. Reputations? Temporary. She steps in, cleans up, and disappears before the press can even snap a photo. But Levi's case stinks.

Krista's rules are simple. No personal entanglements. No werewolf drama. Definitely no falling for clients. But Levi's wolf recognizes her as his mate, and when an attempt on her life proves this goes far beyond showbiz, Krista's defenses crumble like a shoddy film set.

Now, with a killer in the shadows and Levi's wolf refusing to let her walk away, the game has changed. And this time, the stakes aren't just for reputations. It's for survival.

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Chapter 1

KRISTA

The Uber peeled away, leaving me alone at a wrought-iron gate that looked like it belonged in a medieval fortress, not a Hollywood hotshot's driveway. Sleek black security cameras swiveled in my direction as I tapped my foot on the pavement, listening to the distant crash of ocean waves against the cliffs below.

The air smelled like salt and money, crisp, expensive, with an undercurrent of something wilder. I shoved the thought away. First rule of crisis management was to never let the client's mythology get in your head.

My fingers twitched toward the folder in my bag. The file contained the latest headlines about my client.

STORM CLOUDS: ACTOR LINKED TO CO-STAR'S FATAL OVERDOSE

The gate unlatched with a click and swung open. I walked up the long driveway to the grand front entrance where a silver-haired housekeeper in a crisp black uniform greeted me.

Inside, the house was a museum of rich-boy gloom. The dark gleaming wood doors and banisters contrasted with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the ocean. Framed posters of Levi's blockbuster films glared down at me like disapproving gods.

"Mr. Storm is working," she warned, voice hushed. "He's volatile today."

I grinned. "I specialize in volatile."

Her lips pursed. "You're the fifth one this month."

"And the first who won't quit." I adjusted my bag, feigning nonchalance. "Where's the beast's lair?"

She led me down a corridor lined with all sorts of awards including Oscars and Golden Globes, all polished to a spiteful shine, before pausing outside a half-open door. Raised voices spilled out.

The housekeeper flinched. I didn't. I'd heard worse from politicians, from rock stars, from my own father after his third whiskey. Anger was just noise. The trick was listening to what lay beneath.

Inside, Levi Storm was mid-meltdown. "I didn't touch those pills, Portia!" A growl slithered under the words, primal enough to raise the fine hairs on my arms. "They were planted, and if the studio thinks dropping me will save their—" His agent's voice screeched through the phone, loud enough that even I could hear it. "Tell them I don't give a damn!" He threw the phone at the wall and the housekeeper scurried away like a startled rabbit. Typical. Everyone in this town treated Levi Storm like a god or a monster. Me? I'd built a career on handling the untouchables.

It bounced and skidded to a halt near my feet, his agent's tinny voice still shouting out of the cracked phone. I stepped over it. "Classy."

I took a deliberate sip of my coffee, scanning him. The tailored shirt stretched across his shoulders was rumpled, the sleeves shoved up to reveal forearms corded with muscle and a thin scar running from wrist to elbow. A real one, not a movie prop. My fingers twitched with the absurd urge to trace it. Down, girl. He's a client. A growly, entitled, unfairly gorgeous client, but still a client.

Levi whirled, his blue eyes flashing with something feral. He was textbook Hollywood alpha male with tousled dark hair, broad elegant shoulders, and a jawline so sharp it could've cut glass. Exactly like his tabloid photos, if the tabloids captured the way his presence vibrated in the air, a predator barely leashed. But up close, Levi Storm was something else entirely. His eyes weren't just striking, they were alive, flickering with a feral intensity that made my pulse flutter. Nope, not noticing that.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Krista Fortune. Your new crisis manager." I set my coffee down on his desk, right on top of a script titled Alpha Redemption. Ironic. "Nice throw. Would've been better if it hit me, pity press never hurts."

His lip curled. "Another PR puppet."

God, he was obnoxious. And yet the way he loomed over me, all restrained power and coiled aggression, sent a ridiculous thrill down my spine.

I leaned in, close enough to catch the scent of bourbon and something wilder. "And you're another spoiled celebrity who thinks tantrums fix scandals." I dropped my folder with a thud. "Here's your obituary. Want to rewrite it, or should I? Your Q-score dropped forty points since Selene Reyes died on your set. Studio stocks? Plummeting. That fantasy franchise you're carrying? It's on life support."

He didn't take the bait. Instead, he inhaled deeply, his nostrils flaring. He was scenting me, I realized. It should've repulsed me. So why did my stomach tighten with anticipation? Absolutely not. I didn't do clients, and I sure as hell didn't do entitled alpha wolves.

A low growl rumbled in his chest. "You smell like trouble."

I arched a brow. "And you smell like a man who's about to lose everything."

A low growl rumbled in his chest, deeper than human, the sound reverberating in my ribs like a struck drum. My skin prickled, hyperaware of the way his nostrils flared as he scented me. Jesus. Does he smell the heat blooming across my skin? Focus, Fortune. He's trying to intimidate you.

I crossed my arms. "Here's how this works. You follow my lead, I salvage what's left of your reputation. You fight me?" I shrugged. "Enjoy retirement."

A muscle in his jaw twitched. Then, so fast I barely registered the movement, his claws unsheathed just a fraction, but enough to glint in the light. A growl rumbled from his chest, the kind that sent sane people running. A challenge. A threat. Fine. Two could play that game.

My breath caught. Okay, that's new.

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Not the claws. I'd prepped for the whole werewolf thing. No, the problem was the way my body reacted. Blood rushed south filling me with a burst of desire as my skin pebbled under his gaze. It was like my body recognized him before my brain could protest.

I didn't flinch. "Cute party trick. You done?"

His claws retracted. For a heartbeat, his eyes flickered with surprise, then respect. He almost looked impressed, before his mask slammed back down. "Get out."

"Gladly." I turned, but not before snagging his abandoned phone. "Oh, and Levi?" I tossed over my shoulder. "Next time you're framed for murder? Try not leaving evidence lying around."

The screen lit up with a single unread text. My fingers curled around the cracked phone screen before Levi could stop me. The text was from an unsaved number, timestamped the night Selene died.

Unknown: The package is in place.

I raised my gaze to Levi's. His expression darkened, the gold flecks in his blue eyes sharpening. His grip on the desk tightened.

"Explain that," I said, voice low.

He moved so fast that I barely registered it. One second he was by the desk, the next crowding me against the wall. My breath caught in my throat, but I held my ground,

pressing the phone between us like a shield.

"Give.It.Back." Each word was a growl, reverberating through my ribs.

I shoved against his chest, but he didn't budge. Heat radiated off him, musk and salt and something that made my pulse stutter. Stupid. Dangerous. I forced my voice steady. "You can snarl all you want, Storm. But if you're innocent, you need me."

His claws retracted, but he didn't step back. The heat of him pressed against me, his breath ragged against my cheek. My traitorous body arched toward him, drawn to the danger in his gaze. Idiot. I shoved harder. "Back. Off."

The phone buzzed between us. His gaze flicked down, and for a heartbeat, I saw it, the raw fear and desperation beneath the fury. That, more than the text, chilled me to the bone.

Another text, same number:

Unknown: Media's asking about the gun. Keep your mouth shut.

Levi stilled. A muscle in his jaw jumped.

I exhaled slowly. "You're being framed."

He didn't deny it.

Ice slid through my veins.

My Uber ride back to my office was a blur of neon and headlights. Levi's phone burned a hole in my bag. The city's glow did little to soften the unease coiling in my gut. Someone had gone to great lengths to set him up, and if they were willing to kill

Selene, they wouldn't hesitate to silence anyone digging too deep.

I pressed my forehead to the cool glass, exhaling sharply. What the hell are you doing, Fortune?

This went beyond PR damage control. Texts about guns and media manipulation? Someone had framed Levi for murder. And instead of running, I'd stolen evidence like some movie heroine. My stomach churned. This wasn't just a job anymore. It was a minefield.

The driver's eyes flicked to mine in the rearview mirror. "You okay, miss?"

I straightened, schooling my face into professional calm. "Peachy."

Zane was already waiting when I pushed through the glass doors of Fortune PR, his usual chaos of monitors and snack wrappers a comforting contrast to the cold precision of Levi's world. Zane swiveled in his chair, a half-eaten donut dangling from his fingers. His glasses were smudged, and his hair looked like he'd lost a fight with a seagull. He took one look at my face and dropped the donut.

"That bad, huh?"

I tossed the phone onto his desk. "Worse. He's being framed for murder, apparently."

Zane's brows shot up. He wiped powdered sugar off his fingers and snatched the phone, scrolling through the messages. His smirk faded. "Oh. Oh, this is bad."

"Tell me something I don't know." I dropped into my chair, rubbing my temples. "Someone's setting him up, and they're not being subtle."

Zane whistled low. "You sure it's not him? Rich, powerful, primal wolf

predator.Classic villain material."

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I shot him a glare. "He's an ass, not an idiot. If he wanted someone dead, he wouldn't leave a trail that could be followed from space."

"Fair." Zane cracked his knuckles and pulled up a dozen screens on his monitors. "Alright, let's see who's playing puppet master." His fingers flew over the keyboard, pulling up industry databases, social media trails, and what looked like police reports.

I leaned over his shoulder. "Tell me you didn't hack the LAPD."

"Relax, I just borrowed a login." He flashed me a grin. "From a cop who really needs to change his password."

I groaned. "We're going to jail."

"Only if we get caught." He tapped the screen. "Look at this." He swung the screen in my direction. "Selene's overdose was all over the news, but the tox report hasn't been released yet. And Levi's name wasn't even in the initial police report. Someone added it later."

My stomach twisted. "So it's not just the media. Someone inside the investigation is manipulating this."

Zane's expression turned grim. "This isn't just a smear campaign, Kris. This is a takedown."

A chill skated down my spine. Levi wasn't just fighting a scandal. He was being

hunted.

And if we weren't careful, we'd end up in the crosshairs too.

Chapter 2

LEVI

I hadn't stopped pacing since last night. With each breath, my wolf clawed at my insides, a relentless reminder of the woman currently occupying my study. Her honey citrus scent clung stubbornly to the air, mingling with the leather and whiskey of my home. It shouldn't have been this distracting, but it was. She was marking my den as hers.

Mate, the beast insisted, like a hammer to my skull.

I ignored it. I'd spent decades locking my instincts in a cage, and this was no different. A Hollywood empire didn't get built by giving in to each primal urge. Krista Fortune was a crisis manager, not a miracle worker. The sooner she realized she couldn't fix this mess, the sooner she'd leave.

Garrett's boots thudded against the hardwood as he leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed. "Detectives are here. They're not leaving without you this time."

After ten years of being the head of my security, this was the first time I had seen Garrett this close to snapping at human law enforcement. I exhaled through my teeth, rolling my shoulders to ease the tension. The movement did nothing to loosen the knot between them. Nothing ever did. My legal team had been stalling for days, but cops with a warrant weren't a suggestion.

"Fine."

The interrogation room reeked of stale coffee and bad intentions. Detective Moreno, a wiry man with a permanent sneer, slapped a folder on the table between us hard enough to make my lawyer flinch. "Let's try this again, Mr. Storm. You and Selene Reyes had a fight the day she died. Multiple witnesses place you arguing on set."

I leaned back, letting the chair creak under my weight like a warning "We disagreed on a scene. That's called acting."

Moreno's pen tapped against his notepad. Tap. Tap. Tap. "Funny. Because according to her text messages, you were a controlling bastard who couldn't take no for an answer."

Alan, my lawyer, stiffened. "Those texts were taken out of context."

"And this?" Moreno flicked a photo toward me. It was a grainy still from security footage of my Range Rover outside Selene's apartment. The timestamp read 2:37 AM, three hours after I'd been alone in my own home, nursing a whiskey and staring at a script I couldn't focus on.

Ice ran down my spine. I'd never been there. That wasn't my car. The plates were one digit off.

"Explain this, then."

"That's clearly doctored," Alan retorted.

"Or maybe, your client's tired of pretending he's not a monster," Moreno snarled.

I smirked. "If I wanted someone dead, Detective, you'd need dental records to ID the body."

Moreno's grin flattened. Good. Let him wonder if it was a joke.

When I arrived home, I found Krista in the living room, pacing like a caged tiger in those ridiculous heels. Zane slumped on the sofa with his laptop balanced on his knees, typing with the frantic energy of a man who knew caffeine alone wouldn't save him.

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"Plant it on TMZ first, then bulldoze them with the shelter footage. Make them choke on his goddamn goodwill," Krista said with the decisiveness of a battle-tested General giving commands to her troops before marching into battle.

Something primal in my chest tightened. No one spoke for me like that. Not my agents, not my lawyers, no one. I wasn't a brand to salvage, but a person she was defending.

The realization sucked the air from my lungs.

She whirled at the sound of my footsteps, her assessing gaze scraping over me like a physical touch. Not pitying. Not afraid, but calculating. Like I was a puzzle she was determined to solve.

My wolf purred, desperate for her approval. Mine.

Krista tossed her hair over one shoulder, unimpressed. "Nice of you to join us, Storm. Sit down. We're salvaging what's left of your career."

Zane snorted, fingers still flying over his keyboard. "Also known as we're doing your homework while you brooded."

I crossed my arms, the weight of the day pressing down on me. "I was being interrogated, not sulking."

Krista's lips twitched. "Same difference."

I was torn between irritation and fascination.No one talked to me like that.And yet, the way she stood there, all five-foot-nothing of her, with her arms crossed and chin tilted up in challenge.It ignited my veins with heat.

Zane's phone buzzed.He frowned at the screen."Uh-oh.Troy Mercer's lurking outside the gate again.That guy's persistent for a bottom-feeder.Like a cockroach."

I growled at the name.Mercer had been circling like a vulture since Selene's death.He was slimy even by paparazzi standards.

Krista grabbed her bag with a sigh."I'll handle him.Distraction's the best defense."

"Like hell," I muttered.

With Garrett right behind her, I followed, making sure no one saw me shadowing her towards the gates.

"You're kidding, right?"Troy's greasy voice carried across the driveway as Krista stepped outside."Fortune PR slumming it with criminals now?Guess business must be slow."

Krista smiled, saccharine sweet."Aww, Troy.You brought your big-boy camera today.Does that mean you're finally taking your career seriously?"

Troy's smirk faltered.Then his hand shot out, closing around her wrist like a shackle."Listen here, you mouthy little—"

I exploded.My vision turned red with rage as fury surged through me.My claws dug into my palms.Blood roared in my ears as the need to destroy this little rat surged through my muscles.A growl ripped from my throat.

Troy froze, his grip slackening as fear flashed across his face.

Krista didn't even flinch. She just arched a brow and flipped her hair, snapping a picture of Troy with her phone. "Oh, this is gold. I'm going to make you internet famous, Troy. Desperate paparazzo harasses innocent bystander. What do you think, should I tweet it now, or wait until your editor sees it?"

Troy's smirk faltered.

The anger in my gut eased. She wasn't afraid. She was handling it with the ruthless efficiency of a skilled hunter.

Zane jogged up beside me, grinning. "Damn. She's terrifying."

I grunted, watching as Troy slunk back to his car. The wolf settled, but the possessive urge lingered. Just the idea of that greasy bastard even looking at Krista made my skin itch with the need to mark her, to claim her, and to destroy anyone who dared harm her.

Krista turned back toward the house, freezing when she spotted me. Her eyes narrowed. "Were you watching me?"

I shrugged, forcing nonchalance into my voice. "You're on my payroll. I was assessing the investment."

"Uh-huh." She folded her arms, tapping her foot. "Well? How'd I do?"

The corner of my mouth twitched despite myself. "Not terrible."

She rolled her eyes. "High praise, your majesty."

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Zane piped up, waving his phone. "Speaking of investments, Krista, please tell me you're not actually taking Ubers everywhere. Because that's a security nightmare."

Krista scoffed. "I don't need a chauffeur, Zane. It's just until my car is fixed."

I bristled. "You do now."

She blinked. "Excuse me?"

I stepped closer, looming over her until my shadow swallowed hers. "If you're going to dig into this mess, you're doing it from an armored car with my people. No exceptions."

Krista opened her mouth to argue, no doubt, but Garrett cut in. "He's right. Dante isn't playing around. Neither should we."

She glanced between the three of us, her stubbornness warring with logic. Finally, she sighed. "Fine. But no fancy snacks or drivers calling me ma'am. If I see one monogrammed pillow with my initials in there, I'm setting it on fire."

Zane choked on a laugh. Even Garrett's mouth twitched.

I should've been annoyed. Instead, my lips lifted into a smile against my will.

Then my phone buzzed with an incoming text. The name on my screen made me pause. Dean Nightfang, my oldest and arguably only real friend. He and I had known each other since boarding school, when his reclusive nature and my rebellious streak

had made us social pariahs. Now, he lived behind layers of encryption and killer security, hacking into places no one else could reach. Dean was antisocial to the max and didn't do favors for anyone. If he was texting me, it meant he'd found something.

Dean: FOOTAGE LEAKED. DANTE'S MOVING.

And if Dante Grimshaw was involved, it wasn't a coincidence. He was my father's half-brother, a bitter and power-hungry bastard who despised me not only because I refused to merge my production company with his dying studio, but because I was a shifter and he wasn't. Dante never wanted family, only control. It would be just like him to leak doctored footage to the press.

Krista's pulled out her own phone, her sharp gasp cutting through the night air. "Oh, hell. TMZ's running raw footage of you screaming at Selene the day she died." She sucked in a breath. "It looks bad, Levi."

Zane groaned. "That's not just leaked, it's edited. Look at the time stamps, they cut all her lines out to make it seem like you're monologuing like a psycho."

Rage burned through me, righteous and molten. Of course Dante had his claws in this. He had been waiting for this moment since I refused to bow to him and built an empire without his name, his money, or his tainted legacy.

Krista was already typing furiously, firing off messages. "Give me twenty minutes. I can bury this under the animal shelter campaign if we get in front of it now."

Zane was pulling up analytics. "Better make it ten. It's gaining traction in the conspiracy and gossip forums."

I watched her. The way her brow furrowed in concentration, the way her teeth worried her lower lip, the way her fingers moved with lethal precision. Most people crumbled

under pressure.Lawyers panicked.Agents groveled.Even Garrett defaulted to brute force.She barked orders at Zane while somehow managing to shoot me a look that said, Don't just stand there, help.

That's when it hit me.

She wasn't just good at this.

She was brilliant.

The realization hit like a sucker punch.

This woman would set the world on fire before she'd let it bury me.And I'd never wanted anything more.Against all reason, for the first time in years, I trusted someone.

Chapter 3

KRISTA

The glow of my laptop screen was the only light in the room, painting it in eerie blue.Zane and I had set up our makeshift office in one of the guest suites in Levi's mansion.Since Levi was our biggest and only client at the moment, this was going to be HQ for OPERATION FUR AND FURY, which was how Zane and I affectionately referred to our task of salvaging Levi's career.It was easier than having his driver chauffeur us back and forth from my office to the mansion.And this way, we would be ready to pounce on any crisis that popped up.Or at least, that's what I told myself.

A knot twisted in my stomach.Zane had crashed hours ago, sprawled across the couch with a half-empty bag of flaming hot chips on his stomach, his snores punctuated the

silence of the night. In the distance, the crash of waves against the cliffs below the mansion was the only reminder that the world outside still existed.

The files Dean had hacked from Selene's cloud account glared back at me. I scanned the list of medical records, flagged emails, and a string of texts to a contact labeled only as D. My fingers hovered over the keyboard, the weight of what I was reading weighing on me.

This wasn't an overdose. This was staged.

I zoomed in on Selene's prescription history which listed anti-anxiety meds, nothing lethal. But then, tucked away in a subfolder like a dirty secret, there was a scanned document with Dante's production company logo. A "consultation" receipt from a private clinic.

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Bingo.

The door creaked open without warning. Garrett loomed in the doorway, his massive frame swallowing the light from the hallway. His arms were crossed and his serious expression might as well have been carved from granite. "You're supposed to be asleep."

I didn't dignify that with eye contact. "And you're supposed to knock." My voice was sugar-laced acid. Try harder, tough guy.

He stepped inside. "Levi doesn't like people digging into his business."

A laugh escaped me, sharp and humorless. "Good thing I'm not people." I spun the laptop toward him. "Selene was clean. Dante had her doped up and scared. This wasn't an overdose. It was a hit."

Garrett's jaw flexed, his gaze flicking over the screen. For a man built like a human tank, he moved with unnatural precision. Like a predator who'd learned to be silent. "You don't know what you're messing with."

I leaned back in my chair, arching a brow. "Enlighten me."

He lowered his voice. "Dante doesn't just own studios. He owns cops, judges." A muscle twitched in his temple. "People disappear."

I snorted. "And yet here you are, helping me."

Garrett's glare could've melted steel. Then, abruptly, he exhaled through his nose, making a sound somewhere between frustration and reluctant respect, and pulled out his phone. "You want a war? Fine. But we do it smart." He tapped the screen and thrust it at me.

A photo filled the display of Levi crouched in the grass and scratching the ears of a scruffy terrier with three legs.

I blinked. What the hell?

"Levi's got a shelter downtown," Garrett said grudgingly. "Strays, mostly. No press. No tax breaks. Just him and a couple of volunteers."

My throat tightened unexpectedly. The image didn't compute. I barked out a laugh. "Bullshit."

Garrett's harsh expression softened just a fraction as he glanced toward the darkened hallway where Levi's study lay. "Every full moon."

A full moon? When his wolf is closest to the surface? The realization hit me like a gut punch. Levi, the untouchable alpha was seeking solace in helpless creatures just as broken as he was.

I swallowed against the sudden lump in my throat. "You're telling me Levi Storm cries over abandoned huskies?"

Garrett didn't blink. "First time I ever saw him break."

I couldn't believe it. Levi Storm, Hollywood's resident temperamental bad boy, crying over rescue dogs? Of course, the bastard had a bleeding heart. It explained why his words were so sharp. He didn't have a temper because he was an asshole. He was

protecting himself.

Silence stretched between us, heavy with the weight of something I wasn't ready to name. I exhaled. "Fine. I'll use it. Humanize him." I met Garrett's gaze. "While you what?"

His hand drifted to the holster under his jacket. "Pay a visit to Selene's old dealer."

He turned to leave, but I couldn't let him go without asking. "Why?" The word came out softer than I meant it to. "You don't even like me."

Garrett paused at the door. "Levi trusts you."

The door clicked shut behind him, leaving me alone with the hum of the laptop and the weight of what we'd just agreed to. I rubbed my temples, exhaustion gnawing at the edges of my focus, but sleep wouldn't come, not with Selene's ghost still whispering in my ear.

The night bled into dawn without mercy, my thoughts chasing each other in circles. When I opened my eyes, the clock displayed 5:47 AM, the bright numbers swimming in my vision. I blinked at the first glimpses of daylight stabbing through the curtains like a taunt. My muscles were stiff from hunching over my computer all night, and it took all of my energy to drag myself upright in search of my morning dose of caffeine. I pulled on a wrinkled pair of jeans and an old sweatshirt. After my sleepless night, I was too tired to care that I looked like I was dragged out of a gutter. The rich, bitter, and tempting scent of freshly brewed coffee lured me downstairs.

I stopped short in the kitchen doorway. Levi stood at the counter, shirtless, muscles flexing as he poured a cup. Sunlight glinted off the hard planes of his chest, the black ink swirling in intricate patterns along his ribs. Above his hipbone, there was a jagged

white scar that stood out against the rest of his skin.

My pulse kicked.Focus, Fortune.

He didn't look at me."Black.No sugar."

I froze.He remembered how I liked my coffee.Since I never told him, he must have observed me enough during our meetings to learn how I made it every time.The realization sent a rush of heat pooling in my stomach.

I snatched the mug, our fingers brushing.A spark shot up my arm, and I jerked back.Coffee sloshed onto my wrist.Levi's gaze snapped to the spill, his nostrils flaring like he wanted to lick it off.

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His breath hitched just a fraction, but I caught it. My pulse hammered against my ribs like it wanted to jump out of my chest. He clenched his jaw, making the muscle there jump under his stubble.

Jesus. I needed sleep.

I wiped my hand on my jeans, willing my voice steady. "Distracted."

His mouth twitched. "By what?"

By you. By the way your stupid eyes seem to glow. By the fact that beneath all that growling bravado, you had a soft spot for injured animals that couldn't speak for themselves.

I shrugged, aiming for casual and missing by a mile. "Sleep deprivation."

Levi leaned in, just enough that his scent, leather, spearmint toothpaste, and fresh coffee, wrapped around me. "Liar." The word was a growl and a whisper. I swallowed. He knew. Of course he knew. His nostrils flared, catching the change in my scent, and satisfaction flickered in his eyes. Bastard.

Zane's voice shattered the moment.

He barreled in, saving me from making a fool of myself. Levi didn't just step back, he recoiled like he'd been burned, his shoulders rigid. His fingers flexed at his sides. A flicker of something raw crossed his face before he locked it down. Annoyance? Hunger? I couldn't tell, and that unnerved me more than the way

my skin still tingled where he'd almost touched me.

"Krista, you genius! We're viral, baby!" Zane shoved his phone in my face. The screen played a video of Levi crouching in grass as a terrier licked his scruffy jaw.

Levi's grip whitened around his mug. "What the hell is that?"

I sipped my coffee, smirking. "Your redemption."

Levi's silence was as loud as a roaring storm, his chest rising and falling too fast. I could see the pulse hammering in his throat. When he finally spoke, his voice was gravel. "You used that?"

"It worked," I shot back, but my traitorous body swayed toward him, drawn like a magnet. His gaze dropped to my lips. For one reckless second, I thought he might close the distance between us. Then his phone buzzed, against the counter. Dean's name flashed on the screen.

Levi swiped at the phone and opened the message from his friend. The audio file played with a hiss of static before Selene's quivering, raw voice cut through.

"Levi, they're making me—"

Selene's voice died mid-plea. The silence afterward was worse. My eyes snapped up to Levi. His chest rose once, twice, too measured for a man seconds from snapping.

I hit play again.

Selene's voice echoed between us. Levi's pupils dilated, the mug in his grip exploded, porcelain shards raining to the floor. Coffee splattered like blood across the floor tiles. Porcelain shards skittered across the floor, one grazing my ankle. I didn't

move.Neither did he.

My fingers itched to reach for him.To soothe.But that was a line neither of us could cross."Dante's going to pay for this," I said, my voice steady.

Levi's exhale was a snarl."Not if I kill him first."

Chapter 4

LEVI

I barely registered the French doors slamming open as I stormed onto the terrace, the ocean wind whipping through my hair.Krista was right behind me, her bare feet slapping against the stone.

"You don't get to walk away from this!"she snapped.

I whirled on her."You think I want to hear her voice like that?"I let out a chest rumbling snarl."They killed her, Krista.And now they're coming for me."

Selene's terrified voice still echoed in my skull.It would haunt me forever.

A hand closed around my bicep.Small but unrelenting.Krista.She stepped into my space, undeterred by my growl."Then fight smarter.Not harder."

I spun on her, the growl in my chest building to a roar."Back.Off."Grabbing her wrist just firmly enough to make her listen, I towered over her and stared her down."You don't know what Dante's capable of."

Her pulse jumped under my fingers, but she didn't pull away.Just tilted her chin up, eyes blazing."And you don't know what I'm capable of."She poked at my chest with

each word."We're in this together, you stubborn ass."

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My breath came in sharp, ragged bursts. The wolf wanted to lash out. To tear something apart. But Krista stood her ground. "You don't understand what I am," I snarled.

She stepped closer, forcing me back with sheer will. "I don't care. But I won't let you turn into the monster they're painting you as."

A flicker of movement in the trees beyond the property line caught my eye. A glint of glass. A telephoto lens.

Shit.

I dropped her arm like she'd burned me, but it was too late. The damage was done.

Krista followed my gaze, her breath hitching. "Oh, you've got to be kidding me."

I grabbed Krista's hand and pulled her back to the kitchen. Garret materialized as soon as we stepped inside. "Boss. Security feed showed Troy Mercer skulking near the east gate. He's gone, but it's only a matter of time before he spins something for the tabloids."

The next morning, the photo was everywhere. It was doctored, but convincing and it showed me gripping Krista's forearm, my face twisted in what looked like rage. TMZ's latest headline glared back at me from my phone: STORM'S NEW VICTIM? Leaked Photo Shows Levi Grabbing PR Rep in Violent Altercation. Never mind that she'd been the one pushing me. Never mind that her fingers had curled into my shirt right after.

The world only saw what it wanted to see.

The phone cracked in my fist.

Krista snatched her phone from her back pocket. "Zane's already on it. The shelter footage is buying us goodwill, but we need to bury this before it spreads." She exhaled sharply through her nose. "Okay. New plan. We lean into the shelter angle hard. Show them the Levi the strays know."

The shelter reeked of antiseptic and wet dogs. Volunteers shuffled around us, throwing wary glances our way until Krista charmed them with a smile and a clipboard like she owned the place.

Then I saw him, a one-eyed Chihuahua mix named Sunny, who'd arrived last week after being dumped on the freeway. The little demon took one look at me, sniffed, and launched himself at my knees.

Krista went preternaturally still beside me as I crouched to scratch behind his torn ear.

"Yeah, yeah," I muttered as Sunny licked my knuckles. "You're a menace."

When I glanced up, Krista's lips were parted, her expression caught somewhere between shock and awe. She swallowed. "Huh."

The shelter's fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, casting harsh shadows across the rows of kennels. Sunny wriggled in my arms, his stubby tail vibrating like a hummingbird's wings as I scratched under his chin. His one good eye rolled back in bliss, tongue lolling.

Krista pulled out her phone and aimed the camera at me.

I shot her a glare. "You're enjoying this."

She smirked, adjusting the angle. "Immensely."

I sighed and set Sunny down, but he immediately flopped onto his back, paws in the air, demanding belly rubs. Traitor.

One of the volunteers, a college kid with a nose ring, nudged a carrier toward me. "Mr. Storm, we just got this little guy in last night. Found him in a storm drain. He's skittish."

Inside, a scrawny black kitten hunched in the corner, fur puffed up like a Halloween decoration. His yellow eyes tracked every movement, pupils blown wide with fear.

Krista crouched beside me, her shoulder brushing mine. "Think you can work your magic on this one, wolf boy?"

I ignored the jab and reached in slowly, letting the kitten sniff my fingers. His tiny nose twitched. Then, with a hiss that sounded more pathetic than threatening, he swiped at me.

Krista snorted. "Oh, you've got the same personality."

I shot her a look. "Quiet. You're scaring him."

She rolled her eyes but kept her phone trained on the kitten and me.

I kept my movements slow and deliberate, letting the kitten get comfortable and make the choice to come to me. After a tense minute, the kitten's ears twitched forward. Another minute, and he leaned in, sniffing again. Then, with the grace of a creature who'd decided I wasn't a threat, or at least, not worth the energy to fight, he

butted his head against my knuckles.

Krista's breath hitched. "Levi," she whispered in amazement.

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I didn't look at her. Didn't trust what my face might be doing. Instead, I scooped the kitten into my palm, cradling him against my chest. His tiny claws pricked my skin through my shirt, but he didn't bolt. Just curled into a tight, trembling ball, his purr a tiny rumble against my ribs.

Krista's fingers brushed my elbow. "You're good at this."

I grunted. "It's not hard. They just need to know you're not going to hurt them."

She was quiet for a beat. Then, softer: "Yeah. I get that."

When I finally glanced up, her phone was lowered, her gaze fixed on me with an intensity that made my heart beat like a drum and my stomach flipflop. From the chaos of the shelter from the barking dogs, to the chatter of volunteers, to the squeak of sneakers on linoleum, it all faded into the background until it was just her and me and this moment.

Then Sunny barreled into my shin, yipping excitedly and demanding attention.

Krista cleared her throat, lifting her phone again. "Okay, big guy. One more shot of you looking like a Disney prince, and then we'll call it a day."

I scowled.

She snapped the photo anyway, grinning. "Perfect."

The kitten in my hands kneaded his paws against my thumb, purring louder.

Something in my chest unclenched.

The kitten purred against my chest, his tiny body a warm, trusting weight. For a moment, the world felt quiet and simple. Nothing could ruin the rare peace of holding something so small and fragile that wasn't afraid of me.

Then my phone buzzed.

Krista gave me that knowing look. "Trouble?"

I ignored the message until the phone vibrated again. When I finally checked, Garrett's text burned into my vision.

Garrett: Dean found more evidence.

Garrett: Dante paid Selene's dealer to spike her drinks. Call me ASAP.

The kitten squirmed in my grip as my hands shook. Krista's smile vanished.

"Levi?"

That bastard had her killed and then framed me for it.

Before I could answer her, her own phone rang. Zane's panicked voice blared through. "We've got a problem. Dante's lawyers just filed a restraining order claiming Levi threatened him after Selene's death. The media's eating it up."

That night, I found Krista hunched over her laptop in the library, curls piled in a messy bun. The firelight painted her skin gold, and for a reckless second, I let myself stare.

She turned, her eyes soft and heavy with exhaustion. "You should sleep."

I hesitated. "You didn't have to stay."

"Of course I did." Her smile was tired but real. "Someone's gotta keep you from burning the world down."

Something in my chest twisted. "Krista." Her name tasted too raw. "Thank you."

She stilled.

I reached out without thinking, tucking a loose lock of hair behind her ear. Her breath stuttered. My thumb grazed her cheekbone, and I savored the feeling of her soft skin.

Then my phone rang. It was Alan, my lawyer. Reality slammed back in.

I jerked away. "I have to take this."

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Krista's face shuttered. "Right. Work always comes first."

Before I could say another word, she turned back to her computer. As I quietly closed the door behind me, it felt like a brick wall standing between us.

Chapter 5

KRISTA

The driver pulled up to my apartment building and stopped the car. I hadn't been home in days, and my duffel bag was running on fumes. All I had left to wear was a pair of yoga pants and a T-shirt that smelled faintly of Levi's cologne. I didn't have time to dwell on that particular detail. I needed clean clothes, a fresh notebook, and a moment to breathe without his brooding presence filling the room.

The key turned in the lock with a soft click, and I pushed the door open. The sight that greeted me stopped me cold.

My apartment had been ransacked.

The couch was overturned, cushions slashed to ribbons. My bookshelf had been toppled, its contents scattered across the floor like confetti. My desk was a war zone. Drawers hung open, papers were strewn everywhere, and my computer workstation was gone.

"Oh, hell no," I muttered, stepping gingerly over the wreckage.

My first thought was Levi. Had he sent someone to search my place? But no, even he wasn't that much of a control freak. A pang of guilt hit me for even thinking he was behind this. This was something else. Someone else.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. It was Zane. "Krista? Where are you? You were supposed to be back an hour ago."

"Change of plans," I said, crouching to examine the mess. "My apartment got broken into. They took everything, my laptop, my files, even my damn toothbrush."

"What?!" Zane's voice shot up an octave. "Are you okay? Did you call the cops?"

"I'm fine," I lied, my stomach churning. "But this wasn't a random break-in. They were looking for something."

"Levi's case," Zane said grimly. "They're coming after you, Kris."

I swallowed hard, my fingers curling into fists. "Looks like it."

"You need to get out of there. Now."

"I'm not backing down," I said, my voice sharper than I intended. "This just proves we're on the right track. Whoever did this is scared."

"Scared people are dangerous people," Zane shot back. "You're not invincible, Kris."

"I'll be fine," I said, cutting him off. "I always am."

The line went silent for a moment before Zane sighed. "Be careful."

"Always."

I stuffed clean clothes, toiletries, and the photo of me and Mom that I kept on my nightstand into my bag and headed for the door. My hands were steady, but my heart was pounding. Whoever had done this had sent a clear message. They were watching me.

By the time I got back to Levi's mansion, the sun was fully up, casting a golden glow over the sprawling estate. I parked my car and headed inside, my boots clicking against the marble floor. The house was quiet, save for the faint hum of the air conditioner. Levi was nowhere to be seen.

I made my way to the kitchen. The scent of coffee filled the air, and I followed it like a homing beacon. Levi stood by the stove, shirtless, muscles rippling under the morning light as he flipped pancakes. My breath caught in my throat.

"Morning," I said, my voice steady despite the chaos in my head.

He glanced over his shoulder, his blue eyes narrowing. "Where have you been?"

"My apartment," I said, leaning against the counter. "Someone broke in. They trashed the place."

Levi froze, the spatula hovering mid-air. "What?"

"Yeah. They took my computer, my files. Everything."

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His jaw tightened, tension rolling off him in waves. "You're staying here. Permanently."

I rolled my eyes. "Levi, I don't need a babysitter."

"This isn't about babysitting," he snapped, slamming the spatula onto the counter. "They're targeting you. This is my mess, and I'm not letting anyone else get hurt because of it."

I crossed my arms, meeting his glare with one of my own. "First of all, it's not just your mess anymore. I'm in this. Second, I don't need you ordering me around. I've been handling crises long before I met you, and I'll handle this one too."

Levi stepped closer, his towering frame blocking the light from the window. "You don't get it. These people don't just play dirty. And if they think you're a threat, they won't hesitate to come after you."

I held my ground, even as my pulse quickened. "I'm not afraid of them."

His eyes flickered with something I couldn't quite place. "You should be."

We stood there for a moment, the air crackling with tension. Then Levi exhaled sharply, running a hand through his hair. "Fine. But you're not leaving this house without Garrett."

I opened my mouth to argue, but he cut me off. "That's not negotiable."

I scowled, but deep down, I knew he was right. I might be stubborn, but I wasn't stupid. Still, I couldn't let him think he'd won. "If Garrett starts calling me ma'am, I'm out."

Levi's lips twitched, the ghost of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Deal."

Before I could respond, the sound of footsteps interrupted us. I tensed, glancing toward the hallway. Levi's instincts had kicked in, too. He moved in front of me, his body shielding mine, as Garrett appeared in the doorway.

"Boss," Garrett said, his expression serious. "Someone's been here."

Levi's eyes narrowed. "Who?"

Garrett shook his head. "Don't know. The security cameras caught a figure driving to the front of the house, but they were wearing a hood. They threw something through the gates and sped off before we could intercept."

Levi cursed under his breath, and I stepped around him, my curiosity piqued. "What did they leave?"

Garrett held up a manila envelope. "This." He handed the folder over to me and then left to continue searching for clues about our mysterious visitor.

I turned the envelope over in my hands. It was unmarked, with no labels or identifying features. My stomach churned. This couldn't be a coincidence.

"Let's see what's inside," Levi said, his voice low.

I opened it, my fingers trembling as I did so, and pulled out the stack of papers inside.

It was Selene's autopsy report. I skimmed the document, my stomach dropping as I realized what I was looking at. "This isn't right."

Levi leaned over my shoulder, his breath warm against my cheek. "What?"

I pointed to the toxicology results. "She wasn't on drugs, Levi. She was poisoned."

His body went rigid beside me. "What?"

I turned to face him, my heart pounding. "Whoever killed her wanted it to look like an overdose, but they botched it. The poison didn't metabolize the way drugs would. It's all here. They planted the drugs to frame you, but this is the real cause of death."

Levi's jaw clenched, his hands curling into fists. "Dante."

"If we can connect the poisoning to him, then you'll be a free man."

He stared at the report, his expression unreadable. Then, slowly, he turned and strode to the window, his shoulders tense. "This is my fault."

I could hear the guilt in his words, raw and aching. It wasn't just Selene's death weighing on him. It was the idea that he'd brought this into her life, into mine.

"If I hadn't pushed back against Dante—" He cut himself off, his voice thick with guilt. "She didn't deserve this."

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I crossed the room, standing beside him. "Levi, this isn't your fault. Dante did this. He's the monster, not you."

He turned to face me, his eyes dark and stormy. "I won't let him hurt anyone else. Not you. Not anyone."

For a moment, we just stood there, the weight of everything hanging between us. Then Levi reached out, his hand brushing against mine. The contact sent a jolt through me, and I looked up to find his gaze locked on mine.

"Krista," he said, his voice low and rough. "I can't lose you."

My breath caught in my throat. "You won't."

He didn't say anything else. He didn't need to. The look in his eyes said it all. There was fear, determination, and something else.

"We're in over our heads, aren't we?"

He didn't answer right away. When he squeezed my hand, it wasn't just a gesture of comfort. It was a promise, one I wasn't sure I was ready to accept. "Maybe. But we'll figure it out together."

But as much as I wanted to believe him, I couldn't shake the nagging doubt in the back of my mind. Levi was used to fighting his battles alone, and I wasn't sure if he knew how to let someone else in. And honestly, I wasn't sure if I knew how to let someone else in either.

The report sat on the counter between us, a silent reminder of everything we stood to lose. Selene's face flashed in my mind, her death was no longer just a headline but a warning. Dante was coming, and I could feel the noose tightening. I didn't know if I was ready for what came next. All I knew was that backing down wasn't an option. Not for me, and not for Levi.

Levi's voice pulled me out of my thoughts. "We'll figure this out."

I nodded, forcing a smile.

But as I looked at him, the weight of his hand still lingering in mine, I couldn't shake the doubt creeping in. Levi's world was a storm I hadn't asked to step into, and I wasn't sure I could weather it. How long before the danger caught up to us? How long before one of us got hurt, or worse?

Chapter 6

LEVI

The red carpet stretched endlessly before us, a sea of flashing cameras and shouting reporters. Krista's hand rested lightly on my arm, her fingers warm against my skin. She was a vision in a sapphire gown that hugged her curves, her hair piled atop her head with a few loose strands framing her face. Her confidence radiated like a beacon, her smile effortless as she posed for the cameras.

"Just play along," she murmured, her lips barely moving.

I forced a smile, my jaw tight. "I hate these things."

Her laugh was soft, and if not for my enhanced sense of hearing, the clamor around us would have drowned it out. "You're a movie star, Levi. This is your life."

"My life is a circus," I muttered.

She squeezed my arm gently. "Then let's give them a show."

The cameras clicked furiously as we walked, her presence calming the storm inside me. I struggled to hold back a possessive growl as the reporters and paparazzi called her name and shoved their cameras in her direction. Krista was here to help me clear my name. I couldn't fuck it up by acting like a beast and ruining all the hard work she had done. But she was so convincing at her job. By the time we made it to the end of the red carpet and as her scent enveloped me, I had to remind myself that this was just an act.

We were steps from stepping inside away from the press zoo when a reporter shoved a microphone in my face. "Levi, how do you respond to the allegations against you? Do you have any comment on Selene Reyes's death?"

I cut him off with a glare, ready to wrap my claws around his neck. Krista stepped in smoothly, her smile never wavering. "Levi and I are here tonight to celebrate the incredible work of the filmmakers nominated this year. We'd appreciate it if we could keep the focus on the art, not the rumors."

The reporter blinked, thrown off by her poise. Krista gave me a subtle nudge, and I managed a tight smile. "What she said."

We moved on before anybody else could accost us. Her grip tightened on my arm. "Good save," she said under her breath.

"You're better at this than I am," I admitted.

She chuckled. "That's why they pay me the big bucks."

We entered the auditorium, the hum of conversation between the guests already filling the air. The awards ceremony dragged on, each presenter and speech a blur. I barely noticed who won what, too focused on the woman beside me. Krista's leg brushed against mine, the warmth of her skin melting into my side. It may have been wishful thinking on my part, but I caught her glancing at me more than once.

"What?" I asked finally, leaning closer.

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She hesitated, her eyes scanning the room. "Do you feel that?"

I frowned. "Feel what?"

She shook her head. "Never mind. Probably just my imagination."

Her unease set me on edge. My wolf stirred, sensing something I couldn't see. "Stay close," I said quietly.

She nodded, her fingers tightening around my arm.

The ceremony ended, and we made our way to the after-party. The room was packed, the air heady with perfume, cologne, and the scent of champagne. Krista was immediately swept into conversation with a group of actors and studio executives, her laugh ringing out above the noise. I watched her from across the room, a glass of whiskey in my hand.

"Levi."

I turned to find Dante Grimshaw standing beside me, his smile cold and calculating. "Fancy seeing you here. I didn't think you had it in you to show your face in public."

"Dante," I said evenly. "Still stealing other people's ideas?"

His chuckle was low, humorless. "Always so charming. Tell me, how's the investigation going?"

My grip tightened on the glass. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

He leaned in, his voice dropping to a whisper. "Be careful, Levi. You're playing in dangerous waters."

"And you're drowning," I shot back.

His smile didn't falter, but his eyes darkened. "We'll see."

He moved away, disappearing into the crowd. My wolf snarled, wanting to chase him down and rip his throat out. But I stayed where I was, my gaze finding Krista again. She was watching me, her brow furrowed.

The night wore on, the tension between us palpable. Finally, Krista excused herself, and I followed her onto the balcony. The cool night air was a relief, the noise of the party muted.

"You okay?" she asked, leaning against the railing.

I joined her, the city lights stretching out before us. "Just thinking."

She looked at me, her eyes soft. "About what?"

"Everything." I hesitated, then added, "You."

Her breath hitched, but she didn't look away. "Levi..."

I reached out, brushing a strand of hair from her face. Her skin was warm beneath my fingertips, and I couldn't stop myself from leaning closer. Her scent, her warmth, her presence, it was intoxicating.

"Krista," I murmured.

Her lips parted, her breath catching as her eyes flickered to mine. For a moment, the world narrowed to just her and me. My wolf growled low, urging me to claim her, to make her mine. But I held back, my fingers trembling as they traced the curve of her cheek.

"Levi," she whispered, her voice barely audible over the hum of the city below. "What are we doing?"

I didn't have an answer. Not one that made sense. All I knew was that being close to her felt right in a way nothing else ever had. But this wasn't the time or the place. I forced myself to pull back, my hand dropping to my side.

"We're playing a part," I said, my voice steady despite the storm inside me. "That's all."

Her eyes searched mine, and for a second, I thought I saw something like disappointment flash across her face. But it was gone as quickly as it appeared, replaced by her usual mask of confidence. "Right. Of course."

She straightened, brushing an invisible wrinkle from her gown. "We should get back inside. People will talk if we're out here too long."

I nodded, though every fiber of my being screamed to stay. To keep her close. To protect her. But Krista wasn't someone who needed protecting. She was a force in her own right, and I knew better than to underestimate her. Still, the thought of letting her walk back into that viper's nest made my chest tighten.

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"Krista," I said, stopping her before she could open the door. She turned, her eyebrow raised in question. "Be careful."

She gave me a small, knowing smile. "Always am."

We returned to the party, slipping back into our roles effortlessly. The night dragged on, the clinking of glasses and hum of conversation a constant backdrop. I kept one eye on Krista, even as I engaged in meaningless small talk with industry insiders. She was in her element, effortlessly charming those who approached her, her laugh ringing out like music over the noise.

But I couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. My instincts kept screaming that danger was near and throughout the rest of the party, I scanned the room, my gaze always landing on Dante. He was deep in conversation with a group of executives, but his eyes flicked toward Krista more than once. A low growl built in my throat, but I forced it down, keeping my composure.

The evening wore on, and finally, the crowd began to thin. Krista caught my eye across the room, nodding toward the exit. I followed her out, the cool night air a welcome relief after the stifling atmosphere inside.

"Ready to leave?" she asked, her voice light but her eyes serious.

"More than ready," I replied, offering her my arm out of habit. She took it without hesitation, her fingers brushing against mine as we made our way to the car.

The ride back to the mansion was quiet, the hum of the engine the only sound

between us. Krista leaned her head against the window. She looked tired, the weight of the evening showing in the way her shoulders slumped. I fought the urge to reach out, to pull her close and shield her from everything.

When we arrived back at the mansion, it was dark and quiet inside, Garrett and the rest of the team had already retired to their rooms. We stopped inside the foyer and the silence stretched between us, thick with unspoken words and emotions neither of us was ready to acknowledge.

"Levi," Krista said softly, breaking the silence. "Thank you. For tonight."

I frowned. "For what?"

"For being there," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "I know this isn't easy for you, but you handled it well."

I shook my head, my chest tightening. "I didn't do anything. You're the one who kept things together."

She smiled faintly. "Maybe. But we make a good team."

Her words caught me off guard, and for a moment, I couldn't find my voice. My wolf purred in contentment, and I knew it was right. Mate. Krista and I were more than colleagues, more than allies. But what that meant, I wasn't ready to admit out loud. Not yet.

"We do," I finally managed. "But don't let it go to your head."

Her laugh was quiet, almost relieved. "Wouldn't dream of it."

We stood there for a moment longer, the weight of the night pressing down on

us. Then she stepped back, breaking the spell. "I should get some sleep. Big day tomorrow."

I nodded, though the thought of her walking away made my chest ache. "Yeah. Me too."

She hesitated, her gaze lingering on mine. Then, without a word, she turned and headed upstairs, her footsteps echoing softly in the quiet house. I watched her go, my wolf howling in protest, but I forced myself to stay rooted in place.

When her figure disappeared around the corner, I exhaled sharply, running a hand through my hair.

Whatever this was between us was complicating things in ways I hadn't anticipated. Krista was a distraction I couldn't afford, not with Dante circling like a shark and the media ready to pounce on the slightest misstep. And yet, no matter how much I tried to convince myself otherwise, I couldn't shake the feeling that she'd become more than just a means to an end.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, pulling me from my thoughts. It was Dean.

"Levi," he said, his voice urgent. "I've got something. Meet me at my office in an hour."

I frowned, glancing toward the stairs. "Now?"

"It's about Selene."

I hesitated, torn between the need to follow this lead and the desire to stay close to Krista. But duty won out. "I'm on my way."

I ended the call and took one last look at the staircase before heading out into the night. The cool air hit me like a slap. I climbed into the car, the engine roaring to life beneath me. As I pulled away from the mansion, my thoughts lingered on Krista. I'd left her alone in a house that felt too big, too empty, and I couldn't shake the nagging feeling that I'd made the wrong choice.

But there was no turning back now. The storm was coming, and I had to be ready.

When I arrived at Dean's office, the lights were still on, casting a warm glow through the windows. Dean was at his desk, his glasses perched on his nose as he scrolled through lines of code on his monitor.

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"You're late," he said without looking up.

"Traffic," I lied, leaning against the doorframe. "What do you have?"

He finally turned to me, his expression serious. "I've been digging into Selene's financials like you asked. Found some interesting transactions."

I stepped closer, my interest piqued. "Go on."

"Monthly deposits to an offshore account. Started about six months before she died."

I frowned. "Blackmail?"

"Doubtful," Dean said, shaking his head. "She wasn't the one initiating the payments. Someone was funneling money to her."

My stomach dropped. "Dante."

"Bingo," Dean said, leaning back in his chair. "Looks like she was on his payroll. But here's the kicker, the payments stopped two weeks before she died."

I clenched my fists, the pieces falling into place. Dante had been using Selene, and when she was no longer useful, he got rid of her. The realization didn't surprise me, but it fueled the fire burning in my chest.

"What else?" I asked, my voice tight.

"That's not all," Dean said, his tone grim. "I found a deleted email chain between her and Dante. He was pressuring her to do something she didn't want to do."

"Poison herself?" I asked, the words bitter on my tongue.

Dean shook his head. "Not exactly. He wanted her to frame you for something. She refused, and then..." He trailed off, letting the unspoken truth hang in the air.

I swore under my breath, my wolf snarling in frustration. Dante had Selene killed because she wouldn't play along with his scheme. And now he was trying to pin it all on me.

"We need to keep digging, Dean. There has to be more." I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees. "What else do you have?"

Dean turned back to his computer, pulling up another file. "Her phone records. I've been going through the calls she made in the weeks leading up to her death. There's a pattern. She was calling the same number almost every day."

I frowned. "Dante?"

"No," Dean said, shaking his head. "The number's unregistered, but I traced it back to a burner phone. Whoever it is, they're careful."

My gut twisted uneasily. "Do you think it's connected to her death?"

"It's possible," Dean said, his tone cautious. "I'm still working on it, but it's a lead. If we can figure out who she was talking to, we might be able to piece together what happened."

I nodded, the pieces of the puzzle slowly coming together. "Keep digging. I want to

know everything."

"I will," Dean promised, his eyes meeting mine. "But Levi, you need to be careful. If Dante catches wind that we're onto him, he's not going to hesitate to come after you. And he's got no problem playing dirty."

"I know," I said, my voice grim. "But he's not the only one who can play dirty." I stood, turning to leave. "Keep me updated. Let me know if you find anything else."

"I will," Dean said, his voice trailing after me as I headed for the door. "And Levi, don't forget to look out for yourself while all of this is going on. I know what's at stake, but you have to take care of your own head. Otherwise, it's going to get all messed up."

I paused in the doorway, glancing back at him. "Thanks, Dean. I'll keep that in mind."

The road ahead was treacherous, and the stakes were higher than ever. But I couldn't afford to falter now. Selene's death, Krista's safety, and my own future were all on the line. I climbed into the car, the engine roaring to life as I pulled away from Dean's office.

I couldn't shake the image of Krista standing on that balcony, the soft glow of the lights inside the party earlier illuminating her face. She had this way of grounding me, of making the chaos around me feel manageable. But she was also a distraction, and I couldn't afford distractions right now. Not with Dante breathing down my neck and the media ready to pounce on any misstep.

Still, as I drove back to the mansion, I couldn't ignore the pull I felt toward her. It wasn't just my wolf reacting to her. It was something deeper, something I wasn't ready to name. She was strong, fearless, and relentless, but beneath that bold exterior was a vulnerability she tried so hard to hide. I saw it in the way she looked at me sometimes,

like she was waiting for me to let her down. And maybe I would. I wasn't exactly known for my emotional availability.

I parked the car and stepped inside the mansion. The house felt empty, too quiet without her presence. I made my way upstairs, pausing outside her door. My hand hovered over the knob, but I hesitated. What would I even say? Hey, I know we're in the middle of a life-or-death situation, but I can't stop thinking about you? Yeah, that'd go over well.

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Instead, I walked past her door and into my own room. I sat on the edge of the bed, running a hand through my hair. My wolf was restless, pacing beneath the surface, its instincts screaming at me to protect her, to claim her. But I couldn't. Not yet.

As I set my phone down, my gaze landed on the photo on my nightstand. It was a rare picture of me and my mom from when I was a kid. Her gentle smile was a stark contrast to the chaos she'd left behind when she was gone. I picked it up, tracing the edge of the frame with my thumb.

"I wish you were here," I muttered, my voice barely above a whisper. "I'm trying to do the right thing, but it feels like I'm just messing everything up."

The photo didn't answer, of course. It never did. I set it back down and leaned back against the headboard, my exhaustion finally catching up with me. My eyes drifted shut, but my mind wouldn't stop racing. Selene's voice echoed in my head, her plea for help before the line went dead. Dante's smug face taunted me, his cold eyes promising retribution. And Krista's disappointed eyes looking up at me after I pushed her away.

I sighed, rubbing my temples. I couldn't afford to let my guard down, not even for a moment. But the truth was, I was tired. Tired of fighting, tired of running, tired of pretending I had it all together. The only thing keeping me going was the thought of taking Dante down and the hope that maybe, just maybe, I could keep Krista safe in the process.

Just hold on a little longer, I told myself. We're closer than ever. You can do this.

KRISTA

I groaned as I sat up, my body sore from another sleepless night. My mind was a whirlwind as I replayed Levi's lingering gaze on the balcony, the way his hand had brushed my cheek, the electric tension that had crackled between us. I pressed my palms to my eyes, trying to push the memories away. I couldn't afford distractions, not with Dante circling like a vulture and Levi's career and maybe his life, hanging by a thread. But try as I might, I couldn't shake the growing pull I felt toward him.

My phone buzzed on the nightstand.

Zane: We've got a problem.

I sighed, running a hand over my face. Of course we did. I forced myself out of bed. The house was quiet as I made my way downstairs, the remnants of last night's tension lingering in the air. Levi's door was closed, and I hesitated for a moment, my hand hovering over the knob. I shook my head and turned away. Whatever was happening between us would have to wait.

Zane was already pacing the inside of our makeshift office like a caged animal.

"Okay," I said as I walked in. "What's the crisis now?"

Zane turned his open laptop toward me. "These." His browser had multiple tabs open, all of them with similar headlines blaring at the top of each page.

LEVI STORM: FROM HOLLYWOOD HERO TO DANGEROUS LIAR?

INSIDE THE DARK SECRET PAST OF HOLLYWOOD'S GOLDEN BOY.

The articles were filled with speculation, half-truths, and outright lies, painting Levi

as a manipulative, violent monster.

"This is bad," I muttered, collapsing onto a chair next to Zane.

He nodded, running a hand through his already messy hair. "No kidding. Dante's been busy. These hit the internet at midnight, and they're already trending."

I sank into a chair, my mind racing. "Okay, we need to counter this. What's our play? More animal shelter footage? A heartfelt interview?"

Zane shook his head. "We've leaned on the shelter angle too much already. People are starting to see it as a PR move. We need something bigger, something that shifts the narrative entirely."

"But what?" I asked, frustration creeping into my voice. "We're running out of options."

Zane sat across from me, his expression softening. "Krista, you've been working nonstop. Maybe it's time to take a step back and let someone else handle this for a bit."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Are you saying I can't handle it?"

"No," he said quickly, holding up his hands. "I'm saying you don't have to handle it alone. You're not indestructible, as much as you pretend to be."

His words hit harder than I wanted to admit. I looked away, my throat tightening.

"I just need to fix this, Zane," I said quietly. "It's my job, my reputation."

"And Levi's life," Zane added gently. "But you're not going to help him by burning

yourself out."

Before I could respond, a knock at the door interrupted us. Garrett stood in the doorway, his usual stoic expression in place.

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"Boss wants to see you," he said, his gaze flicking to me. "Says it's urgent."

I frowned. "Levi? What's wrong?"

Garrett shook his head. "Didn't say. Just asked me to bring you down to the training room."

I exchanged a glance with Zane, who shrugged. "Go. I'll keep working on damage control here."

I followed Garrett down to the training room, my stomach in knots. Levi was pacing with his hands stuffed in his pockets when I walked in. His expression was dark. The moment I stepped inside, his gaze snapped to me, and I felt the air shift.

"What's going on?" I asked, crossing my arms.

He stopped pacing and turned to me, his eyes scanning my face. "Dante's making his move. We need to be ready."

"Ready for what?"

"For anything," he said grimly. "And that includes making sure you can defend yourself."

I blinked, my initial irritation flaring. "Levi, I don't have time for this. I'm in the middle of trying to save your career."

"And I'm trying to save your life," he snapped. His eyes burned with an intensity that made my breath catch. "Dante isn't playing games anymore, Krista. If he thinks you're a threat, he'll come after you. I'm not taking that risk."

His words hung heavy in the air, and despite my frustration, a part of me softened. He was scared for me. I could see it in the tightness of his jaw, the way he moved restlessly. Still, I wasn't about to let him boss me around.

"So what, you're going to have Garrett teach me how to throw a punch?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

Levi's lips twitched, the ghost of a smirk. "If that's what it takes, yes."

I glared at him for a moment before huffing out a breath. "Fine. But don't think I'm going to go easy on you, Garrett."

Garrett smirked, a rare flicker of amusement in his usually stoic expression. "Wouldn't expect anything less."

The training room was spacious, lined with mats and equipment. Garrett started with the basics, showing me how to block, how to use my body weight, and how to aim for weak spots. I listened intently, my determination outweighing my initial skepticism. When it came time to spar, I wasn't as helpless as I expected. I landed a few decent hits, though Garrett countered effortlessly, his movements fluid and precise.

"Not bad," he said after I managed to dodge one of his strikes. "You're a quick learner."

"Years of dealing with egomaniacs in the industry," I quipped, catching my breath. "Trading blows in the media is not all that different from physically fighting."

Garrett chuckled, the sound low and gruff. "You're tougher than you look."

"Looks can be deceiving," I shot back, wiping the sweat from my brow.

Levi watched from the sidelines, his arms crossed, his expression unreadable. His presence was distracting, and I found myself glancing at him more than I'd like to admit. His gaze was intense, focused on me with a mix of pride and something else I couldn't quite name. It made my stomach flutter.

After one particularly hard hit left me sprawled on the mat, Levi stepped forward, his jaw clenched. "Enough," he said firmly.

Garrett hesitated, then stepped back, giving Levi a nod. I sat up, glaring at Levi. "I don't need you to rescue me, you know."

He crouched down in front of me, his eyes softening. "I'm not trying to rescue you. I'm trying to keep you alive."

His words were quiet, but they hit me like a punch to the gut. I held his gaze for a moment, the unvoiced tension between us crackling like lightning. Finally, I looked away, my cheeks burning.

"Come on," he said, standing and offering me his hand. "You've had enough for today."

I took his hand, trying to ignore the way his touch sent a jolt of desire through me. As I stood, I caught Garrett watching us, his expression thoughtful. He didn't say anything, but the look in his eyes made me wonder what he was thinking.

Back in the main living room, I collapsed onto the couch, my body aching. Levi handed me a water bottle, and I took it gratefully, draining half of it in one go.

"You did well," he said, sitting down beside me. His voice was soft, almost intimate, and it sent a shiver down my spine.

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"Thanks," I replied, trying to sound nonchalant. "Though I'm pretty sure Garrett was going easy on me."

Levi's lips twitched in the ghost of a smile. "He wasn't. You've got grit, Krista."

Our eyes locked, and for a moment, the room felt too small, the air too thick. I opened my mouth to say something, anything to break the tension, when my phone buzzed loudly, shattering the moment.

I pulled it out, frowning at the unknown number. "Unknown caller," I muttered, debating whether to answer.

"Put it on speaker," Levi commanded.

I hesitated but hit the button. "Hello?"

A distorted voice crackled through the line. "If you want to take down Dante, you're looking in the wrong places."

My heart skipped a beat. "Who is this?"

The voice ignored my question. "He's not just a drug dealer. He's into something bigger, something darker. Look into his shipping company."

Before I could respond, the line went dead. I stared at the phone, my mind racing.

"What the hell was that?" Levi asked, his voice tight.

I looked up at him, my pulse quickening. "I think we just got a lead."

Levi's expression darkened. "Or a trap."

"Either way, we can't ignore it," I said, standing.

I turned to Levi. "Can you trace the call?"

He nodded, already pulling out his own phone. "I'll have Dean on this."

Levi grabbed my hand, his touch warm and firm while he pinned me with his intense gaze. "Krista, be careful. Whoever this is, they're playing games. Dante's dangerous, and if he thinks you're onto him..."

"I know," I said, cutting him off. "But we don't have a choice. We need to follow this."

Before I could respond, Levi's phone rang. He frowned at the screen before answering. "Dean? What's up?"

I watched as his expression shifted from confusion to shock. "You're sure? Okay. We'll be there."

He hung up and turned to me, his eyes blazing. "Dean found something. Dante's drug ring is a front. He's running a human trafficking operation."

The words hit like a punch to the gut. My stomach churned as the pieces fell into place. Dante wasn't just a villain; he was a monster. And we were in way over our heads.

"We'll stop him," he said in a deadly steady voice. "But we need to be smart. We can't afford any mistakes."

I nodded, my resolve hardening. "Then let's get to work."

Levi's gaze softened, his thumb brushing over my knuckles. "You're incredible, you know that?"

My cheeks warmed, but I held his gaze. "Incredibly stubborn, maybe."

"Incredibly brave," he corrected, his voice low and steady. "And infuriatingly brilliant."

I laughed, though it came out shaky. "And here I thought you only saw me as a nuisance."

His expression turned serious, the kind of seriousness that made my heart stutter. "I see you, Krista. More than I think you'd like me to."

The room seemed to shrink around us. I opened my mouth to deflect, to make a joke, anything to break the tension, but nothing came out. Instead, I just sat there, trapped in the warmth of his eyes, the unspoken words hanging heavy between us.

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"I don't know what I'd do if something happened to you," he said quietly, his voice rough with emotion. "I can't lose you."

My breath caught. For a man who prided himself on control, on keeping his walls high and impenetrable, this was as close to a confession as I'd ever get. And it terrified me. Not because it was too much, but because it felt like exactly what I'd been waiting for. What I'd been afraid to admit I wanted.

"Levi," I started, my voice trembling.

But the words wouldn't come. How could I explain what I barely understood myself? Somewhere between his gruff exterior and the vulnerability he only showed in rare, fleeting moments, I'd started to fall for him. That his protectiveness, his intensity, his quiet acts of care, like bringing me coffee just the way I liked it, had chipped away at the walls I'd built around my own heart.

He leaned closer, his hand still holding mine, his other coming up to brush a stray lock of hair from my face. "You don't have to say it," he murmured. "I can feel it."

And maybe he could. Maybe he saw it in the way my breath hitched when he was near and in the way I always sought him out in a crowded room without even realizing it. Or maybe it was just that connection between us, the one that had been there since the moment we'd met, that neither of us had been able to ignore.

I swallowed hard, my heart pounding in my chest.

He shook his head, his thumb brushing over my cheek. "Just stay with me."

And there it was, the unspoken truth, the thing I'd been running from. I wasn't falling for him. I was already there, tumbling headfirst into something I couldn't control, something I wasn't sure I wanted to.

But as I looked into his eyes, I realized I didn't want to run anymore. For the first time in a long time, I was exactly where I wanted to be.

"I'm not going anywhere," I whispered.

He pulled me into his arms, and I let myself sink into the warmth of him and the safety of his embrace. It wasn't perfect, and it wasn't easy, but it was real. And for now, that was enough.

Chapter 8

LEVI

The sun hadn't even risen yet, but I was already wide awake, pacing restlessly. Krista's scent lingered in the air, even though she was downstairs, probably already buried in work. My wolf let out a low, rumbling growl that echoed in the silence of my room. It wanted her. It wanted to claim her, to protect her, to keep her close. But I didn't know what I wanted. The wolf snarled, disgusted at the weakness of my human side.

I threw the covers off and stalked to the window, staring out at the dark horizon. The mansion grounds were quiet, the kind of quiet that felt heavy, like the calm before a storm. The threat of Dante loomed over us, growing more dangerous by the day, and the weight of it pressed on my chest like a stone. But it wasn't just Dante. It was her. Krista. She was in the middle of this mess because of me, and the thought of her getting hurt because of my mistakes made my gut churn.

I needed to do something, anything to burn off this restless energy. I grabbed my

workout gear and headed for the training room. Garrett was already there, hitting a punching bag. He glanced up as I walked in, his expression unreadable.

"Couldn't sleep?" he asked, his voice as steady as ever.

I grunted in response, pulling on my gloves. "Let's spar."

Garrett raised an eyebrow but didn't argue. He stepped onto the mat, and we fell into a rhythm, our movements fluid and practiced. But even as I threw punches and dodged his strikes, my mind wasn't in it. It kept drifting back to Krista, to the way she'd looked last night after training with Garrett, her hair messy, her cheeks flushed, her eyes bright with determination. She'd been relentless, refusing to back down even when he'd knocked her to the mat. She was fearless, and it drove me crazy.

He landed a solid hit to my ribs, snapping me out of my thoughts. I stumbled back, glaring at him. "What the hell was that for?"

"You're distracted," he said, crossing his arms. "What's going on?"

I hesitated, my jaw clenching. Garrett wasn't just my security team; he was one of the few people I trusted implicitly. But this was different. This was personal.

"It's nothing," I muttered, but Garrett wasn't buying it.

"It's Krista," he said, his tone annoyingly matter-of-fact. "You're thinking about her."

I didn't respond, but I didn't need to. Garrett smirked, looking far too smug for his own good.

"I knew it," he said, shaking his head. "You're in deep, boss."

"I'm not in anything," I snapped, but even as the words left my mouth.

Garrett gave me a look, one that said he saw right through my bullshit. "You can lie to yourself all you want, but you can't lie to your wolf. It chose her. She's your mate, Levi. You can't fight that."

"I'm not fighting anything," I growled, turning away from him. "I'm trying to keep her safe."

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"Safe from what? Dante? Or safe from you?"

I froze, his words hitting harder than I wanted to admit. Safe from me. Was that really what I was afraid of? That she'd get too close, that she'd see the monster I really was, and she'd run? Or worse, that I'd hurt her without meaning to?

"You're an idiot," Garrett said, his voice cutting through my thoughts. "She's not going anywhere. And you're not a monster."

I turned back to him, my fists clenched at my sides. "You don't know that."

"I've gotten to know her," Garrett said, his tone firm. "And I know you. You're not going to scare her off, Levi. But if you keep pushing her away, you're going to lose her. And trust me, that's a hell of a lot scarier than whatever you're afraid of."

I didn't respond, but Garrett's words lingered in my mind long after he'd left the training room. I showered and changed, the restlessness still gnawing at me as I made my way to the kitchen. The scent of coffee led me to Krista, who was already seated at the counter island, her laptop open in front of her. She looked up as I walked in, her warm brown eyes meeting mine. For a moment, I just stood there, drinking in the sight of her. She was wearing a simple maroon sweater and loose jeans, her hair was pulled back into a messy bun with an elastic. To anyone else, she might have looked casual and unassuming. But to me, she was everything.

"Morning," she said softly but with a cheerful lilt to her voice, as if she didn't have a care in the world. As if she wasn't in the middle of a life-or-death situation because of me.

"Morning," I replied, my voice coming out rougher than I intended. I grabbed a mug from the cabinet and poured myself a cup of coffee, my movements stiff and mechanical.

"Sleep well?" she asked, her tone light, but I could hear the underlying concern in her voice.

"Not really," I admitted, leaning against the counter. I took a sip of coffee, the bitterness grounding me.

Krista's gaze lingered on me, and I could feel her studying me, trying to piece together the puzzle of my mood. She was too perceptive for her own good, and it was both a blessing and a curse.

"Anything I can help with?" she asked finally.

I shook my head, refusing to meet her eyes. "No. Just work stuff."

She nodded, but I could tell she didn't believe me. She never did. Instead of pressing, she turned back to her laptop, her fingers moving quickly over the keyboard. I watched her for a moment. Everything about her was perfect, from the way she bit her lip in concentration, to the way her brows knitted together when she was deep in thought. She was so focused, so determined. And so damn beautiful.

My wolf growled softly, the sound barely audible, but I felt it vibrate through me. It wanted her. It wanted to claim her, to protect her, to keep her close. But I couldn't. Not now. Not when everything was so uncertain.

I forced myself to look away, my grip tightening on the mug. "What are you working on?" I asked, desperate for a distraction.

She glanced up, her eyes brightening. "Follow-up on the lead from the anonymous caller. I've been digging into Dante's shipping company. There's something there, I just can't put my finger on it yet."

I nodded, though my mind was only half on the conversation. The other half was focused on her, on the way her voice lit up when she talked about her work, on the way she leaned forward. Her enthusiasm was contagious.

"You'll figure it out," I said quietly. "You always do."

She smiled, and it was like the sun breaking through the clouds. "Thanks. I needed that."

I didn't respond, but the warmth in her smile lingered in my mind long after she'd turned back to her work. I finished my coffee and set the mug in the sink, my restlessness still simmering beneath the surface.

Later that afternoon, I was in my office when Dean called.

"Levi, I've got something," he said, his voice tight. "You need to hear this."

"What is it?" I asked.

"I followed up on your lead about Dante's shipping company. It's worse than we thought," Dean said. "It's not just drugs. Dante's running a human trafficking operation. Ships, planes, warehouses. He's got a whole underground network."

My blood ran cold. "Human trafficking?"

"Yeah," Dean confirmed, his voice grim. "And Selene's death? It's connected. She found out about it, and Dante had her killed to keep her quiet."

I clenched my fists, my wolf snarling in fury. "We need to stop him."

"We will," Dean said. "But we've got to be smart about this. If Dante catches wind that we're onto him, he's not going to hesitate to come after you. And Krista."

The mention of her name made my chest tighten. "Keep digging, Dean. I want every scrap of evidence you can find."

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"I'm on it," Dean said before hanging up.

I sat down heavily in the library, my mind racing. Dante was more dangerous than I'd realized, and the stakes had just gotten higher. But we were closer than ever to taking him down, and I wasn't going to let him hurt anyone else.

That evening, I found myself alone in the library again, a glass of whiskey in my hand. The room was quiet. The only sound was the occasional crackle of the fireplace. I stared into the flames, my thoughts a tangled mess. Garrett's words echoed in my mind, taunting me. She's your mate, Levi. You can't fight that.

But I could. I had to. Because the thought of losing her was unbearable, but the thought of her getting hurt because of me was even worse.

The sound of footsteps pulled me from my thoughts, and I looked up to see Krista standing in the doorway. She was holding a glass of wine, her expression soft but determined.

"Mind if I join you?" she asked, her voice quiet but steady.

I hesitated, but I couldn't bring myself to say no. "Sure."

She walked over and sat down in the chair across from me, her movements graceful but deliberate. She took a sip of her wine, her eyes never leaving mine. The firelight flickered in her gaze, casting a warm glow over her features. For a moment, we just sat there in silence, the crackling of the fire filling the space between us.

Finally, Krista broke the silence. "You've been quiet all day. What's on your mind?"

I took a long sip of whiskey, the burn down my throat grounding me. "Everything. Dante, Selene's death, this mess we're in. It's a lot."

She nodded, her expression thoughtful. "It is. But you're not alone in this, Levi. You've got me. You've got Garrett, Zane, and Dean. We're all in this together."

Her words were meant to comfort me, but they only made the knot in my chest tighten. I couldn't shake the fear that this was only going to get worse, that I was going to drag her down with me.

"I can't lose you, Krista," I said before I could stop myself. The words were raw, unfiltered, and they hung heavy in the air between us.

She froze with her glass halfway to her lips. Her eyes searched mine, and for a moment, I thought I saw a flicker of surprise, of something deeper. Then she set her glass down and leaned forward, her expression softening.

"You're not going to lose me," she said, her voice steady but filled with emotion. "I'm not going anywhere. Not now, not ever."

Her words hit me like a sucker punch, and I felt something inside me crack. Every instinct, every wall I'd built up over the years, crumbled in that moment. My wolf howled, urging me to claim her, to make her mine. And for the first time, I didn't fight it.

I set my whiskey down and stood, crossing the distance between us in two strides. Krista looked up at me, her breath catching as I reached down and cupped her face in my hands. Her skin was soft, warm, and I could feel the steady beat of her pulse beneath my fingertips.

"Krista," I murmured, my voice rough with emotion. "I can't—"

She didn't let me finish. She stood, closing the distance between us, and pressed her lips to mine. The kiss was soft at first, tentative, but it didn't stay that way for long. It was like a dam breaking, all the pent-up tension, the unspoken words, the raw emotion, pouring into that one moment. My hands tangled in her hair, pulling her closer, and she responded in kind, her arms wrapping around my neck as she deepened the kiss.

My wolf roared in satisfaction, the primal part of me reveling in the feel of her, the taste of her. But it was more than that. It was the way she felt in my arms, the way she clung to me like I was her anchor in a storm. It was the way she'd looked at me, like she saw past the walls I'd built, past the monster I thought I was, and saw something worth fighting for.

When we finally broke apart, we were both breathless, our foreheads resting together as we tried to catch our breath. Krista's eyes were dark with emotion, her cheeks flushed, and I couldn't help but chuckle softly.

"What?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"You're incredible," I murmured, brushing a strand of hair from her face. "You have no idea what you do to me."

She smiled, her hands resting on my chest. "I think I have some idea."

I kissed her again, softer this time, savoring the feel of her. But as much as I wanted to stay in that moment, the reality of our situation came crashing back in. Dante was still out there, and the danger was far from over.

"Stop it, Levi. I know it's complicated," she said, her voice steady. "But it's worth it."

Her words settled something deep inside me, a warmth spreading through my chest. For the first time in a long time, I felt like I wasn't just fighting for survival. I was fighting for something real, something worth fighting for.

I pressed my forehead to hers, my voice barely above a whisper. "You're right. No matter what happens, we'll face it together."

She nodded, her eyes shining with determination and a flicker of vulnerability. Krista pulled back slightly, her hands still resting on my chest. "Levi," she said softly, her tone serious. "Whatever happens, promise me one thing."

"Anything," I said without hesitation.

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"Promise me you won't shut me out," she said, her eyes searching mine. "I get that this is hard for you, but I'm here. I'm not going anywhere, and I don't want you to face this alone."

Her words hit me harder than I expected. I'd spent so much of my life building walls, keeping people at arm's length, but Krista had a way of breaking through them without even trying. She'd seen the parts of me I tried to hide, and instead of running, she'd stayed. She'd fought for me, for us, even when I didn't deserve it.

"I promise," I said, my voice firm. "No more walls. No more shutting you out. We're in this together."

She smiled, her expression softening. "Good. Because you're stuck with me, Storm."

I chuckled, pulling her closer. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

The air between us crackled with electricity. I dipped my head down and claimed her mouth once again. Krista's lips were soft yet commanding, and I couldn't get enough of her. My wolf was howling in triumph, urging me to claim her, to make her mine in every way possible. I tangled one hand in her hair, the other gripping her waist as I pulled her flush against me. She gasped into the kiss, her hands sliding up my chest and looping around my neck, holding on like I was the only thing keeping her grounded.

"Krista," I murmured against her lips, my voice low and rough with desire. "You don't know what you do to me."

She leaned back just enough to meet my gaze, her eyes dark and heavy with the same need that was consuming me. "Then show me," she whispered, her voice trembling but bold.

That was all the invitation I needed. My control snapped, and I kissed her with everything I had, pouring all the longing, the fear, the raw, wild need into it. She responded in kind, her fingers digging into my shoulders as she kissed me back with a fierceness that took my breath away. My hands roamed her body, memorizing every curve, every soft sigh that escaped her lips.

"Levi," she breathed when I finally pulled away, her chest rising and falling with ragged breaths.

I didn't give her a chance to say more. I slid one arm under her knees, the other around her back, and lifted her effortlessly into my arms. She let out a small, surprised laugh, her arms tightening around my neck.

"What are you doing?" she asked, though the playful glint in her eyes told me she already knew.

"Taking you to bed," I said, my voice a growl that sent a shiver through her. "You're mine, Krista. And I'm not wasting another second pretending otherwise."

My heart pounded in my chest as I carried her to my bedroom. She was so small and delicate in my arms, and a part of me couldn't believe that such a stunning creature had chosen a beast like myself to be her mate. It filled my chest with an indescribable ache. All of my senses were overcome with her sweet scent, the silken softness of her skin, the warmth of her head tucked against the crook of my neck.

Reverently, I set her down on the side of my bed. She trembled as I ran my hands over her delicious curves, and answered my own questing hands by exploring my body

with her own. I cupped her breasts and stroked her nipples until they hardened into peaks. She let out a low moan and thrust her chest into my hands. Her long lashes fluttered as her eyes grew heavy.

Dipping my head, I claimed her mouth with my own, sweeping deep with my tongue, forcing her to take me in. Her tongue dueled with mine, sliding and entwining as we drank from each other.

When she finally pulled back for air, I kneeled and pressed my face to her stomach. Her legs fell wide to cradle me. Breathing deep, I took in the scent of her arousal. My control was close to snapping. Running my hands down her torso, I filled my palms with her generous bottom. I squeezed the firm flesh, the wolf rising to the surface. It growled with the need to dominate our mate, to slap her ass and show her who she belonged to.

I bit down on my cheek. Later. Now, I had to be gentle. But that didn't mean the wolf couldn't come out to play. With a flick of my hands, the tips of my claws made quick work of her clothes, tearing them into pieces and revealing her body. Her naked flesh seemed to glow under the golden light of the room. And she was spread out on my bed like a sacrifice on an altar. All for me to explore and pleasure. My cock throbbed with the need to be inside her. Soon.

My palm found her scorching hot center and cupped her sex. Krista let out a little whimper as I stroked her sensitive nub with the pad of my thumb. She rocked her hips, seeking friction. Her feet dug into my back, demanding more. I traced my fingers along her folds, dipping into the honey that overflowed out of her center. Spreading it up to her clit and down until her swollen sex was slippery and shiny with her dew.

"Levi," she moaned. The sound of my name was enough to snap my self-control. Grabbing her ass, I dragged her toward my face and held her there, keeping her in place as I dived face first into her soft center.

With a rumbling purr, I dragged my tongue through her soft puffy folds, savoring the sweet flavor of her juices. I licked up to her click, stroking it in circles with my tongue and sucking it between my lips. Her hips bounced, grinding against my face. I let out a warning growl, tightening my grip on her hips and pinning her in place before I renewed my efforts on her little nub, teasing it until it was swollen and hard in my mouth.

Her desire overflowed, running down her swollen puffy folds and running down her crack. My tongue kept working her faster and faster as I reached over to my nightstand and pulled out the gleaming stainless steel plug I kept in case I finally met the woman destined to be mine.

I paused and lifted my head. "Krista, after tonight, you will be mine forever. I will have you in every way. Are you sure about this?"

"Please, Levi!" She stared at me with wide frenzied eyes. "Anything you want. Just don't stop."

I grinned. I ran the plug along her slick lips, coating it in her dew and warming it up before I gripped the base and pushed it into her cunt, fucking her with it. Her long moan and the fresh gush of her creamy juices told me all I needed to know. Once the plug was as slick as the rest of her sex, I pulled it out and dragged it lower to her back hole. Pausing there, I pressed the tapered tip to her pucker.

Her thighs clenched. "Levi?"

"Shh," I said as I tapped and prodded with the plug. "I'm not going to take you there, not tonight. You need to be trained to take me in your ass. You do want to please me, right?"

"Yes, of course," she whispered.

"Then take a deep breath and bear down.Take the plug like a good girl."Applying constant pressure, I pushed on the base and began working the egg-shaped plug into her ass.Krista whimpered, her hands fisting the sheets as her muscles worked to take it in.Soon, the entire plug disappeared until only the gleaming base was visible between her cheeks.

"You did well, Krista.Now, for your reward."Lifting her butt, I pinned her in place as I drove two fingers deep into her pussy and lapped at her clit.Fucking her with my hand and mouth like I wanted to do with my cock, I drove her higher and higher, until her walls clenched around my fingers.Krista let out a loud keening cry as she came, her hips bucking as her pussy spasmed around my digits.I kept up the pressure, licking her throbbing clit and pumping into her quaking pussy until the last tremors faded.

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"Levi, my god..." she whimpered.

My cock twitched. I was so hard that I was ready to burst at the slightest touch. It was time to become one with my mate.

I ripped off my clothes and crawled up her body until we were face to face. Burying my hand in her hair, I held her in place as I devoured her lips, forcing her to taste her own desire. The possessiveness this woman brought out in me was unlike anything I had ever felt before.

Her hips bucked, as we kissed, and I aligned my cock. I felt a pang of regret for what I was about to do. Our mating would be painful for her until she learned to accommodate my knot, but she was so wet that my flared head slipped in easily. Fuck, she felt wonderful, so tight and warm.

She broke the kiss, gasping as I pierced her with the tip of my cock. "You're so deep," she whispered against my lips.

"Hush, you've only taken a bit." I moved my hips in slow shallow pumps. With every move, I could feel the pressure of the plug in her ass rubbing against my shaft. Her eyes widened. "Don't worry I'll make it fit, stretch you slowly, fill you completely until you can't take anymore."

Was I going too far? I didn't want to hurt her. The shudder that ran through her body and the way she arched her back as I pushed more of my length into her pussy banished my worries. I thrust my hips, forcing her flesh to part way for mine.

Her face flushed."More," she commanded.That was it.The thin strand of control holding back the beast snapped.I snapped my hips, pushing all the way in to the hilt in one thrust.

She cried out, her pussy squeezing down on my shaft as her feet dug into my back, pulling me in deeper.It was glorious, finally mating with Krista.Her pussy milked my cock in a silken caress as I moved.

"Fuck.You're so tight.All mine.Mine.Mine."I pounded into her like I was seeking heaven, riding her with a brutal rhythm.Each time I bottomed out, she let out a high-pitched moan, the sound drove me wild, urging me to drive into her harder.

Soon, I felt the pressure building in my balls, and the base of my shaft began to swell.Her eyes widened as I filled her sex to the breaking point.

As I continued pumping into her, I collared her neck with one hand while my other hand moved down to rub her nub."You like this don't you?Your little pussy squeezes me for more even when I stretch you so wide that it hurts."

Krista gasped."Yes.Give it to me."

I snapped my hips hard, forcing her to take all of my knot, locking us together."I'm going to fill you with my seed until it flows out of you.And then I'm going to take you again and again.In your mouth.In your ass.On your tits.Until every part of you belongs to me."

Her hips bucked and her eyes closed."Yes.Yes.Yes."

Fuck.She was perfect.My perfect mate."Good girl," I growled."You're going to be mine.Forever."I lost control as the pleasure ripped through my body.Only the sensation of burying my cock into her cunt and riding the wave as my cum shot into

her remained. As my seed burst out, she climaxed, crying out as her walls quaking and squeezing every last drop out of me. I dipped my head and clamped my teeth on her neck. "Mine!" I snarled as I bit down.

Stars burst behind my eyes, and then, everything turned black. When I finally came to, I woke up to a warm softness surrounding me. I realized my heavy weight was crushing Krista and moved to get off of her, but she tightened her arms and legs around me. Supporting my weight on my arms, I kissed her lips gently, teasing them with my own as I sought entry. I slipped out of her warm pussy, and our combined essence flowed out as I broke our seal. Gently, I removed the plug from her bottom and tossed it aside.

Looking down at her shining eyes, I felt a contentment I never thought was possible. "Are you all right?"

She smiled shyly and nodded. "I never knew sex could be like this."

I brushed her hair away from her face, revealing my bite mark on her neck. A surge of possessive pride rushed through my veins. "It's the mate bond. You belong to me now."

She traced my face with her hand. "And you belong to me."

"Yes, I am yours. All of me."

Chapter 9

KRISTA

When I woke up, the first thing I noticed was the warmth.

It enveloped me, steady and comforting, like a blanket on a cold winter's morning. My eyes fluttered open, and for a brief, disorienting moment, I couldn't remember where I was. And then I felt it, the heavy weight of an arm draped over my waist, the steady rise and fall of a chest pressed against my back.

Levi.

Memories of the night before came rushing back, and my cheeks warmed as I shifted slightly, careful not to wake him. His arm tightened around me, pulling me closer, and I felt a soft, sleepy murmur rumble through his chest. My heart stuttered at the sound, at the intimacy of it. This was uncharted territory for me, and I wasn't sure how to navigate it.

I glanced over my shoulder, taking in the sight of him. In sleep, the usual tension in his face was gone, replaced by a kind of softness I'd never seen before. His dark hair was tousled, his lips slightly parted, and for the first time, he looked almost peaceful. It was a strange contrast to the grumpy, guarded alpha who always seemed to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders that I had come to know.

A part of me wanted to stay here, to revel in the quiet moment and the warmth of his arms around me. But another part of me was screaming, warning me of the dangers of letting myself get too close. I'd spent my entire life building walls, protecting myself from getting hurt. And now, in the span of a single night, those walls felt like they were crumbling.

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Carefully, I slipped out of bed, grabbing my clothes from the floor and padding quietly to the bathroom. The second thing I noticed was the ache and delicious soreness between my thighs. I winced, but it was worth it. Mating with Levi was beyond anything I could have imagined. Even as he slept, I could feel the happiness flowing from him into my mind through the mating bond. I glanced at myself in the mirror, my reflection staring back at me with wide, uncertain eyes. My hair was a mess, my lips slightly swollen, and there was the bite mark on my neck that made my cheeks flush. I'd never been one to lose myself in the moment, to let my guard down like that and let a man take control. But with Levi, I never felt scared, only loved and safe. It had been easy. Too easy.

I splashed cold water on my face, trying to shake off the lingering haze of sleep and the whirlwind of emotions churning in my chest. When I stepped out of the bathroom, I found Levi awake, propped up on one elbow, watching me with a look that made my stomach flip. His blue eyes were dark, intense, and filled with a mix of affection and passion.

"Morning," he said, his voice rough with sleep but warm in a way that set all my nerves alive.

"Morning," I replied, my voice coming out softer than I intended. I crossed my arms, suddenly feeling exposed despite the oversized T-shirt I'd thrown on.

He didn't say anything else, just held out a hand, his gaze unwavering. I hesitated, my heart pounding in my chest, but something about the way he was looking at me made it impossible to resist. I walked over, taking his hand, and he pulled me back into bed, wrapping his arms around me in a way that felt both possessive and tender.

"Thought you'd run off," he murmured against my hair, his voice laced with a hint of teasing.

"Not yet," I said, trying to keep my tone light, but the words came out more vulnerable than I'd intended.

He pulled back slightly, his eyes searching mine. "You're not running anywhere," he said firmly, as if he could read the thoughts swirling in my head. "Not unless it's with me."

I swallowed hard, my throat tightening. His words were a reassurance, but they also scared me. Because I wasn't sure I was ready to let someone have that kind of hold over me, even if it was Levi.

The kitchen was quiet when we finally made our way downstairs, the early morning sunlight streaming through the windows. Levi moved around with an ease that surprised me, making coffee and toast while I sat at the counter, trying to sort through the mess of emotions in my head. He was different this morning, softer, more open, and it was throwing me off balance.

"Here," he said, sliding a mug of coffee toward me.

"Thanks," I said, wrapping my hands around the mug, letting the warmth seep into my skin.

He leaned against the counter, watching me with that same intense gaze. "You're quiet," he observed. "Something on your mind?"

I shrugged, avoiding his eyes. "Just thinking."

"About?" he pressed, his tone gentle but persistent.

I sighed, setting my mug down and finally meeting his gaze."About this," I said, gesturing vaguely between us."About us.I don't know, Levi.It's a lot.Last night was..." I trailed off, unable to find the right words.

"It was real," he finished for me, his voice low and steady."And it's not something I take lightly, Krista.We are mated.The bond lasts for eternity."

I looked away, my chest tightening."I know.That's what scares me.I've spent my whole life avoiding letting anyone get too close.And now, with everything going on, I just don't know if I can do this and still stay true to myself."

Levi was silent for a moment, then he walked over, pulling out the stool next to me and sitting down.He turned to face me, his expression serious but softened by something I couldn't quite place.

"Krista," he said, his voice quiet but firm."I'm not asking you to change who you are.You're strong, independent, and brilliant, and that's one of the things I admire most about you.I don't want to take that away from you."

His words hit me like a punch to the chest, and I felt tears prick at the corners of my eyes.I swiped at them quickly, annoyed with myself for being so emotional.

"I'm scared," I admitted, my voice barely above a whisper."I'm scared of losing myself in this.Of losing everything I've worked so hard for."

Levi reached out, his hand brushing against mine."You won't lose anything," he said, his tone gentle but resolute."You're not in this alone.We'll figure it out together.But I need you to trust me."

I looked at him, his blue eyes earnest and unwavering, and for the first time, I let myself believe it.Maybe I didn't have to choose between my career and my

heart.Maybe, just maybe, I could have both.

Later that morning, I sat in our makeshift office with Zane, trying to focus on the task at hand.But my mind kept drifting back to the conversation with Levi, to the way he'd looked at me, the way he'd touched me.It was infuriating how much he consumed my thoughts, even when I had a million other things to worry about.

"You're distracted," Zane said, cutting through my haze.He was leaning back in his chair, arms crossed, giving me that look that said he knew more than he let on.

"I'm fine," I lied, forcing my attention back to the laptop screen in front of me.

"Right," he drawled, raising an eyebrow."Because it's totally normal for you to stare blankly at a spreadsheet for ten minutes without typing a single word."

I shot him a glare, but there was no heat behind it.Zane had been my best friend for years, and he had an uncanny ability to see right through me.It was both a blessing and a curse.

"Fine," I sighed, slumping back in my chair."What do you want me to say?"

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"I want you to stop pretending everything's okay when it's not," he said, his tone uncharacteristically serious. "You've been off all morning, Krista. And don't think I haven't noticed the way you and Levi keep looking at each other when you think no one's watching."

My cheeks flushed, and I looked away, suddenly very interested in the pattern of the carpet. "It's complicated," I muttered.

"It always is," Zane replied, leaning forward. "But that doesn't mean you have to deal with it alone. I'm here, you know. Always have been."

His words hit me harder than I expected, and I felt a lump form in my throat. Zane had been my rock for as long as I could remember, the one person I could always count on no matter what. And here I was, shutting him out without even realizing it.

"I don't want to lose myself," I admitted quietly, my voice trembling. "I've worked so hard to get where I am, Zane. He says he'll always be here, but what if he isn't? How can I risk it all?"

Zane was silent for a moment, then he reached over and squeezed my hand. "Krista, you're not going to lose yourself. You're too damn stubborn for that. But you can't keep building walls around your heart just because you're scared of getting hurt. Love isn't a weakness. It's a strength."

I blinked at him, surprised by the intensity in his words. Zane wasn't usually the type to get deep or philosophical, but when he did, he had a way of cutting straight to the heart of things.

"You sound like a Hallmark card," I joked weakly, trying to lighten the mood, but my voice cracked, betraying how much his words had affected me.

Zane smirked, leaning back in his chair. "Yeah, well, someone's gotta knock some sense into you. And if Hallmark wisdom is what it takes, so be it."

I laughed softly, the sound shaky but genuine. "Thanks, Zane. I don't say it enough, but I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Probably burn the place down," he said with a grin, but his eyes were soft. "Now, let's get back to work. We've got a scandal to fix."

I nodded, feeling a little lighter than I had all morning. Zane was right. I didn't have to figure this out alone, and I didn't have to choose between my career and my heart. I could trust the people around me to help me find the balance.

That afternoon, I found myself on the terrace, the cool ocean breeze brushing against my skin as I stared out at the waves crashing against the sprawling grounds of Levi's estate. My conversation with Zane still lingered in my mind, and I knew I needed to talk to Levi. Really talk to him, not just dance around the edges of what we were both feeling.

I heard the sliding door open behind me, and a moment later, Levi's presence filled the space beside me. He didn't say anything at first, just stood there, his hands in his pockets, his gaze fixed on the horizon.

"Hey," I said softly, breaking the silence.

"Hey," he replied, his voice low and steady. He turned to look at me, his blue eyes searching my face. "You okay?"

I nodded, though I wasn't entirely sure if it was true. "I've been thinking."

"Always a dangerous pastime," he said with a slight smirk, but the humor didn't reach his eyes. He was watching me carefully, like he was bracing for something.

I took a deep breath, steeling myself. "We're connected forever through the mate bond, right?"

He didn't hesitate. "Yeah."

My chest tightened at the certainty in his voice, but I pressed on. "And you don't want me to change? You're not asking me to give up who I am or what I've built to become a trophy girlfriend?"

Levi stepped closer, his expression softening. "Krista, I fell for you because of who you are, because you're strong, independent, and fearless. I'm not asking you to give that up. I'm asking you to let me be a part of it."

His words hit me like a wave, knocking the air out of my lungs. I wanted to believe him, to trust that this could work without losing myself in the process. But the fear was still there, gnawing at the edges of my resolve.

"I'm scared," I admitted, my voice barely above a whisper. "I'm scared of getting hurt. Of messing this up. Of losing myself in you."

Levi reached out, his hand brushing against my cheek, his touch gentle but grounding. "I'm scared too," he said, his voice raw with emotion. "But I'd rather face that fear with you than without you. You're not alone in this, Krista. We'll figure it out together."

His words were like a lifeline, pulling me back from the edge of my doubts. I looked

into his eyes, seeing the vulnerability there, the same vulnerability I felt.

"Okay," I said softly, leaning into his touch.

He pulled me into his arms, and I let myself sink into the warmth of him, the safety of his embrace. It wasn't perfect, and it wasn't easy, but it was real. And it was exactly where I was supposed to be.

The moment was shattered by the sound of the sliding door opening again. Garrett stepped out, his expression grim.

"We've got a problem," he said, his tone urgent.

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I pulled back from Levi, my heart racing. "What is it?"

"Troy Mercer's dead," Garrett said, his words hanging heavy in the air. "They just found his body."

The news hit me like a punch to the gut. Troy had been a nuisance, sure, but he'd also been a potential lead in our investigation into Dante. Now, he was just another casualty in a game that was growing deadlier by the minute. My mind raced, trying to process what this meant for us, for the case, for everything.

Levi's jaw tightened, his eyes narrowing as he turned to Garrett. "How?" he demanded, his voice low and dangerous.

"Looks like a hit," Garrett replied, his tone clipped. "Same MO as Selene. Dante's cleaning house."

I felt a chill run down my spine. Troy's death wasn't just a warning. It was a declaration of war. Dante was removing anyone who could connect him to Selene's death, and if we didn't act fast, we'd be next.

Chapter 10

LEVI

Anxiety thrummed under my skin as I paced across the spacious conference room. The fallout from Troy's death felt like an incoming hurricane that I was helpless to stop. It wouldn't be long before Dante directed the media in my direction and tried

to connect me to Troy's death. My legal team was seated around the table, eyes darting over the pages of prepared notes. Most of them were looking to me for leadership, but all I felt was a gnawing sense of dread.

"We need to secure an emergency injunction against the media," I said, breaking the silence. My voice sounded steadier than I felt.

Alan, my lead attorney, adjusted his glasses and nodded. "That will buy you time, but it won't be enough. The media is already speculating. Dante is a savvy opponent. He's going to use this chaos against you."

Frustration simmered in my chest. "We need to stop the bleeding before it starts. If we can restrict them from publishing anything until we set our own narrative, it'll give us room to breathe."

The room filled with murmurs of agreement, but beneath the surface, I felt the anxiety rising. I could sense it in every glance exchanged, every scribble of notes. Everyone knew the stakes were higher than they had been. Selene's death had marked us, and now Troy was gone, another pawn sacrificed. My instincts screamed that Dante was ready to strike again.

I wrapped up the meeting with a sense of urgency, giving my team final instructions as they prepared to move forward with the injunction. We had to be rational and strategic. Still, as I exited the conference room, the tight knot in my stomach pulled tighter.

As soon as I stepped into the car, adrenaline coursed through my veins. The mansion felt like it was both a sanctuary and a prison, and I needed to get back to Krista. She was my focus now, more than the looming shadows of Dante, more than the media chaos.

When I arrived, a familiar warmth greeted me as I entered the house."Krista?"I called out.I headed toward the kitchen and found her sitting at the counter with her laptop open and papers scattered around her.She looked up, her expression a mix of concentration and relief at seeing me.

"There you are," she said, a smile breaking across her face."How did the meeting go?"

I leaned against the counter, crossing my arms."We secured an emergency injunction, but it's only a temporary fix.They'll find another way to hit us, I'm sure."

Her brow furrowed, concern etched across her features."We need to go public with our findings.The sooner we call out Dante, the sooner we can take control of the narrative."

I opened my mouth to protest but stopped myself."It's too dangerous, Krista.You don't understand what he's capable of."

She leaned closer, her tone growing passionate."It's exhausting playing defense all the time!We're giving him the upper hand by staying silent.Don't you want to fight back?We need to make a move before he makes one against us."

Caught between her fire and my instinct to protect her, I exploded."And what if that move puts you in his crosshairs?"

Her eyes flashed with anger and frustration, and I could see her resolve harden."I'm not a fragile little bird you need to protect, Levi!You hired me to fix the burning mess that's your reputation, remember?We can't keep tiptoeing around him forever."

The air thickened with an intensity that felt electric.I opened my mouth to argue further, but the words caught in my throat.She wasn't wrong.I was trying to shield her

from the danger, but in doing so, I was inadvertently belittling her strength.

"Krista, you're stronger than you know," I conceded, my voice softer now. "But rushing in without a plan could jeopardize everything we've worked for."

She shook her head, determination etched on her face. "And what about Troy? He's dead because we're not being proactive. We need to expose Dante and put an end to this before anyone else gets hurt."

"There are better ways to handle this," I argued back, though my own confidence was waning beneath the weight of her passionate plea.

"The longer we wait, the more power we give him," she stated, frustration bleeding into her tone. "I refuse to sit back and let him control our narrative."

Her eyes shone with frustration, and I felt the weight of everything we faced pressing down on us. I could see how much this meant to her, how desperately she wanted to make a difference. But my wolf stirred within me, letting out a howl of warning, sensing how reckless this could be.

At that moment, the combination of fear and fierce determination twisted in her chest, and her eyes shimmered with unshed tears. "I feel trapped, Levi! Trapped as we helplessly play defense to his attacks. I don't want to be left in the shadows. I can't go on being your mouthpiece while we slowly drown."

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My heart twisted painfully at her admission. "I'm not trying to keep you in the shadows. I'm trying to protect you!" I snapped, frustration bubbling over.

"From what? The truth?" she challenged, her voice rising. "I thought you trusted me!"

I couldn't respond. The truth was, I did trust her more than anyone, yet my instincts were battling against my emotions. I had spent my life protecting those I cared about, and everything inside me screamed that showing vulnerability here would expose us both at our weakest point.

Krista took a step back, visibly hurt. "Maybe you don't see me as a partner, then," she said softly, her voice trembling.

"Krista," I started, but the look in her eyes stopped me. She was angry, yes, but there was also a vulnerability there that broke my heart. Deep down, I could see the frustration that had built up in her, and I realized that I had done this to her. I was holding her back when all she wanted was to stand alongside me.

She turned away, tears spilling down her cheeks. The sight hit me like a blow, and every instinct in me screamed that this was not right. I closed the gap between us just as she wiped away her tears with a shaky hand.

"Krista," I said softly, my voice breaking. "I never wanted to hurt you." I stepped closer, reaching for her again, but she stepped back, furthering the space between us. "I'm sorry," I said finally, my voice raw. "I'm scared too. I'm scared of losing you to that monster out there."

She shook her head, the anguish in her eyes piercing through me. Before I could stop myself, I stepped forward again, enveloping her in my arms. She hesitated, holding herself stiff for a heartbeat, but then melted against me, her warm body pressing against mine as I held her tightly. I could feel the rhythm of her heartbeat against my own, steady and strong.

"I can't lose you," I murmured against her hair, letting the storm of my emotions wash over us. "I refuse to let Dante take what we have." She sniffed softly, leaning into my chest as if seeking solace in my embrace. The warmth of her presence steadied me, and I felt my resolve beginning to rebuild itself.

"You won't lose me, Levi," she replied, her voice muffled against my shirt. "I promise. But we need to take a stand."

I pulled back slightly, searching her face for any sign of doubt. Instead, all I found was a determined fire to fight that mirrored my own. "Alright," I whispered, cupping her face in my hands. "Let's come up with a plan of attack."

She nodded, her gaze unwavering as I leaned in and pressed my forehead against hers. "We'll gather evidence, hit Dante hard and fast where it hurts. But first, we need to make sure we have everything in order."

Krista's eyes sparkled with determination. "I have some ideas for getting testimonies from the shelter volunteers and pet owners at the adoption events. Cute videos with puppies and kittens aren't enough anymore. We need people to vouch for your character. If we can showcase the good you've done there, it might balance out the bad press. It's our best shot at humanizing you and villainizing Dante for threatening all of that."

Her enthusiasm ignited something in me, even as the shadow of Dante loomed larger. "Fine, but we need to keep this under wraps. I don't want anything leaking

before we're ready to move."

"I'll coordinate with Zane," she promised, her lips curling into a determined smile. "I'll be safe."

"Good," I said, stepping back. My heart lifted at the thought of her diving headfirst into action. But my body shifted uneasily, caught between wanting to move forward and the alarming feeling rising in my gut that she was putting herself in danger.

Krista grabbed her bag, a determined glint in her eyes. "I'll keep you updated," she said as she headed toward the door. I watched her leave, feeling a strange mix of pride and panic surging within me.

I stood rooted for a moment, battling the instinct to call her back. Krista was heading to the animal shelter, a place that housed innocent lives and, by extension, the only good PR I had left. The weight of what lay ahead pressed down on me, but Krista was fiercer than I had ever imagined. She wasn't the type to back down. Still, the thought of her out there on her own made my wolf stir uneasily.

The minute I tried to shake off the growing dread, the mate bond between us pulsed, sharp and agonizing. I froze, my heart racing.

Something's wrong.

Krista's presence, usually a steady force, flickered like a candle in the wind. The bond between us had never felt this strained nor this chaotic.

The wolf snarled, clawing at my insides, urging me to move and go to her. I stumbled back toward the living room, fingers flexing with agitation as my claws itched to burst out.

I grabbed my phone and checked for any updates, but there was nothing. Anxiety clawed at me. I needed to act. Fast.

Without a plan, I raced to the door, flinging it wide open. Then, the change ripped through me. Bones snapped and rearranged themselves, my back arching as it lengthened. Muscles tore and reknit, sinew stretched like molten wire beneath my skin. My jaw unhinged with a wet pop, fangs punching through bleeding gums as my muzzle stretched forward. Claws split my fingertips, slicing through flesh as they surged free, and a scream lodged in my throat, half-human, half-beast.

The world exploded into a barrage of scent and sound as I propelled myself forward. I dashed through the trees and down the winding road toward the shelter. With each stride, my senses sharpened, honing in on the distant sound of tires screeching against asphalt. A sense of urgency clawed at my insides as the bond flared with Krista's fear. And beneath it all, the mate bond pulsed like a living thing, her heartbeat thundering against mine, each frantic thud a knife twisting deeper. I charged out of the mansion, my instincts guiding me like a beacon.

Images flashed in my mind, the gleam of weapons, shadows flicking in and out of view, and the unmistakable sound of danger approaching. I pushed harder, sprinting faster than I ever had before, feeling the power of the wolf surge through me.

As I neared the shelter, I caught sight of Krista's car pulled over at the side of the road. My blood ran cold. The sound of muffled voices reached me, followed by a crisp command that froze me in place: "Get her out of the car!"

No! The wolf snarled at the threat to our mate.

The world narrowed down to a singular focus. Krista. I could sense her frustration and terror. I lunged forward, muscles coiling like springs ready to unleash fury.

I crouched low as I approached the scene, aware of at least three men standing around Krista's vehicle, their aggressive postures accentuated by the glint of weapons. My heart pounded in my chest, driven by the instinct to protect.

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I needed a plan, or I'd charge in blindly, and that wouldn't do either of us any good. I steeled myself, feeling every ounce of my primal hunting instincts come alive. My wolf was ready for the fight.

I focused on Krista through the cloud of chaos surrounding her. She was holding her ground, and I could see her expression flash from fear to defiance. Yes, be strong and unyielding. Don't let them take you down, my wolf thought, urging me onward.

As I approached from the side, hidden by the dense foliage, I caught snippets of their conversation. "You think he cares about you?" one of the men sneered at Krista. "You're just another pawn in his game. He'll choose his career over you in the end."

Fury pulsed through me. No one was allowed to speak to her like that. I felt her heart quicken, the rage flowing through the bond toward me.

In that moment, unseen and unheard, I slid closer, my muscles rippling as I prepared to launch myself into the fray. Everything faded as I honed my focus on the nearest man, a stocky figure with a taunting smirk that made my blood boil. The threat he posed was no longer theoretical. It was real and immediate.

Suddenly, I heard Krista's voice, steady yet fierce. "You don't know anything about me or Levi. He's more than just some celebrity monster you think you can use to get ahead. You're making a grave mistake threatening me."

Her defiance rattled through the air like a challenge thrown down. My wolf roared in approval, echoing her fearlessness. But with each second that passed, my anxiety

escalated. I sensed the danger creeping closer, and it ignited a primal hunger to protect what was mine, to defend my mate at all costs.

Then, I sprang into action.

With a deep, guttural growl, I leaped from my hiding place, muscles coiled tight as a spring and releasing in a perfect explosion as I tore through the thick brush. The resounding thud of my paws hitting the ground echoed like a war drum. Time seemed to slow as the men spun around, eyes wide in shock as they registered what was barreling toward them.

"What the—"*

The first man never had a chance to finish his thought as I collided with him, my body crashing into his full speed. The impact was fierce, sending him crumpling to the ground. The sickening crack of his head connecting with the asphalt sent a primal thrill through me.

I could hear her gasp, a mixture of surprise and relief, but not fear. It urged me on, fueling the beast's protective rage.

The remaining two men scrambled to reach for their weapons, but I was faster. I whirled around, fangs bared, and lunged toward the next closest figure. The second thug swung his arm to strike me, but I deftly dodged and sunk my teeth into his arm, biting down hard. A scream erupted from his mouth, a raw, desperate sound that ignited my fury further. A couple swipes of my claws and he fell lifelessly to the ground.

The moment I tasted blood, my wolf surged with power, pushing me deeper into the fight. I didn't care who these men were or what their motives were. All I felt was the desire for them to back off and leave my mate alone.

The last man tried to make a run for it, but I wasn't about to let him escape. In a furious sprint, I lunged forward, anticipating his desperate flight. My powerful legs propelled me forward, and I quickly closed the distance. I howled for vengeance, the taste of it bitter and strong in the air.

I pounded down on him, catching his jacket in my jaws, and bringing him down to the ground with a force that rattled the earth beneath us. With a vicious snarl, I pinned him to the ground, my weight holding him still as I breathed heavily, the primal satisfaction surging through me. I fixated on the men who dared threaten my mate. They didn't just come for me, they threatened her existence. The fury that surged through me was fiercer than any emotion I had ever felt before.

Just as I pressed my claws down harder on his throat, he twisted his body to pull a knife from his belt. I snarled, the sound low and menacing, my reflexes kicking into high gear as I released my hold momentarily. Before he could make any attempt to attack, I clamped my jaws at his arm with renewed intensity, knocking the weapon from his grip and sending it sliding across the road with a sharp clatter. He cried out in pain as his arm snapped.

I heard Krista's voice echoing behind me, rising in a mix of fear and urgency. "Levi! Behind you!" Her warning broke through the chaos, and I turned just in time to see another figure emerging from the trees, another of Dante's men creeping in to ambush me from my blind side. I could sense Krista moving behind me, her eyes wide with panic but filled with fierce determination.

"Get back!" I snarled at her through our bond, leaping in front of her as we both faced the new threat together.

The man hesitated but didn't back down. He raised his gun at us, but my instincts kicked into overdrive. With a surge of adrenaline, I lunged at him, my heart pounding with each pulse of rage.

I threw my body against him, knocking the gun from his hands, the metallic clang ringing in the stillness. I wrestled with him, a furious storm of fangs and claws, beating him into the ground as my breath came out in hot bursts. The fear in his eyes faded as his life slipped away. Krista remained behind me, her presence a steady anchor. She was the only thing that could bring me back from the edge.

I dropped the limp body from my jaws, his blood warm and metallic against my snout. I turned around and pinned the remaining thug lying on the ground. He sniveled in pain as he clenched his injured arm against his chest.

Slowly, I prowled toward him, my paws shaking the ground with each step. I let the wolf slip away until I was human again. I leaned close, grabbing the nape of his jacket with my hands and shaking him. My voice lowered to a menacing whisper. "You will leave now. Tell Dante he's made a mistake."

With a frantic jerk, he nodded, and I could see the resolve leaving him. I released him abruptly, allowing him to scramble back to his feet. He shot a terrified glance at Krista, but I interjected. "Go. And if I see you again, it will be the last time you draw breath."

With an uneasy retreat, the man backed away, his eyes glinting with fear as he turned on his heel and fled into the woods.

I exhaled sharply, adrenaline still coursing through my veins, but my attention turned to Krista. I felt the bond between us stabilize, the frantic fearful pulse turning into a gentle warmth that washed over my heart as I approached her. All that mattered now was making sure that she was unharmed.

"Krista? Are you alright?" I asked, searching her face, my heart still pounding from the confrontation.

"I'm fine," she stammered, though her voice trembled. "You came so fast."

"I'll always come for you, no matter what," I promised, stepping closer to her. I reached out, brushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear, my fingers lingering on her cheek. "I'm so damn sorry you got caught up in this. I should've never let you out here alone."

Her eyes locked onto mine, a mixture of gratitude and fear swirling within them.

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"It just happened so fast. One minute I was gathering testimonials, and the next they surrounded the car. But Levi, you were incredible. I've never seen anything so amazing, so beautiful," she whispered.

It was the first time anybody had ever described my wolf as beautiful. If it hadn't come from my mate's mouth, I wouldn't have believed it. I placed a gentle kiss on her forehead. "There's a lot you don't know," I murmured, the weight of my dual nature settling between us. "But what matters is that you're safe."

"Let's get out of here," she said, the determination returning to her voice, but I could see the tremors still trembling through her body.

I took her hand in mine, giving it a reassuring squeeze as we turned toward the shelter. The familiar building loomed in the distance, now a sanctuary from the chaos outside. My senses remained alert, still partly within the adrenaline-fueled haze.

As we rounded the corner, I could see the familiar faces of the volunteers. They stared wide-eyed, uncertainty etched into their features, but I wasn't about to let anyone else near Krista.

"Let's head inside," I said, leading her past the guard of volunteers, their presence instantly making me feel a bit more at ease.

Once we were inside the shelter, I pulled Krista into a quiet corner, away from prying eyes. "You did well. You showed incredible bravery back there."

She shook her head, a mix of pride and vulnerability in her gaze. "All I could think

about was you. I couldn't let them talk to you like that. It felt wrong."

"It's because you care," I responded, my heart swelling. "But you've gotta promise me something."

"Anything," she replied, determination setting in her stance.

"Be careful. I can't lose you, Krista. Not now." The weight of the evening's danger pressed down heavily on my chest, the fierce resolve streaking through me. "We fight together, but there are times when I can't have you out there on the front lines, not like this."

Krista's expression softened, the fire in her eyes giving way to a vulnerability that stirred something deep within me. "I understand, Levi. But you have to let me fight in my own way. You can't shield me every time. I want to stand with you, not behind you."

I nodded slowly, acknowledging her courage but wishing we didn't have to navigate this darkness together. "Let's go back to the mansion," I suggested, gathering our bearings. "We need to regroup and revise our plan. We can't let them get the upper hand again."

As we stepped outside, I held her hand firmly, taking comfort in the physical connection and the mate bond between us. After the chaos, I could feel that we were more tightly woven together now, inseparable from each other.

With the shelter fading into the background and our minds set on the battle ahead, I knew I would protect Krista with every ounce of my being. I vowed to keep her safe from harm forever even at the cost of my own life.

Chapter 11

KRISTA

The library was deadly still, with the only sounds being the soft rustle of papers as Zane sorted through a stack of files. Levi paced the room, the anxiety rolling off of him in waves. Garrett leaned against the wall, arms crossed, his expression unreadable but his eyes sharp. Dean made a rare outing from his office to come to the mansion. He sat at the desk, his fingers flying across the keyboard, pulling up every scrap of information he could find on Dante's latest moves.

The grimness of the situation was overbearing, but I refused to let it crush me. This was it. The moment we'd been working toward. The moment we could finally take Dante down.

"He's making his move," Dean said, breaking the silence. His voice was calm, but his eyes were fierce. "I intercepted a kill order. Dante's hired assassins to take out Levi, and you, Krista."

The words hit me like a punch to the gut, but I didn't flinch. I'd expected this. Dante was desperate, and desperate men made reckless decisions. "Then we make ours," I said, my voice steady. "We use everything we've got to lure him out. He'll come for me if he thinks I'm vulnerable."

Levi froze, his eyes snapping to mine. "No," he said firmly. "Absolutely not. I'm not putting you in danger."

I stood, meeting his gaze head-on. "You're not putting me there. I'm volunteering. This is the only way we'll get him to slip up."

Garrett straightened, his eyes narrowing as he studied me. "She's right," he said after a moment. Levi pinned Garrett with a glare that could have burned a hole through him. "Dante's cocky enough to take the bait if it's her."

Levi's jaw tightened, and I could see the war raging in his eyes, the instinct to protect me battling against the need to end this. "It's too dangerous," he growled.

"Levi, we don't have a choice. If we wait, he'll come for us on his terms. This way, we control the narrative."

Dean leaned back in his chair, his fingers steepled in front of him. "I'll monitor the situation remotely. Once he starts confessing, I'll trigger the live feed. Zane's already rigged a hidden camera in your bag. The world will see everything."

Levi's eyes flicked to Dean, then back to me. The conflict in his gaze was raw, unfiltered. "If anything happens to you—"

I cut him off, stepping closer and grabbing both of his clenched hands in mine. I unfurled his fists until both of our hands were entwined. "Then shift and rip his throat out," I said. "I'm not going down without a fight, Levi. But I need you to trust me."

He stared at me, his jaw working as he struggled with the decision. Finally, he exhaled sharply, his shoulders sagging in defeat. "Fine. But you stay within my line of sight. No unnecessary risks."

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I nodded, relief and determination coursing through me. "I promise."

Later, in Levi's bedroom, the tension between us was thick enough to cut with a knife. He stood by the window, his back to me, the moonlight casting long shadows across his tense frame. I approached him slowly, my heart pounding in my chest.

"Levi," I said softly, placing a hand on his shoulder.

He turned, his eyes dark and filled with a storm of emotions. "If anything happens to you—" he started again, his voice breaking.

I stepped closer, cutting him off with a kiss. It was fierce and desperate, pouring all the fear, determination, and unspoken words between us into that single moment. His arms wrapped around me, pulling me tight against him as if he could shield me from the danger with his body alone.

When we finally pulled away, I rested my forehead against his, my breath coming in shaky gasps. "I'll be careful," I whispered. "But this is our chance, Levi. We can't let it slip away."

He kissed me again, softer this time, but no less intense. "Stay safe," he murmured against my lips. "That's an order."

I smirked, pulling back slightly. "You're not the boss of me."

The corner of his mouth twitched, a ghost of a smile breaking through. "Unfortunately for you, I am."

I laughed, the sound light and freeing, even as my stomach churned with nerves. "Let's end this."

The warehouse was dimly lit, and the inside smelled of dust and decay. I stood in the center of the large open space, my heart pounding in my chest. The weight of the bag with the hidden camera pressed against my side and I clutched it tightly like a shield. Levi and Garrett were hidden in the shadows, their presence a silent reassurance, but I couldn't afford to glance their way. I had to play my part.

The sound of footsteps echoed through the cavernous room, and I turned to see Dante stride in, flanked by his men. His smile was cold and calculating as he surveyed the scene.

"Well, well," he said, his voice dripping with mockery. "I didn't expect you to walk into the lion's den so willingly."

I crossed my arms, forcing a smirk onto my face. "You're not a lion, Dante. You're a cockroach, and I'm here to squash you."

His smile faltered for a brief moment before he chuckled, the sound hollow. "Brave words for someone who's outnumbered."

"Brave or not, you're not leaving here with your pride intact," I shot back, my voice steady. "You've made too many mistakes, and I'm here to make sure you pay for them."

Dante's eyes narrowed, his amusement fading as he stepped closer. "You think you can take me down? You're a nobody, Miss Fortune. A pawn in a game you don't understand."

"Maybe," I said, shrugging. "But I'm the pawn who's holding all the evidence. I have

all of it, Selene's death, the trafficking ring, the drugs. And when I release it, the world will know exactly what kind of monster you are."

His jaw tightened, a flicker of panic crossing his face before he masked it with a sneer. "Nobody will believe you. I could kill a hundred more Selenes and Troys and sell you to a brothel in Romania. It still wouldn't matter. I covered my tracks and I have every judge and cop in town in my pocket. Besides, you're bluffing."

I stepped closer, my gaze locked onto his. "Am I? Then why are you sweating?"

Dante's men shifted uneasily, but he held up a hand, keeping them at bay. "You're playing a dangerous game, little girl. One you won't win."

"The only game here is yours," I said, my voice sharp. "And it's over. You're done, Dante. The police are on their way, and the whole world is watching."

His mask of confidence cracked, his anger boiling over. "You think you can ruin me? I'll destroy you before you even have a chance to—"

His words were cut off by a low, guttural growl that echoed through the warehouse. Dante's men froze, their heads snapping toward the sound. Levi stepped out of the shadows, his eyes glowing with a feral light as his form shifted. The air around him seemed to crackle with raw power, and I could feel the primal energy radiating from him as his wolf emerged.

Dante stumbled back, his face pale as he registered the threat. "What the hell—" he started, but Levi didn't give him a chance to finish. With a snarl, he lunged forward, his massive form moving with terrifying speed. Dante's men scrambled to react, but they were no match for Levi's wolf.

The warehouse erupted into chaos. Levi tore through Dante's men with brutal

efficiency, his claws and fangs flashing in the dim light. Garrett joined the fray, his own wolf form moving in tandem with Levi's, their combined strength overwhelming the opposition.

I stayed where I was, my eyes locked on Dante as the fight raged around us. He backed away, his bravado crumbling as he realized the gravity of his mistake. "You think this changes anything?" he spat, his voice shaking with fear and anger. "You think you've won? This isn't over."

"It's over for you," I said, my voice steady despite the adrenaline coursing through me. "The world knows what you are now, Dante. There's nowhere left for you to hide."

His eyes flicked to the bag at my side, and I saw the moment he made the connection. "You're broadcasting this?" he hissed, panic lacing his words.

I smirked, holding up my phone to show the live feed Zane had set up. "Every second of it," I said. "You've just confessed to murder, human trafficking, and God knows what else. The police are already on their way."

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Dante's face twisted with rage, and he lunged at me, his hand reaching under his jacket for his gun. But before he could aim the gun at me, Levi was there. To my surprise, he shifted back to human form mid-motion. As much as all of us wanted to rip Dante to shreds, we were on a livestream, and Levi couldn't be seen as a murderous monster. Levi's hand clamped around Dante's wrist with bone-crushing force.

"Don't," Levi growled, his voice low and dangerous. "You lay a finger on her, and I'll finish what I started." Dante's eyes widened in fear, but the defiance didn't leave him entirely. He sneered, struggling against Levi's grip. His finger pulled the trigger, sending a bullet toward the ceiling.

Levi's free hand shot out, grabbing Dante by the collar and slamming him against the wall. "You're done, Dante," he snarled, his face inches from Dante's.

In the distance, the sound of sirens echoed, growing louder with each passing second. Dante's men were either unconscious or fleeing, leaving him alone and cornered. His bravado faltered, and for the first time, I saw genuine fear in his eyes.

"You're finished, Dante," Levi repeated. "The world knows what you are. There's no coming back from this."

Dante's lips curled into a snarl, but there was no bite left in him. His confidence had shattered, and the man who had once been a predator now looked like nothing more than a cornered animal. "This isn't over," he spat, though his voice trembled. "You'll regret this, Storm."

Levi leaned in closer, his eyes burning with intensity. "The only thing I regret is not taking you down sooner."

The sound of boots pounding against concrete filled the air as the police burst into the warehouse, their guns drawn and voices barking orders. Levi stepped back, releasing Dante and pushing him toward the officers. Dante stumbled, his face pale and his hands raised in surrender. The police swarmed him, cuffing him without hesitation.

I stood frozen, my breath coming in shallow, uneven gasps as the police swarmed around Dante. The adrenaline that had kept me upright was ebbing, leaving my limbs heavy and my hands trembling at my sides. The scent of dust and sweat clung to the air, but it was the sharp bitter smell of his fear that lingered in my lungs.

My eyes locked onto Dante's as they led him away, his face pale but his gaze still sharp. He met my stare, and for a moment, I saw the bitterness, the rage, the unyielding promise of revenge. My stomach churned, a cold knot of dread tightening in my chest.

"This isn't over." His words repeated in my mind like a curse. I clenched my fists, my nails digging into my palms, trying to steady myself. But even as the police dragged him out, hauling him into the waiting police car, I couldn't shake the feeling that this was only the beginning.

Levi's presence snapped me back to reality. He was at my side in an instant, his hands gripping my shoulders as his eyes searched mine. "Are you okay?" he asked.

I nodded, though my body was still humming with the aftershocks of the confrontation. "I'm fine," I said, forcing my voice to be steady. But the truth was, I didn't feel fine.

Levi pulled me into his arms, his embrace so tight it almost hurt. I buried my face in

his chest, inhaling the familiar scent of him and letting it calm my nerves. His warmth seeped into me, but the tremors in my hands wouldn't stop. I clenched his shirt in my fists, anchoring myself to him.

The warehouse fell silent, the only sound the distant hum of police radios and the echo of our breathing. The air still smelled of dust and sweat, but the tension had shifted, replaced by a strange, fragile calm. I stood there, Levi's arms around me, and for the first time in what felt like forever, I allowed myself to breathe deep, slow breaths that filled my lungs and pushed out the lingering fear.

"It's over," Levi murmured. His hand cradled the back of my head, his fingers tangling in my hair. He pressed another kiss to my forehead, his lips warm and grounding. "You're safe. We're safe."

I nodded against his chest, my fingers tightening in the fabric of his shirt. The adrenaline that had fueled me was fading, leaving me exhausted but strangely at peace.

Levi exhaled, his grip tightening around me. "Now, we make sure Dante can't hurt anyone ever again. He's going to prison for a long time. The evidence we've gathered and the live feed, it's all out there. The entire world knows what kind of monster he is. He's done, Krista. It's over."

As if sensing my unease, Levi pressed a kiss to my forehead, his lips lingering for a moment. "We'll be ready for whatever comes next," he said.

I tilted my head, a teasing smile tugging at my lips despite the heaviness of the moment. "Admit it, Levi. You're just glad you didn't have to clean up my mess for once."

The corner of his mouth twitched, that sly smile that lit up movie screens

worldwide. It was now mine and it made my pulse quicken. "You're lucky I didn't have to," he shot back, his tone light but his eyes serious. "But if you ever pull a stunt like that again, I'm cuffing you to my side. Permanently."

I laughed, the sound bubbling up unexpectedly, and it felt like a weight lifting from my chest. "Oh, so now you're the boss of me?"

His hand cupped my cheek, his touch warm and grounding. "Always have been, whether you admit it or not."

I leaned into his hand, the banter fading as the intensity of his gaze drew me in. "I'm not going anywhere, Levi," I said quietly. "Not without you."

He exhaled sharply, as if he'd been holding his breath, and pulled me closer. "Good. Because I'm not letting you go. Not now. Not ever."

Chapter 12

LEVI

I stood by the floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room, staring out at the ocean waves crashing in the distance. The sunlight streaming in felt almost mocking, too bright for the heaviness in my chest. The adrenaline of taking down Dante had faded, leaving behind a hollow ache. Winning hadn't felt like a victory. It felt like the start of another battle.

My phone buzzed incessantly on the coffee table, but I ignored it. The media frenzy was relentless, and every headline felt like a knife twisting in my gut.

LEVI STORM: HERO OR MONSTER?

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 10:17 am

DID HOLLYWOOD'S GOLDEN BOY COVER UP A MURDER?

KRISTA FORTUNE: THE WOMAN BEHIND THE SCANDAL

Krista's soft footsteps echoed behind me, and I didn't have to turn to know she was there.

Her presence was a warmth that cut through the tension in the room. She stopped beside me, her arm brushing mine as she followed my gaze out the window. For a moment, we just stood there, the silence between us comfortable and familiar.

"You're brooding again," she said finally, her voice teasing but laced with concern. "It's not a good look on you."

I huffed a laugh, though there was no humor in it. "I'm not brooding. I'm strategizing."

She raised an eyebrow, her lips quirking into a small smile. "Strategizing? Is that what we're calling staring at the ocean like it's plotting against you?"

I turned to look at her then, my chest tightening at the sight of her. Even now, with the weight of the world on her shoulders, she managed to find the humor in it. Her hair was messily on top of her head, and she was wearing one of my hoodies that swallowed her frame. She looked perfect.

"What if it's not enough?" I blurted out.

Krista's smile faltered slightly as she searched my face, her playful expression

softening into something more serious."What if what's not enough?"she asked quietly, her voice gentle but probing.

I hesitated, the words sticking in my throat.I wasn't used to vulnerability, to admitting weakness.But with Krista, it felt different.She had a way of disarming me, of making me feel safe even when I was teetering on the edge of losing control.

"What if all of clearing my name, taking down Dante, all the evidence we've gathered, what if it's not enough to fix what's broken?"My voice was low, the weight of my fears pressing down on me."What if it's not enough to protect you?To keep you safe?"

Her brow furrowed, and she stepped closer, her hand reaching up to cup my cheek.Her touch was warm and grounding.I couldn't help but lean into it."Levi," she said, her tone firm but laced with tenderness."You've already done more than enough.You're not just fighting for yourself anymore.You're fighting for justice.It's for Selene and for all the people Dante hurt.And you're not doing it alone.I'm here.We're in this together."

Her words should have been enough to ease the ache in my chest, but the doubt still lingered."I don't want my past to keep dragging you down," I admitted, my voice barely above a whisper."You deserve better than to be caught up in this mess."

Krista's eyes narrowed, and she gave me a pointed look."Stop it," she said firmly, her hand dropping from my face to poke me in the chest."You don't get to decide what I deserve, Levi.I'm here because I choose to be.Because I want to be.And if you think for one second that I'm going to let your self-doubt push me away, you're dead wrong."

I stared at her, stunned by the fierceness in her voice.There was no hesitation in her eyes, no trace of doubt.She meant every word, and it left me speechless.

She crossed her arms, tilting her head as she studied me. "You're not just Levi Storm, the actor, the alpha wolf, the guy with a chip on his shoulder the size of Hollywood," she continued, her tone softening but no less resolute. "You're Levi, the man who saved me when I didn't even know I needed saving. The man who shifts for a one-eyed Chihuahua and volunteers at an animal shelter because he cares. The man who, despite all his growling and brooding, has a heart bigger than he'll ever admit. That's who I choose. Not the image, not the fame, not the drama. You."

Her words hit me like a punch to the gut, knocking the air out of my lungs. I opened my mouth to respond, but nothing came out. I couldn't remember the last time someone had truly seen me and still chose to stay. My wolf stirred in my chest, a low, rumbling purr of contentment that I could feel vibrating through my bones.

Krista stepped closer, her arms uncrossing as she reached up to frame my face with her hands. Her gaze locked onto mine, fierce and unwavering. "You're stuck with me, Storm. Whether you like it or not."

A laugh bubbled up from somewhere deep inside me, unexpected and raw. It felt foreign, like a forgotten reflex, but it was real. "You're impossible," I said, my voice rough but affectionate.

Her lips curved into that blinding smile of hers, the one that could light up the darkest corners of my soul. "And yet, here you are," she shot back, her tone teasing but her eyes soft.

I pulled her into my arms, holding her tight against me. Her warmth seeped into my skin, chasing away the lingering chill of doubt. I buried my face in her hair and inhaled her scent, letting it ground me. "You're right," I murmured against her hair. "I'm stuck with you. And I wouldn't have it any other way."

She laughed softly, her breath warm against my chest, and I felt her arms wrap

around me just as tightly. For a moment, the chaos of the outside world faded away, leaving just the two of us in our little bubble of quiet.

But the peace didn't last long. From the corner of the room, the sound of a throat being cleared broke the silence. I glanced up to see Garrett standing in the doorway, his arms crossed and his expression unreadable. He raised an eyebrow, his tone dry but laced with amusement. "Am I interrupting something, or should I come back later?"

Krista pulled back slightly, her cheeks flushing a faint pink, but she didn't let go of me. "You're fine, Garrett," she said, her voice steady despite the embarrassment. "What's up?"

Garrett stepped further into the room, his gaze flicking between us before settling on me. "We've got a situation. The press is camped outside the gates, and they're not going anywhere. They're demanding a statement from you."

I groaned, the weight of the world settling back onto my shoulders. "Of course they are. What do they want now?"

"A lot of things," Garrett said, his tone grim. "Mostly, they want to know about your involvement with Dante. They're speculating about Selene's death, Krista's role in all of this, and whether you're going to address the rumors head-on. Some are even questioning if Krista's just a PR stunt."

Krista stiffened beside me, and I felt a low growl rumbling in my chest. "They're calling her a stunt?" I snapped, my temper flaring. "After everything we've both done to take Dante down?"

Garrett held up a hand, his expression calm but firm. "Don't shoot the messenger, Levi. But you need to decide how you're going to handle this. If you don't address it, they'll keep pushing. If you do, you risk giving them more ammunition."

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I raked a hand through my hair, frustration bubbling over. "So, what's the play here? Ignore them and hope they go away? Or feed the beast and risk making it worse?"

Krista stepped forward, her hand slipping into mine. "We don't ignore it," she said, her voice steady and resolute. "We address it head-on. We've got the truth on our side, Levi. Dante's crimes are out in the open now. We've got the evidence, the live feed, and the public's attention. This is our chance to set the record straight."

I turned to look at her, her determination sparking something deep within me. Her confidence was infectious, and I could feel the weight of my own fears starting to lift. "You're right," I said, my voice firm now. "We've been on the defensive for too long. It's time we take control of the narrative."

Krista nodded, her grip on my hand tightening. "Exactly. We'll hold a press conference. You'll speak candidly about Selene's death, the evidence against Dante, and what this means for Hollywood moving forward. No more hiding, no more dodging. We give them the truth, and we let the chips fall where they may."

Garrett stepped forward, his arms still crossed but his expression more approving. "It's risky, but it might be the best move. The public's already starting to turn in your favor. If you're transparent and genuine, they'll see you as the victim here, not the villain."

I took a deep breath, the weight of the decision settling over me. I hated the spotlight, hated the way it stripped me bare and left me exposed. But I couldn't keep running. Not anymore. "Alright," I said, finally. "Let's do it. But we do it on our terms."

Krista's smile was small but triumphant. "Atta boy. I'll coordinate with Zane to get everything set up. We'll need to craft a statement, but I think it's important that you speak from the heart, Levi. People can smell insincerity a mile away. Be honest. Be real."

I nodded, though my stomach churned at the thought. Being vulnerable in front of millions wasn't exactly my idea of a good time, but if it meant clearing my name and protecting Krista, I'd do it. "Alright. Let's make it happen."

As Krista and Garrett began to strategize, I found myself lingering by the window again, the sunlight now feeling less mocking and more hopeful. For the first time in what felt like forever, I felt a sense of clarity. The road ahead would be rough, and the media circus wasn't going away anytime soon. But with Krista by my side, I knew I could face whatever came next.

I glanced over at her, her head bouncing as she gestured animatedly, her voice steady and confident. She was a force of nature, and I was grateful that she'd chosen to stand beside me, even when I hadn't made it easy. She'd walked into my life like a storm, upending everything I thought I knew about myself, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

"Levi," she called, pulling me out of my thoughts. "We need to go over the key points for the press conference. You ready?"

I nodded, crossing the room to join her. "Ready as I'll ever be."

She smiled that radiant smile that always seemed to light up the darkest corners of my world. "Good. Because you're about to show the world who you really are. Not the Hollywood alpha wolf. Just Levi. And I think they're going to love him."

Her words settled over me like a balm, easing the knot of anxiety in my chest. I wasn't

sure if the world would ever truly see me the way she did, but as long as she did, that was enough.

The press conference was set for the following morning, and the hours leading up to it were a flurry of activity. Krista and Zane worked tirelessly to craft a statement that was both honest and strategic. Garrett coordinated security to ensure things didn't spiral out of control. I, on the other hand, spent most of the time pacing, rehearsing what I wanted to say in my head.

"You're going to wear a hole through the floor to China," Krista teased at one point, catching me mid-stride.

I stopped, raking a hand through my hair. "I just want to get this right."

She stepped closer, her expression softening. "You will. Just speak from the heart, Levi. That's all you need to do."

I nodded, though the weight of what I was about to do still pressed heavily on my shoulders.

When the time came, I stood on stage, the sea of cameras and reporters glaring back at me like a pack of predators. My pulse quickened, but I forced myself to take a deep breath, grounding myself in the moment.

"Thank you all for being here," I began, my voice steady despite the nerves. "I know there's been a lot of speculation about my involvement in recent events, and I'm here to set the record straight."

The room fell silent, every pair of eyes fixed on me. I continued, my words measured but filled with conviction. "Selene Reyes was a friend and a talented artist. Her death was a tragedy, and it's one that I feel deeply. I want to make it clear. I had no part in

her death. But I do take responsibility for not seeing the signs of the danger she was in. For not doing more to protect her. And for that, I'll always carry guilt."

I paused, Selene's memory pressing heavily on me. The room was deathly quiet.

"The truth is, this isn't just about me," I continued, my voice growing stronger. "It's about the systemic corruption that's plagued our industry for far too long. Dante Grimshaw's arrest is just the beginning. He orchestrated Selene's death, ran a drug ring, and exploited countless others for his own gain. But he didn't act alone. There are others complicit in this. People in the industry who turned a blind eye or actively enabled his crimes. And it's time we held them accountable."

The murmurs started then, whispers spreading like wildfire through the crowd. I could feel the shift in the room, the energy turning from skepticism to something more urgent.

"I'm not here to play the victim," I said, my tone firm. "I know my past isn't spotless. I've made mistakes, and I'll own them. But I'm not the villain in this story. The real villains are the ones who prey on the vulnerable and who use their power to harm rather than protect. And I refuse to let them win."

I glanced over at Krista, who stood off to the side, her eyes locked on me. She gave me a small nod, her expression filled with quiet pride. It gave me the strength to keep going.

"I'm not here to ask for your forgiveness," I said, turning back to the crowd. "I'm here to ask for your help. To stand with me in demanding justice for Selene and for everyone who's been victimized by this system. This isn't just my fight, it's ours. And together, we can make sure no one else has to suffer the way she did."

The room erupted into questions, reporters shouting over one another to be heard. But

I held up a hand, silencing them.

"That's all I have to say for now," I said, my voice cutting through the chaos. "We'll be releasing a full statement with the evidence we've gathered. Thank you."

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 10:17 am

As I stepped away from the podium, the noise behind me reached a fever roar, but I tuned it out. My focus was on Krista, who met me halfway. Her expression was a mix of pride and relief.

"You did it," she said softly, her hand finding mine. "You were perfect."

I let out a shaky breath, the weight of the moment finally hitting me. "I don't know about perfect, but it's a start."

She smiled, her thumb brushing against my knuckles. "A damn good one."

Garrett appeared at my side, his usual stoic demeanor cracked by a faint smirk. "That was a hell of a speech, Storm. Didn't know you had it in you."

I shot him a look, though there was no real heat behind it. "Thanks, Garrett. I'll take that as a compliment."

Zane joined us, his tablet in hand and a grin plastered across his face. "The internet's already exploding. People are calling you a hero, Levi. And the hashtag #JusticeForSelene is trending worldwide."

I glanced at Krista, who squeezed my hand reassuringly. "It's what she deserved," I said quietly. "What they all deserve."

The next few days were a whirlwind of media coverage, legal proceedings, and public scrutiny. The evidence we'd gathered against Dante was indisputable, and his arrest sent shockwaves through Hollywood. The public's reaction was

overwhelmingly supportive, with many praising Selene and calling for systemic change within the industry.

But not everyone was on my side. There were still those who questioned my motives and who painted me as a self-serving opportunist. And then there were the vultures, the ones who'd latched onto my relationship with Krista, twisting it into a narrative of scandal and intrigue.

I tossed the tabloid onto the coffee table, my jaw tight. "They're relentless," I muttered, running a hand through my hair.

Krista sat down beside me, her presence instantly calming the storm brewing inside me. She picked up the tabloid, flipping through it with a look of mild amusement rather than anger. "Let them talk," she said, her tone light but firm. "They're going to spin whatever story sells. But we know the truth. That's what matters."

I turned to look at her, my frustration softening at the sight of her composure. "I just hate that they're dragging you into this. You don't deserve to be a headline."

She shrugged, setting the tabloid aside. "I knew what I was signing up for when I decided to stand by your side. I'm not naive, Levi. I knew the scrutiny would come. But I also knew it would be worth it."

Her words hit me with a kind of quiet intensity, and I reached for her hand, lacing my fingers through hers. "You're something else, you know that?"

She smiled, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "I've been told."

The next morning, I woke to an avalanche of texts and missed calls. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes, groaning as I scrolled through the notifications. Most of them were from my agent, and a quick glance at the timestamp told me she'd been trying to

reach me since the crack of dawn.

"What now?" I muttered, sitting up in bed.

Krista stirred beside me, her hair a wild halo around her face. "What's going on?" she asked, her voice thick with sleep.

"Not sure yet," I said, opening the latest text from my agent. My eyes widened as I read the message. "Oh."

"Oh?" Krista propped herself up on one elbow, her brow furrowing. "Is that a good 'oh' or a bad 'oh'?"

I handed her my phone, unable to hide the grin spreading across my face. "It's a very good 'oh.'"

Her eyes scanned the screen, and then she was sitting up, her smile lighting up the room. "The studio's moving forward with the franchise? That's amazing, Levi!"

I nodded, a mix of relief and excitement coursing through me. "They're officially announcing it this afternoon. They're keeping me on as the lead." I read the message twice, my heart pounding in my chest. It wasn't just a win. It was a second chance.

Krista's smile widened, and she threw her arms around me, nearly knocking me back against the headboard. "I knew it! I told you they wouldn't let you go. This is huge!"

Her words hit me harder than the news itself. I pulled her into a hug, burying my face in her hair. "I couldn't have done this without you," I said, my voice muffled. "You're the reason I'm still standing."

She pulled back slightly, her gaze soft but teasing. "Don't go getting all sappy on me,

Storm. You're still the one who took down Dante. You're the one the public rallied behind. I just helped clean up the mess."

"You did more than that," I said, my tone serious now. "You believed in me when I didn't even believe in myself. You fought for me, Krista. That's not something I'll ever forget."

Her eyes softened, and for a moment, the weight of everything we'd been through seemed to hover between us. She reached up, brushing a strand of hair from my forehead. "You're worth fighting for, Levi."

The studio's announcement later that day was met with a mix of excitement and skepticism. The headlines were split. Some celebrated my return to the franchise, others questioning whether I could carry the weight of such a high-profile role after everything that had happened. But for the first time in a long time, I didn't let the noise get to me. I had Krista by my side, and together, we'd weathered the storm. We'd emerged stronger, and I wasn't about to let anyone tear us apart now.

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 10:17 am

As the sun set that evening, we sat on the terrace. Krista leaned against me, her head resting on my shoulder. I stared out at the sky, the events of the past few weeks playing like a movie in my mind. Selene's death, Dante's downfall, the press conference, the studio's announcement, it had all been a whirlwind. But through it all, Krista had been my constant.

Krista's voice broke the silence, soft but teasing. "You know, for someone who's supposed to be Hollywood's biggest grump, you're turning out to be a pretty decent guy."

I chuckled, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "Don't let it get around. I've got a reputation to maintain."

She laughed, the sound warm and rich. I held her tighter, my chest swelling with something I didn't have a name for. Gratitude. Relief. Love. It was all of that and more.

"Thank you," I murmured, my voice barely audible above the sound of the waves.

She tilted her head to look at me with curious eyes. "For what?"

"For being you," I said simply. "For believing in me. For staying."

Her smile was small but radiant, and she leaned in, pressing her lips to mine in a kiss that felt like a promise. "Always," she whispered when she pulled away.

As we sat there, and the darkening sky wrapped itself around us like a comforting blanket, I knew then that this was exactly where I was meant to be. With her. Always.

Epilogue

KRISTA

SIX MONTHS LATER

The roar of the crowd was deafening as Levi and I stepped out of the limousine onto the red carpet. A sea of flashing cameras and eager voices called his name in a never-ending chant. Levi, ever the stoic alpha, gave a curt nod to the paparazzi, his hand tightening around mine as we made our way into the theater. His new film was premiering tonight, and while the chaos of the last six months still lingered in the back of my mind, I couldn't help but feel a swell of pride as I watched him navigate the frenzy with ease.

"You're glowing," Zane murmured in my ear as we paused for pictures. He was dressed in a sharp navy suit, his trademark glasses perched on his nose, and his grin was as mischievous as ever. "It's disgusting, really. I hope you're not planning to make this a habit."

I laughed, elbowing him gently in the ribs. "Jealousy doesn't suit you, Zane."

"Jealous? Me? Never," he said, feigning offense. "I'm just saying, it's a little unnerving to see the great Krista Fortune so blissfully domesticated."

"Domesticated?" I raised an eyebrow, my tone playful. "I'm still the same person, Zane. Just happier."

His teasing smile softened, and he nudged me with his shoulder. "Good. You deserve it."

Levi appeared beside me then, his arm sliding around my waist in a possessive but

tender gesture."Am I interrupting?"he asked, his voice low and slightly gruff, though the glint in his eyes told me he was only half-serious.

"Not at all," Zane said, throwing Levi a mock salute."Just admiring your handiwork, Storm.You've turned our fearless leader into a lovesick fool.Bravo."

Levi's lips twitched, the ghost of a smile playing at the corners of his mouth."I'll take that as a compliment."

The three of us laughed, the sound blending with the hum of the crowd.It was moments like these that reminded me how far we'd all come.Zane was still the same quirky, loyal friend I'd always known, but now that he had his own clients at the PR firm, there was a new confidence in him, a sense of purpose that had been missing before.

And Levi who was once so closed off and guarded, was now unabashedly affectionate, his walls crumbling bit by bit as we built a life together.

Inside the theater, the air buzzed with excitement.The flickering lights and the hum of conversation created an electric atmosphere, but Levi's presence beside me was a grounding force.His hand never left mine, a silent reassurance that we were in this together.

Garrett appeared as we found our seats, his tall frame commanding attention even in the dimly lit theater.He gave a rare smile, his usually stoic demeanor softening as he approached."Krista," he said with a nod, his deep voice carrying a hint of warmth."Happiness suits you."

I grinned, feeling a swell of gratitude for the man who had become an unexpected ally."Thank you, Garrett."

He glanced at Levi, his expression shifting to something more serious. "You've got a good one here, Storm. Don't mess it up."

Levi smirked, his grip on my hand tightening. "Not planning on it."

The lights dimmed, and the film began. As the opening credits rolled, I felt a surge of pride watching Levi's name flash across the screen. The audience was captivated, their laughter and gasps a testament to his talent. But my attention kept drifting to Levi himself. There was a quiet intensity in his eyes as he watched the film, a mix of pride and relief that mirrored my own.

After the premiere, the after-party was a blur of champagne toasts and congratulations. Levi was pulled in every direction, but he always found his way back to me, his hand brushing against mine or his arm slipping around my waist in a silent declaration that I was his anchor amidst the chaos.

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 10:17 am

As the night wore on, Levi leaned down, his lips brushing my ear. "Let's get out of here," he murmured, his voice low and filled with promise.

I nodded, my heart skipping a beat as he led me away from the noise and into the quiet night. The limousine ride faded into the background, my focus entirely on the man beside me. When we arrived at the animal shelter, I blinked in surprise. The place was transformed. Rope lights strung overhead twinkled like stars and the rescued animals watched us with curious eyes from their kennels.

"Levi, what is this?" I asked, my voice soft with wonder.

He turned to me, his blue eyes glowing with a mix of nervousness and admiration. "I wanted to do something special," he said, his voice low but steady. "Something that felt like us."

I looked around, taking in the scene. The lights glowed soft and golden, the animals wandered lazily or curled up in cozy corners, and a small makeshift altar sat near the center of the shelter. Behind it stood Zane, Garrett, and Dean, their expressions ranging from amused to solemn. Even the animals seemed to sense the significance of the moment, their usual chaos replaced by a quiet, almost reverent stillness.

"You didn't..." I started, my voice catching in my throat.

Levi took my hands in his. "Krista," he began. "You walked into my life like a storm and turned everything I thought I knew upside down. You've seen me at my worst and somehow still choose to stand by my side. You're my mate, my partner, my forever. I want to make that official."

My breath hitched as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a simple, elegant ring. The golden band and diamond at the center shimmered under the lights.

"Krista Fortune," he said, his voice steady but laced with emotion. "Will you marry me?"

Tears welled up in my eyes, and I nodded, unable to find the words. Levi slid the ring onto my finger. The cool metal was a perfect fit. A chorus of cheers from our audience interrupted our private moment. Zane whooped loudly, and Garrett gave a rare clap. Even Dean offered a crooked smile from the corner.

Levi pulled me into his arms, his lips meeting mine in a kiss that was both tender and possessive. It was a vow to face whatever came next together, as equals, as partners, as mates.

As we broke apart, I looked around at our makeshift family. Zane's infectious grin, Garrett's quiet pride, Dean's reluctant approval, and the animals who had become symbols of Levi's hidden compassion. It was a reflection of the life we'd built, imperfect, chaotic, but filled with love.

"I love you," I whispered, my voice trembling with joy. "More than anything."

Levi's chest rumbled. It was a contented hum that echoed through me. "I love you too, Krista," he said. "Always."

We spent the rest of the evening surrounded by the animals and our friends, the string lights casting a dreamlike glow over everything. Levi and I exchanged vows in a simple, heartfelt ceremony, our words carrying the weight of everything we'd been through together. Zane officiated with his usual flair, cracking jokes that had everyone laughing, while Garrett stood as Levi's witness, his gruff exterior softened by the occasion. Dean, ever the recluse, had somehow managed to program the shelter's

speakers to play a soft, instrumental version of our song, a surprise that left me speechless.

As the night wore on, Levi and I danced under the stars, his arms wrapped tightly around me. The animals watched us with curious eyes, their presence a reminder of the sanctuary we'd built. I leaned my head on his shoulder, feeling the steady beat of his heart beneath my ear.

"Do you remember when we first met?" I asked, my voice soft and teasing. "You were all growls and scowls, and I thought, 'This guy's going to be a nightmare to work with.'"

Levi chuckled, the sound rumbling through his chest. "And now look at you," he said, his tone equally playful. "Stuck with me for life."

I pulled back slightly, meeting his gaze. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

His expression softened, and he brushed a strand of hair from my face. "Neither would I."

We stayed like that for a while, swaying to the music and basking in the quiet joy of the moment. The night was perfect, but it wasn't just about the ceremony or the celebration. It was about everything we'd overcome, the battles we'd fought, the scars we'd healed, and the love we'd found in the process.

As the first light of dawn began to creep over the horizon, Levi and I sat together on a bench, watching the animals start to stir. Sunny, the one-eyed Chihuahua trotted over, wagging his tail furiously before curling up at our feet. Levi reached down to scratch behind the dog's ears, his expression softer than I'd ever seen it.

"This is it, isn't it?" I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "Our future. Together."

Levi turned to me, his blue eyes filled with warmth and certainty. "Yeah," he said, his voice steady. "This is it. And it's only the beginning."

4 YEARS LATER

The sanctuary was alive with laughter, the kind that twinkled in the afternoon breeze like a song. Levi and I sat on a wooden bench, watching Riley, our three-year-old son, chase Sunny across the grassy field. Over the years, we'd expanded the shelter in the city by adding a sanctuary out in the country. It soon became a haven not just for the animals, but for us. It was a place where we could escape the cameras and noise of the city, and where our little family could grow in peace.

Riley squealed with delight as Sunny darted around him, his chubby little legs trembling with excitement as he stumbled. Levi chuckled beside me, his arm draped over my shoulders. "He's got your energy," he said, his voice fond.

"And your stubbornness," I shot back, grinning.

Levi smirked, pressing a kiss to my temple. "Fair enough."

The sanctuary had become everything we'd dreamed of and more. It was a place where animals that would have otherwise been forgotten, found a second chance, just like us. Our lives were far from perfect, but they were ours, filled with love, laughter, and the occasional chaos that reminded us of how far we'd come.

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 10:18 am

As I watched Riley climb into Levi's lap, his little hands tugging at his father's shirt, I felt a surge of gratitude. Out of chaos, death, and violence, we had created this little piece of paradise.

Levi caught my eye, his gaze softening. "What are you thinking about?" he asked. His voice was warm and carried that familiar gruffness that always made my heart skip a beat.

I smiled, leaning into his side as our son babbled happily, completely absorbed in the Chihuahua's antics. "Just how far we've come," I said, my voice soft. "This life we've built is everything I ever wanted, even if I didn't know it at the time."

I leaned my head on Levi's shoulder, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat beneath my cheek. "This is my forever," I whispered, the words carrying the weight of all the battles we'd fought and the love we'd built. "And it's perfect."

Levi pressed a kiss to the top of my head, his voice a low, contented rumble. "It is."

Sunny barked, drawing our attention as it bounded back toward us, tail wagging furiously. Our son squealed with delight, wriggling out of Levi's lap to chase after him. Levi and I exchanged a look, equal parts amusement and exasperation, before he stood, brushing off his jeans.

"I'll get him," he said, his tone resigned but fond.

I watched as Levi scooped our son into his arms, the dog dancing around his feet. The sight of Levi, once so guarded and untouchable, now laughing and playing freely

filled me with a sense of peace I hadn't known was possible.

They returned to the bench and Levi's hand found mine, his grip warm and reassuring. "We did good, didn't we?" he murmured, his voice low and filled with a quiet pride.

I squeezed his hand, my heart full. "We did more than good," I said softly. "We built something beautiful."

Levi turned to me, his blue eyes shining with love. "And we're just getting started," he said.

I smiled, leaning into him as our son yawned, his small body curling into Levi's side. Sunny, now exhausted from playing, nestled at our feet, his tail thumping lazily against the ground.

"I love you," I whispered.

Levi's arm tightened around me. "I love you too, Krista. More than anything."

This was our story. Our love. Our forever. And it was perfect.