



# Pack to the Wall (Paranormal Dating Agency #90)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** She's got a runaway hit, a controlling manager, and one very public meltdown. He's a wolf shifter with pack drama, a private island, and zero interest in celebrities.

Chrissy Rivera didn't plan to fake-ill her way out of a charity gala and disappear before sunrise—but when matchmaking icon Gerri Wilder offers an escape route via helicopter, she takes it. The destination? A no-press, no-schedule sanctuary that turns out to include a very large, very shirtless Alpha with opinions about everything—including her.

Zev Landon doesn't do pop stars. Or unexpected guests. Or women who smell like jasmine and trouble. But the moment Chrissy steps onto Isle Luna, his wolf makes it clear: she's not going anywhere.

Now the guitars are vintage, the mate bond is snapping, and the paparazzi are circling overhead.

Because when a wolf claims his mate, not even fame can break the bond.

**Total Pages (Source):** 30

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:07 am*

ONE

CHRISSY

The camera flashes blinded Chrissy with each step down the red carpet.

Her midnight blue gown—chosen by one of her stylists, not her—hugged her curves in a way that the magazine reporters couldn't stop raving about.

The sweetheart neckline dipped just low enough to be sexy without crossing into scandalous territory, the crystal beading catching the light with each step.

Perfect for the charity gala. Perfect for headlines. Perfect for everyone but her.

"Smile wider," Leslie hissed into her ear, her fingers digging into Chrissy's elbow. "The Hadid sisters just arrived and everyone's looking this way."

Chrissy cranked up her smile a few notches. The muscles in her face ached with the effort.

"Three more photographers, then straight to the greenroom for final prep," Leslie rattled off, her clipboard clutched in her free hand. "You memorized your speech, right? The charity's name is Youth Forward Alliance, founded by Stella Wang, and you're presenting a check for fifty thousand."

The words blurred together. Chrissy nodded mechanically. The details would come to her when she needed them. They always did.

"God, you look exhausted." Maggie fell into step on Chrissy's other side, powder brush already in hand. "Let me fix your T-zone before the next flash blinds you."

Chrissy stood still as Maggie dabbed at her face. At least Maggie's touch felt gentle and human.

"Thanks, Mags." Chrissy's voice came out raspier than intended. "Don't suppose you smuggled in a Red Bull?"

"Better." Maggie slipped a tiny espresso shot into her hand. "Slam it while Leslie's distracted."

Chrissy downed the bitter liquid in one gulp, grateful for the momentary jolt. "You're a lifesaver."

"Empire Records newest sensation, Chrissy Rivera!" A reporter thrust a microphone toward her face. "How does it feel headlining tonight's event?"

The practiced answer flowed easily. "I'm honored to support such an amazing cause. Youth Forward Alliance changes lives, and that's what music should do too."

Words she believed but hadn't written. Words that had been crafted and approved and handed to her on a notecard this morning.

Inside the venue, crystal chandeliers cast honeyed light across the ballroom. Celebrities mingled with tech moguls and fashion icons, champagne flutes in hand. A year ago, Chrissy would have been star-struck. Now she just wanted a moment to breathe.

"Ten minutes until you're on," Leslie growled, checking her watch when they finally made their way to the greenroom. "Remember, you're introducing Stella Wang first,

presenting the check, then performing your set."

"Stella Wang," Chrissy repeated, trying to cement the name in her memory.

Ten minutes later, the stage lights hit her like a physical force as she stepped into the spotlight. Five hundred faces turned toward her, expressions of expectation and admiration on them.

"Good evening, everyone." Chrissy's voice echoed through the speakers. "It's my privilege to be here tonight supporting Youth Forward Alliance and their incredible work with at-risk teenagers across Los Angeles."

The words flowed smoothly until the moment arrived to introduce the founder.

"Please welcome to the stage the visionary founder of this amazing organization, Stella Rang—" Chrissy froze, realizing her mistake instantly.

The crowd's polite applause faltered. "I mean Wang!

Stella Wang, everyone! Guess that's what happens when you're running on enough caffeine to power a small country. "

The audience laughed, the tension dissolving. Stella Wang, a striking woman in her forties wearing a sleek red pantsuit, stepped onto the stage with a wide smile.

"Thank you, Chrissy. I've been called worse, believe me." She winked at the audience. "Usually by my teenage son when I tell him his curfew."

Relief washed through Chrissy as she handed over the oversized check. Camera flashes captured the moment, and Stella gave her a genuine hug before exiting the stage.

Chrissy then executed her thirty-minute set on stage with practiced ease. Once she strummed the final chords of 'Daddy's Girl' on her acoustic guitar, she swung it over her shoulder and took a bow. The crowd erupted with thunderous applause.

That song had changed her life forever. One year ago, she'd recorded herself singing that original song a cappella while playing her acoustic guitar in her bedroom wearing her dad's old flannel shirt.

Several minutes after she'd recorded the video on her phone, she'd posted it to TikTok, and it went viral.

Now, it felt like that song belonged to someone else.

Her eyes burned with fatigue as she waved to the crowd. Five songs performed flawlessly, but the notes had felt mechanical, and the emotions manufactured. Her dad would have noticed immediately. He always said music needed heart to matter.

God, she missed him. With her busy schedule these days, she never got to see him.

As she stepped backstage, Leslie was already waiting with her phone out. "Not your best, but it'll do. The name slip-up is already trending, but your recovery was cute. Oh, and Marty wants you at the studio at 6 AM tomorrow."

6 AM tomorrow? This event won't even wrap up until midnight. And then there's the VIP after-party.

Maggie appeared at her side, her arm slipping around Chrissy's waist. "You killed it, sweetheart." Her whisper held genuine warmth. "Your dad would be so proud."

Leslie's hand shot out like a whip, shoving Maggie aside with enough force to make the makeup artist stumble backward. The warm comfort of Maggie's arm disappeared

from around Chrissy's waist.

"Get off her," Leslie snapped. "You're paid to do her makeup, not cuddle her."

Before Chrissy could protest, Leslie's fingers clamped around her bare arm, her nails digging into the soft flesh. The crystal beading on Chrissy's midnight blue gown scraped against Leslie's expensive blazer as she yanked her forward.

"You'll fix that little flub in your Instagram post tonight, though." Leslie practically dragged her through the backstage area, her heels clicking aggressively against the polished floor. "And put this cropped leather jacket on. That tight revealing dress makes you look like a stripper."

Leslie thrust a black leather jacket at her chest. Chrissy caught it reflexively, her throat tightening. The sweetheart neckline of her gown wasn't even that low—just enough to highlight her natural curves without being distasteful. But arguing would only make things worse.

"Now," Leslie barked.

Chrissy slipped her arms into the jacket, the material stiff and hot against her skin. The moment she zipped it up, Leslie seized her wrist and resumed marching her toward the VIP lounge.

Chrissy flinched at the grip but bit her tongue. She'd learned that lesson months ago—every objection just fueled Leslie's venom. And tonight, with exhaustion burning behind her eyes and her dad's song still echoing in her mind, she lacked the energy for another confrontation.

God, what would her dad think if he saw how they treated her? The thought made her chest tight.

The VIP lounge glittered with wealth and exclusivity—crystal chandeliers, plush velvet couches, and the unmistakable gleam of fame. But all Chrissy noticed was Marty Shriner's cold stare as he stood by the bar, his tailored suit as sharp as his expression.

Leslie delivered her like a package. "Here she is."

No "great performance." No "well done." Just that predatory assessment that made her skin crawl.

Marty's hand shot out, his fingers wrapping around her upper arm with bruising force as he pulled her to the side of the room. His ice-blue eyes narrowed beneath his perfectly groomed auburn hair.

"What the hell was that performance?" His voice dropped to a dangerous whisper that somehow cut through the ambient music. "You were flat on the bridge of 'Midnight Dreams,' you botched Stella Wang's name, and you looked like you were sleepwalking through the whole set."

Chrissy's heart hammered against her ribs. "I'm sorry, I'm just tired?—"

"Tired?" Marty's grip tightened. "You think I care? Your new album just dropped. We have promotions lined up across three continents."

"But I asked for just two days to see my dad?—"

"Time off?" A harsh laugh cut through her plea. "This entire industry is built on momentum, and momentum means no breaks. I made you a star, Rivera. Now you need to act like it."

Something snapped inside her—a thread pulled too tight for too long. The memories

of recording 'Daddy's Girl' in her bedroom, the joy of music before contracts and handlers, before becoming property instead of a person.

"Made me a star?" Heat flooded her cheeks. "I made myself a star. You just showed up after my TikTok video went viral and slapped a contract in front of me that I was too naïve to read properly."

Marty's eyes flashed dangerously. "Watch yourself."

"No, you watch yourself." The words tumbled out, unstoppable now. "I'm a human being, not a wind-up toy. I need sleep. I need to see my family. I need five minutes to breathe without you or Leslie yanking me around like a dog on a leash."

The room seemed to still around them. Marty's face transformed into something cold and feral.

"You belong to my company." His voice dropped to a whisper that chilled her blood. "Try to run, and we'll ruin you."

The threat hung in the air between them, crystalline and poisonous.

The VIP lounge suddenly seemed smaller, the glittering chandeliers dimmer. Her pulse hammered in her ears as she stared into Marty's ice-blue eyes, seeing something inhuman lurking behind them.

"Excuse me, but I simply must interrupt."

The soft yet commanding voice sliced through their confrontation like a velvet-wrapped blade. Chrissy turned, grateful for the reprieve, and found herself face-to-face with a diminutive woman who somehow commanded the entire room despite her small stature.



Standing at 4'11", the stranger wore an impeccably tailored crimson pantsuit that probably cost more than Chrissy's first car.

Her white bob framed a face that radiated wisdom and mischief in equal measure.

But it was her eyes that captivated Chrissy—startling blue that seemed to shift to molten gold as she fixed Marty with a pointed stare.

"Gerri Wilder!" Marty's demeanor transformed instantly. His grip on Chrissy's arm vanished as he stepped forward, charm replacing menace. "What a delightful surprise."

Chrissy rubbed her arm, certain tomorrow's bruises would match his fingerprints perfectly. The zipped-up leather jacket Leslie had forced her to wear felt suffocating in the warm room, the midnight blue gown beneath it suddenly too tight and too restrictive—like everything else in her life.

"Marty, darling." The woman—Gerri—smiled, but it didn't reach her now-golden eyes. "Always a pleasure. I was hoping I might borrow your star for a moment. Her performance tonight was absolutely transcendent."

Chrissy blinked, stunned by the immediate deference Marty showed this tiny powerhouse of a woman.

"Of course, of course." Marty's smile stretched wide, all teeth. "Anything for you, Gerri."

The moment he retreated a few steps away to engage with some industry executives, Gerri turned her full attention to Chrissy.

"You don't know me yet, but I know you, Chrissy. And I know you're not okay right

now." Her voice was gentle but direct, cutting through pretense like it wasn't even there.

"Are you with the charity?" Chrissy asked, suddenly conscious of how tight her voice sounded and how close to breaking she was.

"Yes, I helped Stella plan tonight's gala." Gerri's eyes then sparkled with mischief. "But I do more than that."

She reached into her designer clutch and extracted a single business card, sliding it discreetly into Chrissy's hand with the practiced ease of someone used to operating below radar.

"I can offer you a way out of this situation. Somewhere private. Somewhere safe. With no cameras, no handlers, and no Marty." Gerri's voice dropped lower, forcing Chrissy to lean in. "If you want to disappear, I can make it happen."

A flutter of something dangerous—hope—stirred in Chrissy's chest. Disappear? The word felt like cool water after months in a desert. She quickly slipped the card into her jacket pocket without looking at it, all too aware of Marty's watchful presence nearby.

"Thank you for the compliment," Chrissy said, louder than necessary, playing along.

Gerri's laugh was genuine as she patted Chrissy's arm. "Chrissy, that was a beautiful performance tonight, and you look absolutely stunning." She winked and glided away, her exit as striking as her entrance.

Chrissy watched her go, her mind racing. Who was this nice woman who could make Marty Shriner—the man who terrorized everyone around him—suddenly act like a fawning schoolboy? And more importantly, how could she possibly help Chrissy

escape a contract that had more teeth than a shark?

Her fingers brushed against the card in her pocket. Disappear. The word echoed in her mind like the promise of rain during drought. To be somewhere Marty couldn't reach her. To sleep without nightmares of schedules and obligations. Seeing her dad again someday.

The business card burned in her pocket, a tiny flame of possibility. Her back was against the wall, but maybe—just maybe—there was a door she hadn't seen before.

As Marty approached again, his smile a mask over the predator beneath, Chrissy straightened her spine. For the first time in months, something like anticipation fluttered in her stomach. It seemed impossible to get away from him—but then again, so had becoming a star overnight.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:07 am*

TWO

ZEV

Zev Landon stood on the patio outside his island resort's lobby with his hands planted on the teak wooden railing, surveying his domain.

Morning sunlight spilled across Isle Luna, turning the Caribbean Sea into a dazzling carpet of diamonds.

His keen gaze tracked a pair of staff members arranging chaise lounges along the pristine white beach that curved like a crescent moon around the eastern cove.

"Miguel." His voice carried easily to the head of housekeeping, who immediately straightened. "The Orchid Villa needs special attention today. Fresh-cut local flowers, premium linens, and make sure the privacy screens are operational."

"Of course, Mr. Landon." Miguel nodded. "Any specific requests from the VIP?"

Zev's jaw tightened imperceptibly. "The guest prefers absolute discretion. No photos, no social media mentions, and no press. Not that we usually allow that here. But this time it's particularly important that nobody gets any ideas."

He didn't mention that the VIP was Gerri Wilder. He rarely kept secrets from his pack, but Gerri's visits were always... complicated. She never came without a purpose, and that purpose inevitably raised questions that he couldn't or wouldn't answer most times.

His wolf stirred beneath his skin, unusually restless today. Zev rolled his shoulders, trying to ease the sensation.

"Something wrong, boss?" Tina, his events coordinator, approached with her ever-present tablet.

"It's nothing." He straightened, his six-foot-two frame casting a long shadow across the polished marble flooring. "Just a... feeling."

"Full moon's not for two weeks." Tina's knowing smile reminded him that his pack was attuned to his moods. As Alpha, his energy affected them all.

"Run the security protocols again," he said, changing the subject. "I want beach patrols doubled and the perimeter sensors checked."

"Already done. Ewan's team swept the island at dawn." Her eyes crinkled. "Though Ewan said you'd ask again anyway."

A smile tugged at Zev's mouth. His best friend knew him too well.

The morning briefing continued as Zev prowled the main lodge, checking details others would miss—a slightly crooked painting in the dining room and a loose floorboard near the spa entrance.

Isle Luna was more than just a luxury resort.

It was home to his pack. Their sanctuary was hidden in plain sight among the pampered elite who paid obscene amounts for privacy and perfection.

His family had purchased the island four generations ago, transforming it from a wild jungle outpost to an exclusive paradise. What guests never realized was that the true

purpose was protection—a place where wolf shifters could run free under the moonlight without fear of discovery.

As Zev walked the meandering path toward the cliffside villas, his wolf's senses reveled in the island's perfume—salt spray mixing with the heady scent of tropical flowers and the rich, loamy smell of the jungle that covered the island's interior.

Beyond the manicured resort grounds lay miles of protected wilderness where his pack could shift and hunt freely.

He paused at the edge of the tree line, letting his gaze sweep across his territory.

The resort occupied only a quarter of the island—twenty-five exclusive villas and bungalows nestled into the landscape, the main lodge with its world-class restaurant and spa, and the hidden infrastructure that kept everything running seamlessly.

The rest remained wild, preserved for the pack's hundred members who lived in a cluster of homes tucked into a protected valley on the western side.

Yet despite everything he'd built and everything he'd inherited, something gnawed at him. An emptiness he couldn't name.

"What more could you possibly want?" he muttered to himself, annoyed at the persistent feeling of incompleteness.

He had wealth beyond measure, a pack that respected him, and a private island paradise.

Women threw themselves at him regularly—guests, staff from the mainland, even supernatural creatures drawn to his power as Alpha.

None of them had ever sparked more than passing interest.

His wolf's restlessness increased, making him roll his neck to ease the pressure building there.

"You're in a mood today." The observation came from Sofia, one of the few humans who knew their secret. As the resort's concierge, she handled the most delicate guest requests. "The staff's picking up on it."

"I'm fine." He forced his shoulders to relax. "Just... anticipating problems."

"With this VIP?" Sofia cocked an eyebrow. "Must be someone special. You've never been this twitchy for a celebrity before."

"She's not a celebrity." He kept his voice neutral. "Just someone who deserves our best."

Sofia's knowing smile made him wonder how transparent he was. "The Orchid Villa is ready. I added those special Belizean chocolates she mentioned in her thank you note from her last visit."

Zev nodded, impressed but not surprised by Sofia's attention to detail. "Perfect."

As she walked away, Zev turned toward the helipad where their guest would arrive soon. His wolf paced beneath his skin, as if anticipating something monumental. Usually, he could sense threats to his pack or territory, but this wasn't danger his instincts were reacting to.

It was something else entirely—a premonition of change that made his heart beat faster and his senses sharpen. His wolf knew something was coming. Something important.

"Just another day in paradise," he murmured to the turquoise sea stretching endlessly before him. But he didn't believe it for a second.

The concrete of the elevated helipad shimmered in the morning light as Zev stood with his arms crossed, his muscles tensed beneath his crisp white linen shirt.

The landing area jutted out over the side of a cliff, offering a breathtaking panoramic view of the Caribbean's endless azure expanse.

He checked his watch for the third time in five minutes.

"If you keep scowling like that, you'll scare her off before she even lands." Ewan's deep voice cut through Zev's concentration as his oldest friend strode up beside him, dressed in cargo shorts and a navy resort polo that stretched across his broad shoulders.

Zev didn't uncross his arms. "I'm not scowling. I'm focused."

"Oh, is that what we're supposed to call it now?"

"Olivia appeared at Ewan's side, her flowing yellow sundress catching the island breeze.

She slipped her hand into her husband's with the easy familiarity of true mates.

"You look like you're preparing for battle instead of welcoming the most beloved matchmaker in the supernatural world. "

"I want everything to be perfect." Zev ran his hand through his thick wavy brown hair, feeling the weight of responsibility. "Gerri Wilder deserves our absolute best."



Ewan snorted. "You've personally inspected every corner of the resort twice over. The staff is ready to mutiny if you criticize one more perfectly arranged flower."

"Her connections span continents," Zev countered, pacing the edge of the helipad. "Hell, she even has contacts off-world. Nova Aurora's Alpha bear shifter still owes her a favor, and those bears don't give their loyalty easily."

Olivia's green eyes sparkled with amusement. "This wouldn't have anything to do with Gerri's other talents, would it? Her legendary matchmaking prowess, perhaps?"

Zev shot her a sharp look. "This is about business. Her endorsement keeps our exclusive clientele flowing—the kind who respect our privacy as a supernatural community."

"Mm-hmm." Olivia exchanged a knowing glance with Ewan. "Nothing at all to do with her uncanny ability to match shifters with their fated mates? The woman has a perfect track record, you know."

"Just look at us," Ewan added, pulling Olivia closer against his side. "Three years of bliss thanks to her meddling."

"I'm well aware of her reputation," Zev said stiffly, his wolf stirring restlessly. "And I'm happy for you both, obviously. But I'm focused on running this resort and protecting our pack. I don't have time for matchmaking mumbo jumbo."

Ewan's eyebrows shot up. "Really? Because when she visited a few months ago, you two had a pretty intense private meeting. She looked like the cat who ate the canary afterward."

Heat crawled up Zev's neck. Damn Ewan and his observations. "That was about expanding our charitable initiatives."

"Of course it was." Olivia's smile widened. "Which is why you've been prowling around like a caged animal since her call last night."

Zev fell silent, his mind racing back to that midnight conversation. Gerri's voice had held that unmistakable note of mischief when she'd said she had "life-changing news" that required her immediate presence on Isle Luna.

Why hadn't he made the connection until now? His wolf had been unusually alert all morning, sensing something momentous approaching. It wasn't just Gerri's visit that had him on edge—it was what she represented for his future.

"She promised you something, didn't she?" Olivia's voice softened, her intuition as sharp as ever. "What was it, Zev?"

The words stuck in his throat. Admitting it made it real. "She says she's located my mate."

The silence that followed felt electric. Ewan's expression shifted from surprise to understanding.

"Well, shit." Ewan clapped him on the shoulder. "No wonder you're wound tighter than a spring."

Olivia's delighted laughter danced on the sea breeze. "The mighty Alpha of Isle Luna, finally caught in Gerri's web like the rest of us mortals. Oh, this is delicious."

"Nothing is going to happen," Zev growled, though his racing heart betrayed him. "I have responsibilities. A pack to lead. A business to run."

Olivia smirked. "Oh, that's right. You've spent years perfecting the art of emotional unavailability."

His wolf bristled at the accusation, even as the man recognized its truth. "I'm not emotionally unavailable. I'm selective."

"Is that what we're calling it?" Ewan's grin was infuriating. "Your last date was what—a year ago? And didn't she leave after you took three business calls during dinner?"

"This conversation is over." Zev turned his attention to the horizon, where the distant thrum of helicopter blades had just become audible. "Gerri will be here any minute, and I need you both focused."

But while his words dismissed their teasing, Zev couldn't dismiss the sudden churning in his gut. His instincts prickled with awareness, his wolf pacing anxiously under his skin. Gerri had found his mate—his perfect match. The one woman in the universe designed specifically for him.

Gerri told him last night on the phone that she was coming here today to discuss the specifics with him. He didn't know what those details entailed, but probably something about when he'd be willing to meet his mate in the future.

As the sound of the helicopter's engines grew closer, something deep within Zev told him his world was about to tilt on its axis in ways he couldn't begin to imagine. The man in him wasn't too sure if he was ready for it.

Zev straightened his white linen shirt, watching with keen eyes as the sleek black helicopter made its approach. His wolf senses picked up details no human could—the pitch of the engines, the subtle shifts in wind direction, and the precise angle of descent.

"Showtime," Ewan muttered beside him, his navy resort polo rippling in the downdraft as the helicopter touched down with featherlight precision.

Zev maintained his commanding posture, his jaw set and his shoulders squared as the rotors slowed.

This was his territory. His domain. He'd welcome Gerri with the respect she deserved, hear her out about this supposed mate she'd found, then gently explain why his pack responsibilities took precedence over romance.

The door slid open, and Gerri Wilder emerged into the brilliant Caribbean sunshine.

At four-foot-eleven, she nonetheless commanded attention in her designer lavender pantsuit, her white bob perfectly styled despite the helicopter journey.

Her blue eyes sparkled with mischief as she breathed in the tropical air.

"Zev, dear," she called over the dying engine noise. "Paradise suits you as always."

He nodded politely, preparing the practiced welcome speech he'd rehearsed that morning. Then the air shifted unexpectedly.

A second figure appeared in the helicopter doorway, and Zev's entire world stopped spinning.

She stepped onto the helipad with cautious grace—a vision in white, her sundress flowing around curves that made his mouth go dry.

The sunlight caught in her long dark brown hair, creating a halo effect that made her appear almost ethereal.

The dress hugged her body with tantalizing perfection, revealing just enough cleavage to make his wolf howl silently.

Her face was a study in beauty and vulnerability, her eyes wide as she took in the panoramic view of his island.

His island. His territory.

His mate.

The recognition slammed into him with physical force.

His wolf, normally a constant presence beneath his skin, suddenly went utterly still.

The roaring in his ears drowned out everything but the sight of her.

Every sense locked onto her—her jasmine scent cutting through the salt air like a beacon, the sound of her quickened heartbeat, and the way her fingers trembled slightly as she brushed her hair from her face.

She's mine.

The certainty of it buckled his knees. The world tilted sideways as every instinct he possessed realigned to a new center of gravity—her.

"Whoa, easy there, boss." Ewan's strong hand gripped his bicep, steadying him with military precision. "Deep breaths."

Olivia made a small, delighted sound beside them. "Oh my god, it's actually happening. Right now."

Zev couldn't form words. His entire being focused on the woman standing beside Gerri, trying to look composed despite her obvious disorientation.

She was taking in the endless blue sea, the lush island vegetation, and finally—him.

Their eyes met across the helipad, and the connection that sparked between them was almost visible in its intensity.

"Well," Gerri's self-satisfied voice floated through his consciousness, her eyes turning that telltale golden color that signaled her matchmaking powers were in full effect. "I believe my work here is already half done."

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:07 am*

THREE

CHRISSY

Chrissy stepped onto the helipad after her whirlwind trip, her white sundress billowing in the warm breeze.

It was the first outfit she'd chosen for herself in what felt like forever—no stylist, no Leslie barking edicts about her image, and no "let's make you less you" lectures.

Just cotton against her skin and the freedom to finally breathe.

The tropical heat caressed her face, instantly relaxing muscles she hadn't realized were so tense.

After last night's nightmare at the charity gala—Marty's iron grip on her arm and his snarled threat about ruining her if she ran—this place seemed like a fever dream from a completely different universe.

"Oh my God," she whispered, taking in the panoramic view. Crystal-clear turquoise water stretched to the horizon, framed by pristine white sand beaches and lush jungle vegetation. The air smelled of salt and exotic flowers instead of hairspray and the artificial scents of a crowded event.

Gerri moved back closer to her side, her diminutive frame somehow radiating assurance. "No cameras. No schedules. Just plenty of time to breathe," she said, her voice pitched low enough for only Chrissy's ears.

Breathing. What a concept. Chrissy couldn't remember the last time she'd done that properly.

Last night had been pure impulse. Around 11 PM, she'd faked illness to Marty as they got out of the limo at the VIP after party.

She'd rarely lied to him. But last night she'd felt exceptionally desperate.

He'd let her leave, fearing she might puke and cause a scene that would inevitably end up in the tabloids.

Once she got home, she'd paced her empty Huntington Beach mansion while anxiety clawed at her throat for thirty minutes.

Finally, at nearly midnight, she'd called the number on that business card that Gerri had slipped her earlier in the VIP lounge at the gala.

Gerri had picked up on the first ring and proposed an offer to take Chrissy to a very special place with no schedules and no cameras. Maybe it was her exhaustion or maybe it was her anger at Marty, but for some reason Chrissy accepted Gerri's offer.

But one thing didn't quite add up for Chrissy.

After she'd hung up with Gerri and looked closer at the business card, she saw a title under Gerri's name.

Founder and Owner of Paranormal Dating Agency .

What exactly did Gerri do for a living? Chrissy knew shifters existed—some of her music industry colleagues were supernatural, though they kept it under wraps from the general public.



But a dating agency for them? And what did that have to do with Gerri being able to help Chrissy disappear for a while?

"I can't believe I just...left," Chrissy murmured, guilt and exhilaration battling for dominance. She hadn't even told her dad or Maggie where she was going, afraid Marty would harass them for information. "Marty's going to lose his mind."

"Let him," Gerri whispered softly. "You're entitled to a vacation."

"He doesn't think I'm entitled to use the bathroom without permission," Chrissy muttered so only Gerri could hear. "I didn't even pack anything. I just...ran away."

"Sometimes running away is the bravest thing you can do." Gerri's eyes twinkled. "And don't worry about clothes. The resort has everything you'll need for your stay."

Resort. Right. Chrissy had been so focused on escaping that she hadn't bothered asking where they were ultimately going. The black limo at 5 AM, the private jet to Belize, the helicopter—it had all happened in an exhausted blur this morning.

"Where exactly are we?" she whispered, finally taking in the elegant structures nestled tastefully among the palm trees.

"Isle Luna," Gerri answered so that only Chrissy could hear. "The most exclusive private island resort in the Caribbean. And the most discreet." She emphasized the last word meaningfully. "No one will find you here unless you want to be found."

The thought made her shoulders drop another inch. No paparazzi. No fans asking for selfies when she looked like death warmed over. No Leslie criticizing her for eating carbs.

Chrissy inhaled deeply, filling her lungs with fresh air that didn't taste of desperation

and exhaustion. Something that she hadn't felt in almost a year unfurled in her chest—a sense of possibility. One impulsive phone call, and here she was, standing on a slice of paradise.

"Thank you," Chrissy whispered, tears threatening to spill. "I didn't realize how much I needed?—"

The words died in her throat as she finally looked forward, across the helipad. A welcoming committee stood several yards away—a woman in a yellow sundress, a broad-shouldered man in a navy polo, and...

Her heart stuttered, then accelerated to a gallop.

Him.

He stood tall and commanding in a white linen shirt that showcased broad shoulders and muscular arms. His stance was unmistakably that of someone in charge—feet planted firmly, chin raised, and eyes intense.

Even from this distance, those eyes burned into her, electric blue against tanned skin.

His thick, wavy brown hair caught the sunlight, and the stubble along his jaw gave him a rugged edge that made her mouth go dry.

Chrissy froze, unable to look away. Something primal and inexplicable pulled at her, a magnetic force that made her skin tingle and her breath catch.

The sensation was both thrilling and terrifying—like standing at the edge of a tall cliff, which she literally was doing on this helipad right now, knowing she should step back but wanting desperately to fly.

"Ah," Gerri said beside her, satisfaction coloring her voice. "I see you've noticed your host."

Heat rushed to Chrissy's cheeks. She tried to look away but couldn't break free from his intense gaze.

Those electric blue eyes seemed to see straight through her carefully constructed walls, past the makeup-free face and simple sundress, and into the real her that had been buried under a year of celebrity polish.

"He's watching me like I'm..." Chrissy's thought trailed off as she struggled to name the expression on his face.

Not the predatory appraisal she'd grown accustomed to in the music industry, but something deeper and more reverent—like she was a long-lost masterpiece he'd only heard about in legends and was finally seeing with his own eyes.

Gerri touched her elbow gently. "That's Zev Landon," she explained. "Alpha of the Isle Luna pack and owner of this paradise."

Alpha. The word sent a flicker of warning through Chrissy's system.

During their flight, Gerri had explained that Isle Luna was home to wolf shifters—not that she'd needed much convincing to believe in the supernatural after working with some shifters in the industry.

What Gerri hadn't mentioned was how her "safe haven" would be ruled by an alpha who looked like he'd stepped straight out of her most secret fantasies.

"He's..." Chrissy whispered.

"Quite something, isn't he?" Gerri finished for her, eyes twinkling.

Chrissy's spine suddenly straightened. Was he another powerful man who thought the world revolved around him? She'd just escaped Marty's controlling grip—she wasn't about to trade one gilded cage for another, no matter how attractive the jailer.

"Chrissy Rivera," Gerri announced as they approached the waiting trio, "this is Zev Landon, the owner of Isle Luna."

Zev moved forward with a fluid grace that belied his size. When he spoke, his voice rumbled deep and rich, sending an involuntary shiver through her body.

"Miss Rivera. Welcome to Isle Luna." His gaze never wavered from hers. "I trust your journey was comfortable?"

"As comfortable as running away from your life can be," Chrissy replied, surprised by her own frankness.

A hint of a smile tugged at his lips. "Then you've come to the right place. No one finds Isle Luna unless we want them to."

The way he said "we" carried weight, reminding her that he wasn't just a resort owner but leader of an entire pack. Power radiated from him without effort, making the air between them practically vibrate.

Zev gestured to the couple beside him. "My operations director, Ewan Chavez, and his wife Olivia, our wellness director."

Olivia stepped forward, her yellow sundress catching the breeze. Her warm smile reached all the way to kind green eyes. "We're so glad you're here, Chrissy. Any friend of Gerri's is a friend of ours."

"Thank you," Chrissy managed, grateful for the woman's genuine warmth that reminded her of Maggie. "This place is... incredible."

"Just wait until you see the rest of it," Ewan added with an easy grin that softened his imposing frame.

But her attention kept straying back to Zev, who hadn't taken his eyes off her for a second. His gaze felt like a physical touch, both thrilling and unnerving.

"I promise you absolute privacy here," Zev said, his commanding tone making it clear this wasn't just a courtesy but a decree. "No press, no schedules, and no obligations."

"Sounds too good to be true," Chrissy said, unable to keep the skepticism from her voice. Men with money and power always wanted something in return.

Zev's eyes darkened slightly, as if he sensed her distrust. "On Isle Luna, Miss Rivera, we prioritize freedom above all else."

Freedom. The very thing she'd been desperate for when she called Gerri last night.

Zev gestured toward two electric golf carts waiting nearby. "We'll take these to the main lodge. It's not far, but the jungle paths can be challenging to navigate on foot."

Walking beside him, Chrissy noticed the powerful confidence in his stride—measured and deliberate.

Like a man who knew exactly who he was and what he controlled.

She'd spent a year surrounded by men who postured and preened, desperate to appear more important than they were.

Zev seemed to possess the opposite quality—his authority so innate he didn't need to broadcast it.

## Page 4

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The silence between them stretched a beat too long, thickening the tropical air. Chrissy cleared her throat.

"So, is this the part where you tell me you don't own a TV and have never heard my music?" she quipped, flashing him a smile. "Because I'm totally fine with that. Sometimes I wish I had never heard my latest single—they made me record it six different ways before choosing the worst version."

Zev's expression remained serious, but something flickered in those electric blue eyes—a hint of amusement that softened his intensity for just a moment. The corner of his mouth twitched upward, not quite a smile, but close enough to make Chrissy's heart flutter unexpectedly.

"I've heard your music, Miss Rivera," he replied, his deep voice sending a strange thrill down her spine.

Before she could respond, Gerri appeared at her elbow. "You two should ride together," she announced, her eyes twinkling with mischief. "I need to catch up with Ewan and Olivia."

Chrissy shot her a questioning look, but Gerri had already swept away toward the second cart where Olivia and Ewan waited.

Zev held the small passenger door open, his posture rigid. "After you."

Settling into the seat, Chrissy smoothed her dress over her thighs, suddenly self-conscious. She'd grown accustomed to being styled and primped before every public

appearance. Here she was makeup-free, in sandals and her simple white sundress.

As Zev slid into the driver's seat with grace, the cart seemed to shrink around his muscular frame.

His forearm flexed as he gripped the wheel, the tanned skin a stark contrast to the white linen of his rolled-up sleeve.

The scent of him—cedar and sea air and something wild underneath—made her dizzy.

They pulled away from the helipad, following a winding stone path that disappeared into lush vegetation.

"I had no idea there'd be so much jungle between the resort and the water," Chrissy remarked, struck by the vibrant greens and splashes of tropical flowers surrounding them. No concrete, no billboards, and no paparazzi lurking in the bushes. Just life in its most primal, beautiful form.

"The isolation is intentional," Zev explained, steering them around a gentle curve. "We maintain the natural buffer."

"It's so quiet," she murmured. The peaceful silence felt foreign after a year of constant noise—screaming fans, clicking cameras, endless questions, and demands. Even in her Huntington Beach mansion, she couldn't escape the ambient noise of her celebrity.

"It's designed to stay that way," Zev replied, his gaze fixed ahead. "Privacy and tranquility are our priorities."

Chrissy studied his profile, appreciating the strong line of his jaw and the intensity of



his focus. "Do you get many indie folk pop stars out here hiding from their handlers?"

"No." His answer was immediate and definitive.

The silence stretched until he added, "You're the first."

Something in his tone made her pulse jump—not dismissal or annoyance, but fascination, as if she were a rare, unexpected discovery.

"How am I doing so far?" she asked. "On a scale from 'problem guest' to 'perfect guest'?"

The question earned her another almost-smile. "You haven't demanded a specific brand of mineral water yet or complained about the humidity affecting your hair. You're exceeding my expectations."

Chrissy laughed, the sound startling her with its authenticity. When was the last time she'd laughed without calculating how it would look on camera?

"You know, this is the longest conversation I've had in a year where someone hasn't immediately asked me for something," she observed, the realization both liberating and depressing.

"No 'Chrissy, we need you to record this promo' or 'Can you post this on Instagram' or 'Remember to mention our sponsor in your next interview. '"

Zev gave her an odd, searching look. The intensity in his blue eyes made her wonder if he could see straight into the hollow spaces inside her that fame had carved out.

"Isle Luna exists for people who need to remember who they are," he said finally. "I hope you find the rest and quiet you need here to reset yourself."

The simple sincerity in his voice caught her off guard. There were no ulterior motives lurking beneath his words or hidden agendas. Just a straightforward offer of sanctuary.

"Thank you," she said softly. "I think I'm already starting to."

They rounded a final curve, and the main lodge appeared before them—an architectural marvel of natural woods, soaring ceilings, and walls that seemed to disappear into the surrounding jungle. Every detail blended harmoniously with the environment rather than imposing upon it.

As they pulled to a stop, Chrissy moved to stand, misjudging the small step down from the cart. Her sandal caught, and she pitched forward with a small gasp.

Strong hands caught her, one at her elbow, the other at her waist, steadying her before she'd even registered she was falling. Zev stood beside her, having moved with impossible speed from the driver's side.

"Careful," he murmured, his voice a low rumble that she felt more than heard.

His touch burned through the thin cotton of her sundress. Heat radiated from his body, enveloping her in that intoxicating scent. This close, she could see flecks of silver in his blue eyes and the pulse beating at his throat.

"Thanks," Chrissy breathed, unable to look away from his face. "You're really fast."

"Just good reflexes," he replied, letting go of her.

The air between them seemed to thicken and charge with electricity.

"Gerri and the others must have taken a detour," Zev said, reluctantly dropping his

hands. "I can show you to your villa."

He led her along a winding stone path fringed with orchids and lush ferns. "This is the Orchid Villa," he explained as they approached a secluded structure nestled among palms. "Complete privacy, unobstructed views of the Caribbean Sea, and your own private pool and beach access."

As he reached to unlock the door, their hands brushed accidentally. A jolt of electricity shot up Chrissy's arm, stopping her heart for a beat before it raced forward at double speed. Zev jerked his hand back as if burned, his jaw tightening visibly, and his muscles flexing beneath his tanned skin.

They both stepped backward, creating distance as if by mutual instinct. Chrissy pressed her tingling hand against her thigh, trying to steady her suddenly shallow breathing.

The look in Zev's eyes was unlike anything she'd ever seen in a man's eyes—shock, desire, and something deeper and more primitive that made her knees weak. Something fundamental had shifted between them, charging the tropical air with potential that terrified and thrilled her simultaneously.

"I should—" Zev's normally confident voice sounded strained. He cleared his throat, his posture stiffening as he collected himself. "Room service is available at any hour of the day or night, and the staff is at your disposal for anything else you need."

Before she could reply, he turned and walked away, his powerful shoulders rigid beneath his linen shirt, leaving Chrissy staring after him with her heart racing.

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FOUR

ZEV

Z ev rushed away from the Orchid Villa with the controlled precision of a man who was one heartbeat away from losing control. Each step felt like fighting against a magnetic pull drawing him back toward Chrissy. His body moved forward while everything inside him screamed to return to her.

Once safely hidden behind a cluster of palm trees, he braced one arm against the rough trunk and drew a ragged breath. His heart pounded inside his chest like a wild animal trying to escape its cage.

"Shit," he growled under his breath. "She's definitely my mate."

The truth of it resonated through every cell in his body.

His wolf was now fully awake and practically howling for him to go back to her immediately.

The intensity of it was staggering. One definitive touch of her hand against his a moment ago had nearly brought the Alpha of Isle Luna straight to his knees.

Her scent still clung to him—jasmine and honeysuckle with an undercurrent of something uniquely hers that made his mouth water and his muscles tighten with primal need. He loosened another button on his linen shirt, suddenly feeling as though he couldn't breathe.

"What the hell were you thinking, Gerri?" he muttered, though deep down he already knew.

The matchmaker had outmaneuvered him completely.

When Gerri called last night with that cryptic message about finding his mate, he'd assumed she meant he'd meet his mate in the distant future on his terms, not that she'd be delivering her to his island within twelve hours.

If Gerri had been more direct about her plans, he likely would have found a reason to delay, to question, and to doubt.

Smart woman. She knew him all too well.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. As if summoned by his thoughts, Gerri's name flashed on the screen.

"You could have warned me," he growled instead of hello.

Gerri's laugh tinkled through the speaker. "And have you find some noble reason to refuse meeting her? I believe in the direct approach when dealing with stubborn Alphas."

"She's human, Gerri." His voice dropped lower, more primal. "And not just any human. She's Chrissy Rivera."

"And she's your mate." Gerri's tone left no room for debate. "You felt it the moment you saw her."

Zev closed his eyes, remembering the exact second Chrissy had stepped off the helicopter.

The world had narrowed to a single point centered on her face.

The sun had caught perfectly in her dark brown hair, making it shine almost blue-black against the pristine white of her sundress.

The delicate curve of her neck and the full swell of her breasts above that sweetly modest neckline—his wolf had nearly forced a shift right there on the helipad.

"Mine," he admitted, the word coming out as a growl that made no attempt to hide his nature.

"Then why are you hiding behind palm trees instead of getting to know her?" Gerri challenged.

Zev straightened, scanning the area with narrowed eyes. "How did you?—"

"Call it intuition," she interrupted. "Or perhaps I'm just familiar with the pattern of an alpha wolf running from what he fears most."

"I don't fear her," he snapped, then immediately recognized the lie. He feared himself around her—feared the intensity of what he felt and the rawness of his need.

"She needs protection, Zev. She's running from people who see her as property, not a person. Sound familiar to what your pack escaped generations ago?"

Zev's jaw tightened. His ancestors had founded Isle Luna as a sanctuary from those who would use wolf shifters as weapons or trophies.

"You should have told me who she was last night." His voice was quieter now, tinged with a dangerous edge as he thought of someone hurting her.

"Would it have mattered? She's your fated mate, Zev. Nothing else will ever matter the same way again."

And there it was—the simple, stark truth. Nothing else mattered. Not her fame, not her humanity, not even his own reservations.

"She's everything," he whispered, more to himself than to Gerri. The realization settled into his bones with the weight of absolute certainty.

"Then be worthy of her." Gerri paused for a moment. "Meet me at your office. I have something for you."

Zev ended the call and headed straight to his office. His entire existence had been rewritten in the span of thirty minutes. From this moment forward, protecting Chrissy Rivera was his purpose—not from a sense of duty, but from the deepest, most primal part of himself.

"Nothing will harm her ever again," he vowed to the island breeze.

Zev strode across the private resort grounds toward the main lodge, the tropical breeze ruffling his rolled-up sleeves and tousling his thick brown hair.

His unbuttoned linen shirt revealed a tantalizing glimpse of his tanned muscular chest, but he was unbothered by his disheveled appearance right now.

His mind was consumed by one thought—Chrissy.

Her scent still lingered in his nostrils, making his wolf restless under his skin.

He pushed open the door to his office with more force than necessary, the wood creaking in protest. The spacious room with its floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking

the turquoise waters normally calmed him, but not today.

His territorial instincts were in full swing, heightened by the knowledge that his fated mate was finally on his island.

Gerri sat perched on the edge of his desk, her petite frame somehow commanding the space. Her lavender pantsuit was immaculate despite the island humidity, not a single white hair out of place in her perfect bob.

"You certainly took your time getting here," she remarked, her blue eyes sparkling.

Zev's jaw tightened. "I needed an extra moment."

"To pull yourself together?" Gerri's lips curved into a knowing smile. "Fated mates tend to have that effect."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "I still think you should've warned me, Gerri."

"And miss seeing the mighty Alpha Zev Landon struck speechless by a slip of a human woman?" She chuckled. "Some things are still worth witnessing firsthand."

Zev growled low in his throat, but there was no real threat behind it. They both knew he respected her too much for that.

"Unfortunately, I can't stay to watch this delightful courtship unfold." Gerri stood, smoothing her already-perfect pantsuit. "I have another urgent appointment. Love never seems to wait for the ideal moment."

"You're leaving? Already?" Zev frowned. He'd expected Gerri to at least stay the night.



She waved a dismissive hand. "Don't look so worried. I've done my part by bringing your fated mate to you. The rest is up to you." She reached into her designer handbag and pulled out a sealed manila envelope. "Before I go, this is for you."

Zev took it, feeling the substantial weight. "What is it?"

"Information on Marty Shriner—Chrissy's manager." Gerri's playful demeanor shifted into something more serious. "I've given Ewan a copy as well. He's already working on it."

Zev's fingers tightened around the envelope, crinkling the paper. "Tell me."

"He's powerful, connected, and furious that his star performer has vanished." Gerri's eyes flashed golden for a brief moment. "And he's a wolf without a pack, which makes him dangerous."

A primal rage surged through Zev's body. His eyes darkened to midnight blue, almost black at the edges. The wolf inside him clawed to the surface, demanding retribution against anyone who would dare threaten what was his.

"Only a fool would make a move against my mate now," he growled, his voice dropping to a dangerous octave that made even the air in the room seem to still. "If he comes near her, I'll tear out his throat."

Gerri nodded, seemingly satisfied with his response. "Good. Channel that protective instinct, but don't let it control you. Chrissy needs safety, but she also needs space to heal."

She patted his arm as she walked past him toward the door. "Good luck, Alpha. Your mate needs you, whether she knows it yet or not."

"Gerri," Zev called after her. "Thank you."

She smiled over her shoulder. "Just name your firstborn after me," she winked, then disappeared through the doorway, leaving Zev alone with the weight of his newfound responsibility.

The door had barely closed behind Gerri when Ewan strode in, his navy resort polo stretching across his broad shoulders and his cargo shorts revealing legs honed by years of military service. His purposeful gait and tense jaw told Zev everything before he even opened his mouth.

"So, your fated mate is the Chrissy Rivera." Ewan dropped his own manila envelope on the desk with a weighted thud. "Gerri doesn't mess around, does she?"

Zev's fingers tightened around his copy of the envelope. The paper crackled beneath his grip as the memory of Chrissy's delicate hand brushing against his sent another wave of possessive heat through his body.

"My mate," Zev affirmed, the two words carrying the weight of ancient shifter law. His chest expanded with primal satisfaction as he said it aloud.

Ewan leaned against the desk, crossing his muscular arms. "I've done some preliminary digging on this Marty character. He's not just any wolf—he's a rogue shifter hiding in plain sight in the entertainment industry. Preys mostly on humans but has a few shifters in his stable too."

"Gerri mentioned he's a wolf without a pack." Zev's jaw tightened, his blue eyes darkening at the thought. "Makes him unpredictable."

"That's putting it mildly." Ewan's expression grew grim. "He's built a business empire by turning talented humans into commodities. His contracts are practically ownership

documents, and he's got connections we haven't even begun to map."

Zev paced to the window, the muscles in his back rippling beneath his half-unbuttoned white linen shirt. The island sprawled before him—his domain and his responsibility. Now Chrissy's sanctuary.

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"I want everything on him. Every weakness, every ally, and every dirty secret." Zev's voice dropped to a dangerous growl. "Nobody threatens what's mine and gets away with it."

"Understood." Ewan paused, shifting his weight. "But we've got another problem."

Zev turned, sensing the tension in his friend's voice. "What now?"

"Word's gotten around the pack already." Ewan rubbed the back of his neck. "Someone leaked that we're harboring a human with powerful enemies."

"How?" Zev's voice cut through the air like a blade.

"Unknown, but the damage is done. The pack's restless—asking why we're putting ourselves at risk for a human. And not just any human—a high-profile celebrity who could bring unwanted attention to our home."

Zev's nostrils flared, his alpha instincts surging. "They question my judgment?"

"They question the risk-to-benefit ratio." Ewan held his ground, one of the few who could face Zev's alpha intensity without backing down. "And without knowing your connection to her, they have a point."

Zev stalked across the room, his movements fluid and predatory. "Then make sure they understand she's not running from just any enemy. She's running from a rogue shifter."

"That might not be enough." Ewan's serious tone cut through Zev's growing anger. "You're downplaying what we're up against. Marty isn't just any rogue—he's rich, well-connected, and probably has powerful allies. This isn't like other disputes we've handled in the past."

The weight of Ewan's words hit Zev like a physical blow. This wasn't just about protecting his mate—it was about protecting his entire pack from potential fallout.

"We need to be smarter about this," Ewan continued. "We don't know who he's connected to in the supernatural world or how far his influence reaches. If we underestimate him?—"

"We won't." Zev's voice was steel wrapped in velvet.

Ewan pushed off from Zev's desk and moved toward the door.

The afternoon sunlight that filtered through the office windows caught in Ewan's short black hair.

When he turned to face Zev fully, Ewan's eyes sparked with that familiar glint that told Zev that Ewan had an idea he probably wouldn't agree to.

"There's an easier solution here, you know." Ewan crossed his arms over his navy polo. "Tell the pack she's your fated mate. Tell them she's their Luna right now. Problem solved."

Zev's jaw tightened as he paced across the polished bamboo floor, his movements those of a predator confined to too small a space. The word 'Luna' reverberated through him with ancient power. His mate. His Luna.

"She is my Luna," Zev growled, the possessive rumble in his voice unmistakable. His

bright blue eyes flashed with intensity as he locked eyes with Ewan. "But my pack won't hear it from me before she does."

"She might not understand what that means, Zev."

"Exactly my point." Zev raked a hand through his thick hair, his muscles bunching beneath his shirt. "She's human. She doesn't have our instincts or our understanding of mate bonds."

He stalked to the window again, looking out over the pristine beach where the turquoise waves crashed against white sand. Not too far from here, in the Orchid villa, Chrissy was settling in—his mate, on his island, within his reach yet impossibly distant.

"She's running from someone who tried to own her completely," Zev continued, his voice lowering to a dangerous edge. "You think she'll welcome being claimed by an Alpha wolf she just met?"

Ewan sighed, the sound heavy with understanding. "Being Luna isn't the same as being a celebrity puppet. Being your mate isn't the same as being controlled by that bastard manager of hers."

"I know that." Zev's fist clenched at his side. "But does she?"

"Then help her understand," Ewan pressed. "Time might be working against us. Marty won't sit idle while his star asset is missing. He's coming for her—we both know it."

Zev turned, his eyes darkening as his wolf surged closer to the surface. "Let him try."

The low, dangerous quality in Zev's voice made even Ewan straighten slightly. The

bond between them ran deep, but at this moment, Ewan was facing his Alpha in full protective mode.

"A mate is protective and possessive because it's about love and connection," Ewan said more softly. "That manager of hers is possessive because she's a commodity to him. There's a world of difference there, Zev."

Zev stalked closer, radiating authority with every step. The scent of Chrissy still lingered on his skin from their brief touch, inflaming his territorial instincts.

"My pack will protect her," Zev stated, each word precise and final. "Because I, their Alpha, command it. My order is law on this island."

The air between them crackled with tension as Zev's dominance filled the room. His voice dropped an octave lower. "Isle Luna is not a democracy. I don't need to explain myself to anyone."

Ewan held his ground for a long moment, then inclined his head in submission, acknowledging the command of his Alpha.

"As you wish," he conceded. "But don't wait too long to tell her, Zev. She deserves to know why she feels drawn to you—why her body responds to you even if her human senses can't identify the mate bond."

The truth of Ewan's words hit Zev hard. Already he could sense it—the invisible thread connecting him to Chrissy, pulling tighter with every passing minute they were on the same island.

"I'll tell her when she's ready," Zev said finally. "When she feels safe. When she trusts me enough to hear it."

Ewan nodded once, then left Zev alone with the tumult of his thoughts.

Zev braced his large hand against his desk, his powerful body humming with restless energy. His wolf paced, impatient to claim what was his by ancient right. The primal urge to mark her and to show the world she belonged to him was nearly overwhelming.

"Soon," he promised his wolf, his voice a rough whisper in the empty room. "She'll be ours."



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:07 am*

FIVE

CHRISSY

Chrissy stretched languidly across the king-sized bed in her private villa that morning.

Her body sank into Egyptian cotton sheets so soft they felt like sleeping on a cloud.

The sunlight streamed through the open balcony doors, painting golden patterns across the polished hardwood floor.

The gentle Caribbean breeze carried the scent of salt water and tropical flowers into the Orchid villa.

"Two days of absolute freedom," she whispered to herself, wiggling her unpainted toes. No Leslie hovering with a designer outfit. No Marty barking orders through her earpiece. No cameras documenting her every move.

She rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling fan spinning lazily above her. The strange disappointment at Gerri's abrupt departure still lingered. The matchmaker had vanished while Chrissy was settling into the Orchid villa, leaving a constellation of unanswered questions in her wake.

"How are you exactly keeping Marty away? Is my dad safe? Am I stuck here forever?" Chrissy murmured the questions to the empty room. "A goodbye would've been nice."

She pushed herself up and padded to the balcony, letting the warm tropical air envelop her body clad only in silk shorts and a thin camisole. The sea stretched to the horizon, impossibly blue and inviting.

"I could get used to this," she admitted, feeling a twinge of guilt. Her album had just dropped. Her fans were probably wondering where she'd disappeared to. But right now, in this moment, she realized her shoulders weren't bunched up around her ears and she could actually breathe again.

The villa's landline rang, startling her from her reverie.

"Hello?" she answered cautiously.

"Good morning, sleepyhead!" Olivia's cheerful voice came through. "Ready for our spa date today? I'll be at your door in fifteen minutes."

"Perfect timing. I'll be ready."

Chrissy moved to the closet filled with clothes Olivia had provided—casual, comfortable pieces that made her feel like herself again. She selected a simple yellow sundress, the fabric light and airy against her skin.

As she dressed, her thoughts drifted to Zev. Those intense blue eyes that seemed to see right through her. The way his jaw had tightened when their hands brushed. The subtle woody scent of him that had haunted her dreams for two nights straight.

Unlike the entertainment industry men who saw her as a product to be packaged and sold, Zev gazed at her like she was a rare discovery. Like meeting her had shifted something monumental in his world.

"Get it together, Chrissy," she scolded her reflection as she ran a brush through her

long brown hair. "Just because he isn't immediately trying to profit off you doesn't mean he doesn't want something."

But what exactly did he want? She'd barely seen him since that first day. Only glimpsed him from afar, his powerful frame commanding attention as he strode across the resort grounds. Each time, he'd caught her watching and held her gaze with an intensity that had heat blooming in her chest.

A soft knock at the door interrupted her thoughts. She opened it to find Olivia waiting, radiant in a flowing teal sundress that complemented her tanned skin.

"You look like a different person already," Olivia noted with approval, stepping inside. "Two days of actual sleep works wonders, doesn't it?"

"You have no idea." Chrissy gathered her hair into a loose ponytail. "I forgot what it feels like to wake up naturally, without someone yanking back my curtains and shoving a protein shake in my hand."

Olivia laughed, the sound bright and genuine. "Well, today is all about pampering. The spa grotto is my favorite place on the island—after the private coves, of course."

"I haven't explored much yet," Chrissy admitted. "This villa has been my sanctuary since I arrived."

"Hiding from Zev?" Olivia's green eyes sparkled with mischief.

Heat rushed to Chrissy's cheeks. "Not hiding exactly. Just... processing things."

"He has that effect on people. All that alpha energy packed into those muscles." Olivia wiggled her eyebrows. "I've never seen him so thrown off balance by someone before."

"Me? I threw him off balance?" The thought was unexpectedly thrilling.

"Honey, you practically knocked him sideways the moment you stepped off that helicopter." Olivia linked her arm through Chrissy's. "Come on, spa first, then we can dissect the way Zev looks at you like you're the answer to a question he didn't know he was asking."

Chrissy felt her cheeks flush again as they strolled along a winding stone path bordered by vibrant tropical flowers.

The warmth of Olivia's arm against hers felt grounding and real.

When was the last time she'd had genuine female friendship outside of work and without an agenda?

Someone who wasn't afraid to tease her or tell her the truth?

She had Maggie back home, but even that friendship had its limits and restrictions due to Leslie's watchful eye.

"Does he really look at me like that?" Chrissy asked, her loose ponytail swaying with each step.

"Honey, I've known Zev for years, and I've never seen him like this. He watches you when you're not looking—like you're this fascinating puzzle he's desperate to solve."

The spa grotto emerged before them—a natural cave formation with crystal-clear pools steaming gently in the morning light. Bamboo privacy screens sectioned off different areas, and the scent of essential oils perfumed the air.

"This is incredible," Chrissy breathed, taking in the tranquil space. For twelve

months, she'd been shuttled from one sterile hotel spa to another for "image maintenance," never allowed to simply enjoy the experience.

"Wait until you try the mineral soak," Olivia grinned, guiding her toward a changing area. "Here, I brought you this." She handed Chrissy a midnight blue bikini.

Chrissy held it up, hesitation flickering across her face. "It's... kind of revealing."

"Honey, you have the body for it—you might as well embrace it and show it off a little. Be proud of it." Olivia squeezed her shoulder gently. "For you, not for album covers or publicity shots."

Something shifted inside Chrissy at those words. Her body belonged to her, not Empire Records or Marty or the public. She changed quickly, emerging to find Olivia already waiting in an emerald bikini.

Within minutes, they were submerged in a private thermal pool, warm water bubbling around them as an attendant placed cucumber slices over their eyes and clay masks on their faces.

"This is heaven," Chrissy sighed, feeling muscles she hadn't even realized were tense begin to unwind.

The attendant's gentle touch on her shoulder suddenly triggered a flash of memory—Leslie's bony fingers digging into her arm, dragging her toward the scale in her bathroom.

"Five pounds? FIVE? Do you know what the internet is saying about your ass already? And you're eating carbs?"

Chrissy's body went rigid, her breathing shallow.

"Chrissy?" Olivia's voice sounded far away. "Are you okay?"

Chrissy tried to nod, but her body trembled. Another memory surfaced—Leslie slapping her hand away from a plate of food at a catered event, hissing that she was getting "too fat for her costumes."

"I'm sorry," she whispered, tears mixing with the cucumber juice on her cheeks.

Olivia removed her own cucumber slices and gently took Chrissy's away. "Don't apologize. Whatever you're feeling is valid."

"Leslie—my handler—she..." Chrissy's voice broke. "She would hit me if I gained weight. Called me disgusting. Said I was ruining everything Marty built."

Olivia's green eyes darkened, something wild flickering behind them. "That's abuse, Chrissy. Plain and simple."

"I know. I just...got used to it, I guess."

"You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to." Olivia's voice was gentle but firm. "But I want you to know something right now. You are worthy of love and respect, not the abuse you went through."

Chrissy nodded, tears still falling. There was something freeing about Olivia's approach—no pressure to share more, no forced conversation, just space to feel her emotions.

"Thank you," Chrissy whispered. "For letting me choose what to say. For not pushing me."

"On this island, your choices matter," Olivia said simply. "Especially to Zev."

Chrissy took a deep breath, pushing away the remnants of tears. The spa attendant had tactfully disappeared, giving her time to collect herself.

"Sorry about that," she murmured, dabbing at her eyes with the back of her hand. "Guess I'm carrying more baggage than I realized."

Olivia squeezed her shoulder gently. "Don't ever apologize for healing. That's what this place is for."

They moved from the thermal pool to the mud treatment area, where two attendants waited with clay masks and brushes. The grotto opened to the sky here, sunlight filtering through the natural skylight to illuminate the smooth stone chamber.

"This mud is sourced right from the volcanic deposits on the southern end of the island," Olivia explained as the attendants began applying the warm, mineral-rich clay to their skin. "Zev's grandmother discovered its healing properties decades ago. It's one of our most sought-after treatments."

Chrissy closed her eyes as the clay was brushed across her shoulders. "Speaking of Zev, I've barely seen anyone except you and the staff since I arrived. Is the resort usually this... empty?"

"Actually," Olivia said, looking slightly sheepish, "Zev cleared this entire section for you—the spa grotto, the beachfront near your villa, everything. There are no other guests anywhere near you. He wanted to ensure your privacy after everything you've been through."

Chrissy's eyes flew open. "The whole section? But that must be costing him a fortune in lost revenue."

Olivia shrugged. "Money isn't really an issue for Zev. Your comfort and safety were

his primary concerns."



## Page 8

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"Well, that was really thoughtful of him." Suddenly, a strange heat pooled low in her belly. She quickly cleared her throat. "So, all the people I've seen here..."

"Are employees. They live on the island—actually, they're the only people who live here permanently."

Chrissy tilted her head, considering this. "So that means they're all wolf shifters? Members of Zev's pack?"

Olivia hesitated, her expression cautious.

"I get it if you can't tell me," Chrissy added quickly.

"I understand the secrecy. A lot of the celebrities I've met this past year were shifters who keep it under wraps from the public.

I can relate to wanting parts of yourself protected and private—something I haven't been allowed to have for a year now.

" She gave a rueful smile. "I understand why Zev and his pack would think it's important to remain hidden. "

Relief softened Olivia's features. "Yes, all employees are residents, and all residents are pack members. Though not everyone is a wolf shifter. Some married into the pack—other animal shifters, and a very few humans."

The attendants finished applying the mud and discreetly stepped away, leaving them

to soak in the mineral properties. Chrissy wiggled her toes, feeling oddly comfortable covered head-to-toe in clay.

"Did Gerri say anything else to you during your travels here?" Olivia asked casually. "About mates, perhaps?"

Chrissy shook her head. "No. Actually, that was the one thing that didn't add up. Her business card said 'Founder and Owner of the Paranormal Dating Agency,' but I was too focused on escaping Marty's clutches to really dig deeper."

"Gerri Wilder is a renowned paranormal matchmaker," Olivia said, watching Chrissy's face carefully. "She has a perfect track record matching shifters with their fated mates. Any time she brings someone new—especially a human—to a shifter pack, well..." She raised her eyebrows meaningfully.

"Wait, you think she brought me here because I'm someone's mate?" Chrissy laughed nervously, feeling heat climb her neck that had nothing to do with the mud. "I don't even know what being a fated mate means. I know nothing about shifter instincts or traditions."

"Well then, is there anyone in particular who's caught your eye since you've been here?" Olivia's lips quirked in a knowing smile. "Maybe someone who might possibly be your mate?"

Zev's intense blue eyes and powerful presence immediately flashed in Chrissy's mind, sending a shiver of awareness down her spine. The way he'd looked at her like she was the most fascinating creature he'd ever encountered.

"That's—there's no way," Chrissy stammered, trying to laugh it off. "Gerri didn't bring me here for that. It must be a coincidence. I'm only here to escape my situation..." she trailed off, not wanting to delve further into her problems.

"Well, whatever the reason," Chrissy added, changing the subject, "I really appreciate everything you and the others are doing for me."

"It's all Zev," Olivia corrected her. "You should really be thanking him."

Chrissy bit her lip, realizing she hadn't properly thanked her host. "I've barely seen him since I arrived. Just glimpses from across the resort."

"He's probably giving you space to decompress." Olivia's eyes lit up with an idea. "You should dine with him tonight. Thank him in person."

The thought of a private dinner with Zev sent Chrissy's pulse racing. She remembered the electricity that had sparked between them when their hands brushed—the way his jaw had tightened as if fighting some powerful instinct.

"Maybe I should," Chrissy agreed, surprised by how much she wanted to see him again. To understand the intensity she'd glimpsed beneath his controlled exterior.

"Perfect!" Olivia beamed. "I'll let him know. Eight o'clock at the Cliff House?"

Chrissy nodded, suddenly nervous and excited all at once. A dinner with the most magnetic man she'd ever met, on a cliff overlooking the Caribbean.

As the warm water sluiced away the last traces of clay from her skin, Chrissy leaned her forehead against the cool tile of the shower stall.

The tension in her shoulders had melted away during the spa treatments, replaced by a strange flutter of anticipation in her stomach.

She'd agreed to have dinner with Zev tonight. Alone.

"You doing okay in there?" Olivia called from the adjacent shower.

"Just enjoying having shower time without someone timing me with a stopwatch." Chrissy smiled to herself, remembering Leslie's shrill voice counting down the minutes before she was due on set.

But beneath her lighthearted response lay a deeper current of emotion. Zev had cleared an entire section of his resort just for her privacy. He'd made sure she had space to breathe and to decompress. The thought of seeing him tonight and properly thanking him sent a thrill racing through her veins.

Six hours later, Chrissy stood in her villa bedroom surrounded by clothing options spread across her king-sized bed. Nothing fancy like the couture gowns Leslie forced her into for industry events—just simple, comfortable pieces that actually felt like her.

"Why am I overthinking this?" she muttered, holding an emerald green sundress against her body. "It's just dinner."

Yet it didn't feel like "just dinner." She'd performed for stadiums filled with screaming fans without her heart racing like this. She'd done live television interviews watched by millions without breaking a sweat.

But one pair of intense blue eyes made her insides twist with a mixture of nervousness and excitement she couldn't explain.

She slipped the emerald dress over her head, the soft fabric caressing her curves. The color made her green eyes pop and complemented her fair skin. She applied minimal makeup—just enough to enhance her natural features without the heavy stage makeup she'd grown accustomed to.

"This is ridiculous," she told her reflection as she ran her fingers through her loose waves. "I've dealt with pushy executives and handsy producers. Why does the thought of sitting across a table from Zev make my knees weak?"

Because he looks at you like you're the only person in the room, a small voice whispered in her mind. Because he gave you space when everyone else took and took and took.

A gentle knock at Chrissy's door startled her from her thoughts. Olivia stood outside, looking flawless in a flowing maxi dress, her smile knowing.

"You look gorgeous," she said, eyeing Chrissy's emerald sundress appreciatively. "Perfect for dinner at the Cliff House."

The path to the restaurant wound through flowering tropical gardens, their sweet scent hanging heavy in the evening air. With each step closer, Chrissy's heart beat a little faster.

Just because he's drop-dead gorgeous and seems super nice doesn't mean you should trust him completely, she reminded herself. After all, Marty had seemed charming at first too.

But something about Zev felt different. There was an intensity to him, yes, but also a warmth. A genuineness that Marty had never possessed.

The Cliff House emerged before them—an open-air structure perched dramatically on the edge of a cliff overlooking the Caribbean. Lanterns hung around the space, casting golden light across polished wooden floors. The sound of waves crashing against the rocks below provided a rhythmic backdrop.

And there he was.

Zev stood at a table near the terrace edge, his powerful frame outlined against the darkening sky.

His black button-down shirt stretched across his broad shoulders, the top buttons undone to reveal a teasing glimpse of tanned skin.

When he spotted her, his piercing blue eyes locked onto her green ones, and something primal and electric passed between them.

He straightened immediately, his posture shifting subtly—shoulders back and chin up, a stance that screamed authority and confidence. Yet as she drew closer, Chrissy noticed the slight fidget of his fingers against his leg and the barely perceptible bob of his Adam's apple as he swallowed.

Was the Alpha actually nervous?

"Good luck," Olivia whispered with a wink before disappearing back down the path.

Chrissy approached the table, hyperaware of how Zev's gaze traveled briefly down her body before returning respectfully to her face—appreciative but not leering.

"You look stunning," he said, his deep voice sending a pleasant shiver through her. He pulled out her chair with effortless grace, his fingers brushing against her bare shoulder as he helped her sit.

That brief contact sent a jolt of electricity through her body. From the subtle tightening of his jaw, she suspected he felt it too.

Looking around, she realized they were completely alone in the restaurant. No other tables were occupied. No waitstaff hovered nearby. Just them, the candles, and the endless view of stars twinkling above the ocean.

"Did you clear out the restaurant for me too?" she asked, one eyebrow raised.

A hint of color touched his cheekbones. "I thought you might appreciate a little privacy after being constantly in the public eye."

"Thank you." The words felt inadequate for everything he'd done the past two days. "Not just for tonight, but for all of this. The villa, the security, the space." She gestured around them. "I haven't felt this...free...in over a year."

Zev's expression softened, his intense gaze warming. "Everyone deserves freedom, Chrissy. Especially from people who want to cage your spirit."

The simple understanding in those words nearly brought tears to her eyes. Not pity, not judgment—just recognition of her struggle.

"How are you real?" The question slipped out before she could stop it, her natural impulsiveness breaking through her careful reserve.

Zev laughed, the sound rich and deep, reaching places inside her that had been cold for too long. "I assure you, I'm very real. Though perhaps not what you're used to."

"That's for sure." Chrissy's lips curved upward. "Most powerful men I've met usually want something from me."

"And you think I don't?" His question was gentle but direct, his blue eyes studying her with that unnerving intensity that made her feel seen down to her soul.

Chrissy considered him for a moment, her eyes meeting his steadily. There was something about this man that made her want to lower her defenses, even as her experience screamed caution.

"What I think," she said finally, "is that whatever you want from me, you'll actually ask for it rather than manipulate me or demand that I give it to you."



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:07 am*

SIX

ZEV

Z ev's wolf clawed at his insides as he watched Chrissy's full lips curve into that genuine smile that had haunted him for two days.

The emerald sundress she wore clung to her curves in all the right places, making his mouth go dry every time she shifted in her seat.

When the server—one of his most trusted pack members—set down their dinner and retreated with silent efficiency, Zev took a steadying breath.

"You're right," he admitted, meeting her bright green eyes across the flickering candles. "I would never manipulate you. That's not how I operate."

Not with my mate , his wolf added possessively.

The soft island breeze caught a strand of her dark hair, blowing it across her cheek. His fingers itched to brush it back and to feel the softness of her skin. He gripped his water glass instead, the crystal cool against his suddenly overheated palm.

"So what do you want, then?" Chrissy asked, her head tilting to the side with genuine curiosity. The movement exposed the elegant line of her neck, and Zev's wolf growled with approval. "Because powerful men always want something eventually."

"Right now?" Zev leaned forward slightly, his voice lowering to a rumble. "I want to

know who you really are, Chrissy Rivera. Not the image they've created for you. The woman who finds joy in simple sundresses rather than designer gowns."

Her eyes widened slightly, surprise flickering across her features. "Olivia's been talking, I see."

"She mentioned you had a good day at the spa." He stabbed a piece of seared tuna with his fork, his muscles flexing beneath his black shirt. "She also suggested I not overwhelm you with questions, but my wolf isn't known for its patience."

Shit . He hadn't meant to mention his wolf so openly.

Chrissy's eyebrow arched. "Your... wolf?"

Zev's jaw tightened. Olivia had warned him to go slow, and not to scare Chrissy away with talk of shifters and mates. Yet here he was, five minutes into dinner, already slipping up. He set down his fork with deliberate control.

"Figure of speech," he said smoothly. "An Alpha trait. When I want something, the instinct can be... overwhelming."

The look in her eyes told him she wasn't entirely convinced, but she didn't push. Instead, she surprised him by offering a piece of herself.

"You want to know the real me?" She stabbed at her salad, her shoulders relaxing slightly.

"I learned guitar at eight from my dad. When I play, I feel like I can breathe again.

Lately, I haven't been allowed to play other than at my designated shows.

Leslie says it ruins my manicure and costs too much to keep fixing my nails. "

The casual mention of her handler's control made Zev's blood boil. His fingers curled around the edge of the table.

"We have several guitars on the island," he offered, fighting to keep his voice level despite the protective rage coursing through him. "Professional quality. You're welcome to play any time."

The brilliant smile that lit her face made his heart thunder against his ribs. Genuine happiness looked spectacular on her—nothing like the practiced smiles he'd seen in social media posts.

"Really? I'd love that." Excitement danced in her eyes. "I have so many half-finished songs in my head with nowhere to put them."

"Your own music? Not the produced pop they've been releasing?"

Chrissy nodded, suddenly animated. "I wrote 'Daddy's Girl' in an hour sitting on my back porch. It's simple yet raw. But the label keeps pushing me toward overproduced tracks with lyrics I barely relate to."

Zev leaned forward, genuinely fascinated by this glimpse of the real woman. "I'd rather hear one honest song from your heart than a hundred manufactured hits."

The blush that spread across her cheeks was intoxicating. His wolf preened at having caused it.

"Careful," she teased, "keep talking like that and I might mistake you for a decent guy."

"I'm no saint," Zev admitted with a wolfish grin that showed just enough teeth to make her pulse jump visibly at her throat. "But I do recognize authenticity when I see it. It's rare in your world."

"And common in yours?" Zev watched Chrissy's eyes sparkle with interest as she spoke across the candlelit table

The emerald sundress she wore perfectly complemented her bright green eyes, and the neckline dipped just low enough to reveal the swell of her breasts—a distraction his wolf kept eagerly drawing his attention to whenever she leaned forward.

"When you're Alpha, people can't hide much. You develop an eye for truth," he said, enjoying the way her pulse visibly quickened at his words again.

His wolf rumbled with satisfaction at the reaction, sensing the attraction that crackled between them. It had been building all evening, electric and undeniable.

"So, what does your Alpha eye see when you look at me?" Chrissy challenged, her full lips curving into a smile as she sipped her wine.

"Someone who's been caged for too long." Zev leaned forward, his broad shoulders shifting under his black shirt. "A songbird who's forgotten she has wings."

A blush crept across Chrissy's cheeks again, and Zev inhaled deeply, capturing her sweet scent tinged with arousal. His wolf growled eagerly, though Zev maintained his outward composure despite the primal need to claim her that surged through his blood.

As the server returned with their chocolate soufflés, Zev's mind returned to his earlier conversation with Olivia.

The pack was growing restless. They'd play along for now—closing off an entire section of the resort for a human stranger—but their patience wouldn't last forever.

Each hour that passed heightened their unease about having someone with Chrissy's high-profile history on their secluded territory.

Sooner rather than later, you need to claim her publicly, his wolf insisted. Tell them she's our fated mate. Their Luna.

And when Olivia had described the bruises she'd glimpsed on Chrissy's arms during their spa day today—revealed when her makeup had washed away in the hot springs—Zev had nearly lost control.

The evidence of Leslie's physical abuse had made him want to shift and hunt down both her and Marty immediately.

Only the knowledge that Chrissy needed him here had kept his rage in check.

"What's on your mind?" Chrissy asked, noticing his sudden intensity. "You look like you're plotting someone's murder."

Zev's jaw tightened. She had no idea how accurate that assessment was.

"Nothing important," he lied, then changed course, unwilling to further deceive his mate. "Actually, I was thinking about what you've been through. Someone should pay for the way they've treated you."

A shadow passed over her face, but she quickly covered it with a smile that didn't reach her eyes. Zev's wolf snarled at the mask she'd clearly been forced to wear for months.

"I'd rather focus on now." She took a bite of her dessert, closing her eyes briefly in pleasure. The small moan that escaped her lips sent heat rushing through Zev's body. "This is amazing, by the way."

"I'll inform the chef," Zev replied, his voice rougher than intended as he fought for control. "Though I'd rather hear more about these songs you haven't been allowed to write."

Her entire face lit up, the shadows instantly banished. "Really? Most people just want to talk about what celebrities I've dated."

"I'm not most people," Zev stated flatly, leaning back in his chair with alpha confidence. "And I'm far more interested in who you actually are than who they've made you be."

The look she gave him—vulnerable, hopeful, yet still cautious—made his protective instincts flare.

He would destroy anyone who ever hurt her again.

The depth of this feeling after just days of knowing her should have worried him, but his wolf recognized the truth his human side was still processing.

She was his, and he would rearrange the world to keep her safe.

"In that case," Chrissy said, setting down her fork, "I should warn you I might talk about music all night."

Zev's lips curved up into a predatory smile. "Good. Because I have nowhere else to be."

After they finished their dessert, Zev helped Chrissy up from the table and guided her out of the restaurant.

His hand rested on the small of Chrissy's back as they stepped out into the evening air and onto the moonlit path leading to the beach.

The gesture felt natural and instinctive, as if his wolf had already claimed her even if his human side was still treading carefully.

The soft fabric of her emerald sundress brushed against his fingers, and the warmth of her skin seeped through, sending a low hum of satisfaction through him. He fought the urge to pull her closer.

"The moon's bright tonight," he said, his voice carrying over the gentle rustle of palm leaves. "Perfect for a walk."

Chrissy glanced up at him, her green eyes reflecting the silver light. "It's so quiet here. No paparazzi, no handlers, no schedules. Just... peace."

Zev's wolf growled at the hint of weariness in her voice. She's safe now , he reminded himself. She's with me.

They reached the beach, and the white sand sparkled under the moonlight.

The waves lapped gently at the shore, their rhythm calming yet alive.

Zev slipped off his shoes, letting the cool sand shift between his toes.

Chrissy followed suit, her laugh soft and melodic as she wiggled her bare feet into the sand.

"Feels good, doesn't it?" he asked, watching her closely. She looked radiant, her hair catching the breeze and her sundress swaying with every step.

"Amazing," she admitted, turning to him with a smile that made his chest tighten. "I haven't had this much freedom in a long time."

Zev's jaw clenched. But he kept his tone light, not wanting to ruin the moment. "You mentioned a half-written song earlier. Would you sing it for me?"

Her smile faltered, and she looked down, her toes tracing patterns in the sand. "I don't know. It's... raw. Just something I've been working on in my limited spare time."

"Raw is honest," Zev said, stepping closer. His hand brushed against hers, and he felt that electric jolt of her skin against his. "And I'd rather hear honest words from you than anything polished from someone else."

Chrissy hesitated, then took a deep breath. She began softly, humming a melody that wove through the night air like a whispered secret. Then her voice, clear and soulful, joined in.

"Lost in the shadows, searching for light,

Tired of the fights, the endless nights.

Wishing for someone who'll see the real me,

Not the mask they made, but who I'm meant to be."

Her words hit him like a punch to the chest. The pain in her voice, the vulnerability, and the quiet hope—it tore at him. His wolf stirred, restless and protective, urging him to pull her into his arms and promise her the world. Instead, he stood still, letting



her finish.

When the last note faded into the night, Chrissy looked up at him, her eyes searching his. "It's still a work in progress," she said, her voice barely a whisper.

Zev stepped closer, his hand lifting to brush a strand of hair from her face. His fingers lingered against her cheek, the warmth of her skin making his blood hum. "It's beautiful," he said roughly. "And I want to be the one who sees the real you."

Her breath hitched, and she looked away, her cheeks flushing. "Zev, I... I don't want to be another person's project. Not again."

His hand dropped to her shoulder, his touch firm but gentle. "I'm not Marty. I'm not here to control you or mold you into something you're not. I'm here because I see you , Chrissy. The woman who's been buried under everyone else's expectations."

She hesitated, then nodded, her eyes glistening. "It's hard to trust that. After everything... They treat me like I'm property. Like my worth is tied to how much money I can make for them."

Zev's wolf growled low in his chest, and he clenched his fists to keep from shifting right then and there. "You're not property," he said, his voice dark with intensity. "You're incredible. Resilient. And you're safe here. I won't let anyone hurt you again."

Chrissy's lips parted, and for a moment, she looked like she might argue. But then she stepped closer, her hand brushing against his. "Thank you," she said softly. "For seeing me tonight. For giving me space to breathe these past two days."

Zev's heart thundered in his chest. His wolf howled with the need to claim her and to mark her as his.

But he forced himself to stay calm and to give her the time she needed.

"You deserve more than just breathing," he said, his voice rough with emotion.

"You deserve to live. To sing from your heart. To be free."

She looked at him, her green eyes searching his blue ones. "And what if I'm scared to trust that freedom?" She paused for a long moment. "What if I'm scared to trust you?"

"Then I'll be patient," he promised, his hand sliding down to intertwine with hers. "Because you're worth it."

The night stretched around them, the waves crashing against the shore. Zev's wolf settled slightly, content to stand beside her, to protect her, and to wait for her. For now, that was enough.

But deep down, he knew it wouldn't be for long, because every instinct in him screamed to claim her. The only question was when she'd be ready to let him.

SEVEN

CHRISSY

Chrissy's lips parted as she faced Zev, the moonlight casting a soft glow over his chiseled features.

She was about to make a joke and deflect again, to retreat into the safety of her walls.

But then, she stepped even closer to him, her bare feet sinking into the cool sand.

The warmth of his hand in hers sent tingles up her arm, and she felt the weight of his gaze, intense and unyielding.

The night stretched around them, the waves crashing against the shore in a rhythmic lullaby.

Chrissy couldn't believe what had just happened.

This had been the most real and magical night in months—maybe ever.

Zev had a way of making her feel seen, of peeling back the layers she'd been forced to wear for so long.

He made her want to be vulnerable, to show him the parts of herself she'd kept hidden, even from herself.

She couldn't believe she'd actually sung him one of her most personal and vulnerable songs, especially when it was only half-written and far from perfect.

She never shared her unfinished work with anyone anymore.

Marty had made sure of that. He'd stripped her of her creative freedom, forcing her to sing the songs his producers wrote, ones that didn't feel anything like her at all.

The only exception was 'Daddy's Girl,' the song that had made her a star.

But even that felt like a relic of a time when she'd been free to create and be herself.

Zev had listened to her raw, imperfect song with a reverence that made her chest ache.

He hadn't critiqued it or told her to polish it.

He'd just... appreciated it. And that made her want to wrap her arms around him right now, and to let him hold her so she could feel safe again.

Because she did feel safe with him, in a way she hadn't felt in a long time.

"You're different," she said, her voice trembling slightly. "You don't want anything from me. You're not trying to use me or control me. You just... want to be here. With me."

Zev's eyes darkened, and he stepped impossibly closer, his free hand lifting to cup her cheek. His touch was electric, sending a jolt of heat through her. "I want you , Chrissy. Not the pop star, not the image they've created. Just you."

Her breath hitched, and she leaned into his touch, her heart racing. "I don't know if

I'm ready for this," she admitted, her voice barely audible. "But I want to be."

"That's enough for me," he said, his voice low and rough. "We'll take it one step at a time."

She nodded, her eyes never leaving his. The air between them crackled with tension, and she felt the pull of him, magnetic and undeniable. She wanted to kiss him, to feel the heat of his lips on hers, but she hesitated, her fear warring with her desire.

Zev seemed to sense her internal struggle. He leaned down, his breath warm against her ear. "Whenever you're ready," he murmured, his voice a promise. "I'm not going anywhere."

Chrissy's heart swelled, and she felt a tear slip down her cheek.

She hadn't realized how much she'd needed to hear those words.

In what felt like forever, she finally felt a flicker of hope.

Maybe, just maybe, she could find her way back to herself.

And maybe Zev could be the one to help her get there.

She squeezed his hand, her voice steady despite the emotions swirling inside her. "Thank you again," she said, her eyes locking with his. "For... everything."

Zev gave her a small, knowing smile. "Always," he said, his voice a vow.

Chrissy's heart was racing from the intensity of the moment, her hand warm in Zev's, and his other hand cradling her cheek like she was something precious.

The moonlight bathed them in a silvery glow, and for a second, the world felt like it had narrowed to just the two of them.

His eyes held hers, and she could see the promise in them, the unspoken vow that he'd be there for her, no matter what.

But then, the sound of hurried footsteps crunching against the sand shattered the moment. Ewan appeared, his face tight with worry and his dark hair slightly disheveled.

"It's Jonah," Ewan said, his voice urgent. "He hasn't come home."

Zev's entire body tensed, his hand dropping from Chrissy's cheek as he turned to face Ewan. The shift in him was immediate—gone was the tender, protective man who'd been holding her hand, replaced by the Alpha, commanding and ready to act.

"What do you mean he hasn't come home?" Zev's voice was sharp.

"He was supposed to be back by sunset. His parents let him explore, but he knows the rules. He's never missed curfew before." Ewan's jaw tightened. "We've checked the usual spots. But nothing."

Chrissy's stomach dropped. A kid was out there, alone, in the jungle at night. She didn't know Jonah, but the thought of a child lost and scared made her chest tight. She stepped forward, her feet sinking into the sand. "I'm coming with you."

Zev's head snapped toward her, his eyes narrowing. "It's not safe for you. The jungle at night is dangerous, especially for someone who doesn't know the terrain."

She crossed her arms, her chin lifting in defiance. "A kid's out there alone. I'm not just going to stand by and do nothing."

Zev's gaze bore into hers, and for a moment, she thought he might argue. But then he gave a curt nod, his expression softening just a fraction. "Fine. But you stay close to me. No wandering off."

"Deal," she said, her voice firm. She bent down to slip her sandals back on, her fingers fumbling slightly in her haste. Zev did the same, his movements quick and efficient.

Ewan stepped closer, his voice low. "I'll rally the others. We'll spread out and cover as much ground as we can."

Zev nodded, his jaw set. "Use the pack link. Keep me updated."

Chrissy straightened, her brow furrowing. "Pack link?"

Zev glanced at her, his expression softening again slightly. "It's how we communicate. Telepathically. But it's something that develops after puberty, so Jonah can't use it yet."

"Got it," she said, though her mind was still reeling from the idea of telepathic communication. She'd known shifters were different, but this was something else entirely.

Zev turned back to Ewan. "I'll take Chrissy with me. I've got a hunch he might be near the lava tube cave. It's easier to navigate on two legs, so I'll stay in human form."

Ewan nodded, then turned and jogged back up the beach, his figure quickly disappearing into the shadows.

Zev grabbed flashlights from a nearby storage shed and handed one to Chrissy. "Stay close," he repeated, his voice firm but not unkind. "The jungle can be unpredictable at

night."

She nodded, gripping the flashlight tightly. "Lead the way."

They moved quickly, the jungle swallowing them whole as they left the beach behind.

The air was thick with the scent of earth and foliage, the sounds of the night creatures buzzing and chirping around them.

Chrissy's heart pounded in her chest, but she forced herself to focus, her eyes scanning the darkness for any sign of Jonah.

Zev moved with a predator's grace, his steps sure and silent despite the uneven terrain. She could feel the tension radiating off him, his focus entirely on the task at hand. But every so often, he'd glance back at her, his eyes checking to make sure she was still there and still safe.

"You're sure he'd be near this cave?" she asked, her voice low as they pushed through a thicket of vines.

"It's a place I used to explore when I was his age," Zev said, his voice steady. "It's secluded, but it's also dangerous if you don't know what you're doing. If he's there, we'll find him."

Chrissy nodded, her mind racing. She couldn't help but admire Zev's calm under pressure, the way he took charge without hesitation.

It was a stark contrast to the men she'd known in her world, who were all bluster and ego.



Zev was so different. He was a leader, but he didn't need to shout to prove it.

Zev and Chrissy moved deeper into the jungle, their flashlights cutting narrow beams through the oppressive darkness.

The air grew cooler, the cacophony of night creatures fading into a distant hum.

Chrissy's pulse quickened, her senses on high alert.

The jungle felt alive around her, its weight pressing in, but she forced herself to stay focused and keep moving forward.

Zev's broad shoulders moved ahead of her, his presence a steady anchor in the shifting shadows.

They turned onto a narrow trail that led to the base of a cliffside, its jagged silhouette cutting into the starry sky.

Zev stopped, his flashlight beam scanning the dense wall of vines and moss that clung to the rock face.

He turned to her, his blue eyes sharp in the dim light.

"The cave's just through here. The entrance is narrow so stay close to me. "

Chrissy nodded, her throat suddenly dry.

She stepped closer to him, her shoulder brushing his arm.

A shiver ran through her, though she couldn't tell if it was from the cool air or the way his body seemed to radiate heat.

Zev pushed aside the thick vines, revealing a narrow opening barely wide enough for a person to squeeze through sideways.

He stepped in first, his voice echoing back to her. "Come on, I've got you."

She hesitated for a moment, her heart pounding, then followed him into the cave.

The interior was a tight, winding corridor of smooth black stone, the walls glistening faintly in the flashlight beams. The air was cooler inside, damp and earthy, with a faint metallic tang.

The space was cramped—less than six feet tall in places, and no more than three or four feet wide—forcing her to move carefully.

Her breath hitched as she navigated the uneven floor, her sandals slipping slightly on the damp stone.

"Careful," Zev's voice came from ahead, low and steady. "The floor can be slick."

"Got it," she said, her voice echoing eerily in the confined space. She glanced up, catching a glimpse of a natural chimney in the ceiling, a thin shaft of moonlight filtering down. "This place is... wild."

Zev glanced back at her, a faint smirk tugging at his lips. "I used to spend hours here as a kid. It was my escape—away from the pack and away from being the Alpha's heir. Just me and the silence."

Chrissy's chest tightened. "Sounds nice. I haven't had a place like this in... well, a very long time now. No matter where I go, someone's always watching."

Zev's gaze softened, and he slowed his pace to match hers. "Why's that?"

She shrugged, though the movement felt stiff in the confined space. "Fame, I guess. Everyone thinks they own a piece of you or knows you. No privacy and no space to just... be."

Zev stopped and turned to face her in the cramped space, his expression unreadable in the dim light. "You're safe here, Chrissy."

She swallowed hard, her eyes meeting his. Suddenly, the world outside the cave ceased to exist. It was just the two of them, surrounded by the ancient stone, the air thick with something she couldn't quite name. "I trust you," she said softly, the words slipping out.

Zev's jaw tightened, and he nodded once, a flicker of something intense in his eyes. "Good. Because I'm not letting anything happen to you."

He turned then, and they continued deeper into the cave, the walls narrowing in places making Chrissy slightly claustrophobic.

Her steps faltered as the silence pressed in, broken only by the faint drip of water from the ceiling.

She glanced back at the twisting path behind them, her stomach knotting with unease.

"We've been walking for a while. Do you really think Jonah's in here? "

Zev stopped and turned to her again, his expression calm but resolute. "My instincts are telling me we're close. Trust them."

She hesitated, her gaze searching his. "And if we're wrong? If we're just wasting time?"

Zev stepped closer to her, his presence filling the narrow space. His voice was quiet but firm. "We're not wrong. But even if we were, I wouldn't leave this cave without knowing for sure. That's what it means to lead and protect a pack—no one gets left behind."

Chrissy's breath caught at the intensity in his voice.

She could feel the weight of his words, the unshakable conviction behind them.

It was so different from the calculated, self-serving men she'd known in her human world.

Zev wasn't just powerful—he was protective and loyal.

And for reasons she couldn't explain, that made her chest ache for something.

"Okay," she said finally, her voice soft but steady. "I trust you completely."

Zev's lips curled up into a smile, his eyes holding hers for a moment longer than necessary. "Good. You should."

They pressed on, the cave winding deeper into the cliffside.

Chrissy's flashlight beam danced over the smooth walls, catching glimpses of strange formations—ribbons of stone that looked like frozen waves, and tiny pools of water that shimmered like liquid silver.

The air grew cooler yet and the silence more profound.

She could hear her own heartbeat, steady but insistent, echoing in the confined space.

"You know," she said, her voice breaking the quiet, "this place is kind of incredible. I can see why you'd want to escape here."

Zev glanced back at her, his smirk lingering. "It's not just the cave. It's the freedom. Out there, I'm the Alpha—always on and always in control. But in here, I'm just me."

Chrissy's chest tightened again, and she forced herself to look away. "Sounds wonderful. I haven't just been me in... I don't even know how long."

Zev stepped closer to Chrissy, his expression softer now. "Then maybe it's time you found your own cave."

She met his gaze, her heart skipping a beat as she felt herself being pulled closer to him. The intensity of his voice wrapped around her like a warm embrace, making her feel alive in a way she never had. At this moment, she allowed herself to believe that maybe she could find that freedom again.

And as they continued deeper into the cave, she couldn't shake the feeling that her own personal escape might just be standing right in front of her.

EIGHT

ZEV

Zev's fingers brushed against the damp cave wall as they moved deeper into the lava tube, the rough stone cool beneath his touch.

The memory of Chrissy's face on the beach—her lips parted and her green eyes wide with anticipation—flashed through his mind like lightning.

His wolf snarled in frustration at the interruption. So close.

The way she'd looked at him when he said he wanted her—not the pop star, not the polished persona—had nearly undone him.

That flicker of vulnerability in her gaze, and the way her breath hitched when he stepped closer.

And when she admitted she wanted to be ready for whatever this was between them?

His pulse had roared in his ears like the sea during a storm.

Now, in the cave's dim glow, he stole a glance back at her.

The emerald sundress clung to her curves, the fabric shifting with each step, teasing glimpses of her toned legs.

Her sandals scuffed against the stone, her bare toes peeking out.

Fuck. Even in a crisis, his body reacted to her like she was the only thing that mattered.

"Jonah!" Chrissy's voice echoed, melodic even in urgency.

Zev's muscles tightened reflexively. He should've insisted she stay behind. But that defiant lift of her chin back on the beach—no one challenged him like that. Not his pack, not even his enemies. And yet, when she did, his wolf had practically preened. His mate had fire.

A low chuckle escaped him. "You do realize you're the first person who's ever argued with me about safety and lived to tell the tale, right?"

Chrissy let out a soft laugh. "Guess I'm special."

You have no idea.

The cave narrowed, forcing them sideways. Chrissy's shoulder grazed his, the contact sending heat spiraling down his spine. Her intoxicating scent—jasmine and honeysuckle and salt air—wrapped around him.

"You really came here as a kid, huh?" She trailed fingers along the stone. "It's... beautiful. In a strange, 'might get eaten by a cave monster' way."

Zev smirked. "No monsters here. Just silence." He hesitated, then added, "I still come here sometimes when I need some space to think. To be me without the Alpha bullshit."

Chrissy slowed, studying him. "Sounds like heaven to me." Her voice dropped,

suddenly raw. "I haven't had that in over a year. I don't even remember what it feels like to be me anymore. To have peace."

His chest tightened. The urge to pull her against him and to promise she'd never feel trapped again burned through him. Instead, he brushed a knuckle down her arm—light and testing. "Maybe you'll find it here."

She shivered, but didn't pull away. "With you?"

The words hung between them, charged with possibility. Zev stepped closer, caging her against the cave wall without touching. Her breath hitched and her lips parted. Fuck taking it slow.

"Zev?"

A faint whimper cut through the electric tension.

Both froze. Zev's head snapped toward the sound, his instincts sharpening. "Jonah!"

Twenty feet ahead, a small figure huddled in a crevice. The boy's eyes widened—relief, then guilt.

"Alpha, I—I didn't mean to?—"

Zev was moving before Jonah finished, Chrissy right behind. He crouched, gripping the boy's shoulders firm but gentle. "You're okay. That's all that matters."

Jonah's lower lip trembled. "I just wanted to see the crystals. But then I got lost, and?—"

Chrissy knelt beside them, her hand gentle on Jonah's arm. "Hey, little adventurer.



We've got you now."

The boy blinked up at her, then at Zev. "You brought her ?"

Zev arched a brow. "Problem with that?"

Jonah grinned, suddenly cheeky. "Nope. But Grandma Rosa's gonna freak when she hears Chrissy Rivera crawled through a cave for me."

Their laughter echoed off the cave walls, relief washing over them in waves.

Zev ran his large hand through his brown hair, his wolf settling now that they'd found the lost pup.

As the initial relief subsided, his alpha instincts kicked in, his eyes scanning Jonah for injuries.

The boy's posture was off, and that's when Zev noticed it—Jonah's right foot wedged between two jutting rocks.

The boy's forced smile and the tightness around his eyes told Zev everything.

The kid was worried but trying to be brave for his Alpha.

"Jonah," Zev's voice dropped an octave, commanding but gentle. "Why didn't you tell me your foot was stuck?"

The boy's eyes widened, his bottom lip quivering slightly again. "I didn't want to—I thought I could?—"

"I'm going to send word through the pack link," Zev interrupted, his tone brooking no

argument. "Let them know we found you and that you're safe."

Chrissy knelt close beside Jonah. "Jonah," Her voice was soft velvet in the cave's stillness. "Want to hear something brand new? Something nobody else has heard yet?"

Jonah nodded, his attention momentarily diverted from his trapped foot.

As Zev closed his eyes to concentrate on the pack link, Chrissy began to sing. The melody started low, almost a whisper, before lifting into something hauntingly beautiful. Her voice filled the cave with raw emotion—not the polished performance he'd seen on videos, but something organic and pure.

Focus. Zev forced himself to concentrate, reaching out to the others through their mental connection. We found him. He's safe. Stuck, but we're freeing him now. Meet us at the lava tube cave entrance.

He opened his eyes to find Jonah mesmerized by Chrissy's song, the fear temporarily forgotten in his wide-eyed wonder. Her lyrics spoke of finding light in darkness and of adventure and coming home. It was as though she'd crafted it on the spot just for this moment and just for this boy.

"I need to move these rocks," Zev said, interrupting the song with reluctance. "It might hurt a little."

Chrissy never stopped singing, only shifted to kneel behind Jonah, wrapping her arms around his small body and supporting him. Her eyes locked with Zev's over the boy's head, nodding in silent understanding.

Zev positioned his hands on the rocks, his fingers digging into the crevices. His muscles bunched beneath his shirt as he braced himself. With one powerful motion,

he wrenched the rocks apart, creating just enough space for Jonah's foot to slip free.

The moment he was released, Jonah's brave facade crumbled. Tears streamed down his face as he launched himself into Chrissy's arms, burying his face against her neck.

"It's okay," she murmured between verses, never breaking her song. "You're the bravest explorer I've ever met."

Before Zev could reach for him, Chrissy had already stood, somehow managing to lift Jonah onto her back in a single graceful movement. The boy's arms wrapped around her neck, his tearstained face pressed against her shoulder.

"Lead the way, Alpha," she said with a wink that sent heat surging through Zev's body.

His wolf preened. Look at our mate. Strong. Caring. Carrying our pack's young.

Zev didn't bother arguing with her, partly out of respect for her determination, and partly because the sight of her with a pack child on her back stirred something primal in him. Instead, he flashed her a smile that showed just enough of his canines to be a reminder of what he was.

"This way," he said, his voice rough with something more than concern for Jonah.

The trip back seemed faster. Zev stayed close enough to Chrissy to catch her if she stumbled, but she moved with surprising confidence through the narrow passages, singing softly to Jonah the entire way.

When they finally emerged from the cave, the night air felt electric against his skin. The sounds of people—his pack—crashed through the underbrush, reaching them moments before two figures burst into the clearing. Jonah's parents.

"Mama!" Jonah cried, his voice breaking.

His mother rushed forward, sobbing as she pulled her son from Chrissy's back and clutched him to her chest. His father wrapped his arms around them both, pressing kisses to the boy's head.

Chrissy stepped back into the shadows, giving the family space.

Zev watched her face as she observed the reunion—the soft parting of her lips, the gentle moisture gathering in her eyes, and the way she hugged her arms around herself.

She looked awed and wistful, like she was witnessing something alien yet beautiful.

Zev moved to her side, drawn by an instinct deeper than thought. "You were incredible in there."

Chrissy's eyes remained on the family, now surrounded by arriving pack members offering comfort and relief. "This is..." She gestured to the scene. "It's nice to see. Everyone coming together like this."

"It's pack," Zev said simply.

"What's it like?" Her voice held a note of longing that tugged at something deep within him. "Being part of a community like this. Where you all protect each other, and where everyone drops everything when someone needs help."

Zev studied Chrissy intently for a moment—how the moonlight caught the delicate curve of her neck, the perfect fullness of her lips, and the way her sundress clung to her curves.

His wolf paced restlessly. Every protective instinct in his body had been triggered tonight—first by the missing pack pup, then by the fierce woman beside him who'd thrown herself into danger without hesitation.

"Maybe someday you'll know," he said, the words more revealing than he'd intended.

His nostrils flared as the scent of rain prickled his senses. Looking skyward, he saw dark clouds rolling in, threatening to unleash nature's fury. The island's storms were legendary—violent and swift, transforming placid terrain into deadly slides within minutes.

"Everyone needs to head back now." His voice carried the weight of command. "Storm's coming, and it's going to be a bad one."

The pack members scattered immediately, recognizing the authority in his tone. Only Jonah hesitated, turning back with panic flashing across his small face.

"My necklace! Grandpa's carving—I left it in the cave!" The boy's voice cracked with distress. "Please, Alpha, I need it!"

Zev's jaw tightened. He knew exactly what Jonah meant—a wooden wolf pendant the boy's grandfather had carved for Jonah before his passing. He crossed to Jonah in three swift strides, crouching to meet the child's eyes.

"I'll get it. You go home with your parents. Now." The command was firm but gentle. "These storms are dangerous, and your safety matters more than anything."

Jonah looked ready to protest until Zev's eyes flashed amber—a subtle reminder of who was in charge. The boy nodded meekly and rejoined his relieved parents.

"We're going back in, aren't we?" Chrissy asked as the others disappeared into the

jungle.

Zev raised his eyebrows. " We? "

"Like hell I'm standing out here alone in this weather." Her green eyes sparked with defiance.

His wolf rumbled with approval at her inner fire. "Fine. But stay close to me again."

They slipped back into the cave, their movements practiced now after the first journey. Zev's enhanced vision picked out the wooden pendant almost immediately—nestled in the crevice where they'd found Jonah.

"Got it," he announced, tucking the carved wolf pendant into his pocket.

They retraced their steps quickly, aware of the darkening sky outside. As they approached the entrance, Zev's instincts triggered.

"Run," he ordered, grabbing her hand.

They burst from the cave mouth just as the heavens opened.

The downpour was instantaneous, a vertical wall of water that soaked them within seconds.

Visibility dropped to nothing as sheets of rain transformed the path into a slick mess.

Zev felt rather than saw the ground that began to shift beneath them.

"Back!" He pulled Chrissy hard against his chest, spinning them both back toward the cave entrance. They stumbled inside, drenched and breathing hard.

"Holy shit," Chrissy gasped, water streaming from her hair down her neck and over the swell of her breasts beneath the thin fabric of her dress.

"Island storms don't mess around." Zev raked a hand through his wet hair, dragging it back from his forehead. The top four buttons of his shirt had come undone, revealing his bronzed skin and the muscular planes of his chest. "We'll have to wait it out. Usually passes in twenty minutes."

They moved deeper into the cave where it was dry, the sound of rain drumming against stone creating a primal rhythm. Chrissy wrung water from her hair, laughing softly.

"Well... not how I pictured our first date ending."

The word 'date' sent a jolt through him. His wolf prowled to the forefront, satisfied that she saw this night as something personal and intimate.

"Not how I pictured tonight going at all," he replied, unable to keep the hunger from his voice.

Chrissy studied him, her eyes traveling over his face with quiet intensity. "You really care about them, don't you? You didn't even hesitate tonight."

"They're my family." The simple truth rumbled from deep in his chest. "I'll always run into any storm for them."

She stepped closer, close enough that he could feel the heat of her body despite her wet clothes. "That's the kind of person I want to be around someday."

Their eyes locked. Something electric sparked between them, primitive and undeniable. Her full lips parted slightly, and the scent of her desire mixed with rain

and earth threatened to overwhelm his control.

"You showed bravery tonight too," he murmured, his voice deepening to a primal register. "Coming into the jungle, into danger, for a child you'd never met." He brushed a wet strand of hair from her cheek, letting his fingers linger. "That's the kind of mate I've always wanted."

"Mate?" The word hung between them, weighted with possibility.

Zev didn't answer with words. He didn't need to.

His lips found hers with unerring precision, claiming them in a kiss that started gentle but quickly blazed into something raw and honest. Her mouth opened under his, yielding and demanding all at once.

His hands spanned her waist, lifting her slightly as her arms wound around his neck.

The kiss deepened, his tongue sweeping into her mouth to taste her. She made a soft sound—half sigh, half moan—that his wolf recognized as surrender and triumph combined.

When they finally broke apart, both breathless, Zev noticed the rain had stopped. Through the cave entrance, moonlight once again painted the jungle.

But neither moved to leave.



NINE

CHRISSY

Chrissy stretched luxuriously across the king-sized bed in the Orchid villa.

The first rays of sunlight streamed through her open balcony doors, painting golden-amber shaped patterns across her naked body.

She hadn't bothered with pajamas last night.

Her skin had felt too electric and hypersensitive after that kiss between her and Zev in the cave.

That kiss.

Her fingers drifted to her lips, still swollen from Zev's passionate attention. No man had ever kissed her like that—like she was both precious treasure and untamed wilderness, something to be both worshipped and conquered. The memory sent heat spiraling through her core, settling low in her belly.

"Well, good morning to me," she murmured to herself, rolling onto her back and staring at the teak ceiling.

Today, she felt completely and gloriously alive. Three days on Isle Luna had done what a year of expensive spa treatments and designer clothes couldn't—restored her soul. And one night with Zev had awakened parts of her she'd thought deadened by

Marty's constant control.

Zev was nothing like Marty. Where Marty demanded, Zev offered. Where Marty schemed, Zev protected. The contrast was so stark it almost made her laugh.

"Celebrity Boyfriend Number Three said I laughed too loud," she mused aloud, thinking of the actor who'd lasted all of two weeks before his ego couldn't handle her spotlight. "Wonder what Zev thinks of my laugh?"

The question sent a delicious shiver through her. She wanted to hear him answer it. Wanted to know every thought that crossed behind those intense blue eyes when he looked at her.

That look he gave her in the cave when the rain had stopped but neither of them moved to leave—pure possession tempered with something so tender it made her chest ache all over again.

"What the hell am I doing?" Chrissy sat up, running her fingers through her tousled dark hair. "I've known him for three days."

But it felt like longer. Felt like forever. Like her soul had been waiting patiently inside her half-asleep until he'd jolted it fully awake with that single, scorching kiss.

"And then he didn't even kiss me goodnight at my door," she huffed, swinging her legs over the side of the bed.

She remembered how he'd walked her back to her villa with his large hand protective at her lower back. How he'd hesitated at her door, his eyes darkening to midnight as they dropped to her lips. For one breathless moment, she'd thought he'd kiss her again.

Instead, he'd brushed a knuckle down her cheek and said, "Sweet dreams, Chrissy," in that low, rumbling voice that seemed to vibrate directly into her bones.

"That's what you call taking it one step at a time?" She stood, stretching her arms above her head. "You turn me inside out with one kiss and then just... walk away?"

But she knew why. He'd sensed her vulnerability and her need for space after everything with Marty. Even wanting her with an intensity she could practically taste in the air between them, he'd put her comfort first.

"OK, I get it. You're perfect," she told the empty room, a smile curving her lips. "But tonight, if you pull that gentleman crap again, I'm taking matters into my own hands."

The thought of being the aggressor sent an unexpected thrill through her. With Marty, with the celebrity boyfriends, with everyone in her life lately—she'd been reactive and responding to their demands. But with Zev? She could take what she wanted, and she knew he would let her.

And what she wanted was another taste of that wild, untamed power he kept carefully leashed beneath his control.

"Mate," she whispered, testing the word on her tongue. It had sounded primitive when he'd said it. Significant. Like it meant something far deeper than "girlfriend" or even "partner."

Whatever it meant, she wanted to find out.

As she stared out her balcony doors at the sun rising higher over the horizon, after months of feeling completely lost and hopeless, Chrissy felt like herself again—impulsive, hopeful, adventurous, and absolutely ready to pursue what she wanted today.

Chrissy padded barefoot to the closet, the morning air kissing her naked skin. For a moment, she stood stroking the soft fabrics of the clothes Olivia had provided, marveling at this simple choice—what to wear—that had been denied her for so long.

"No Leslie telling me these shorts show too much thigh," she murmured, pulling out a pair of frayed denim cutoffs that would barely cover her backside. "No Marty insisting this tank top needs a fancy blazer over it."

After she put on her white lace bra and panties, she slipped into the white tank top, the thin cotton hugging her curves perfectly.

The denim shorts followed, settling low on her hips.

God, it felt good to dress down. The high-fashion outfits Leslie insisted on made her feel like a doll—beautiful but stiff and always on display.

Chrissy ordered breakfast through the villa's tablet system: fresh fruit, coconut pancakes, and strong island coffee. When it arrived twenty minutes later, she sat cross-legged on her balcony, eating whatever she wanted, however she wanted.

"I'd have been fired for these carbs back home," she laughed, licking syrup from her finger. "Leslie would've knocked the fork right out of my hand."

After breakfast, Chrissy decided to explore the grounds around her villa. The morning sunlight filtered through the palm trees, creating dappled patterns on the stone pathway. The air smelled of salt and tropical flowers, intoxicating in its purity.

As she rounded a corner near a flowering hibiscus bush, excited whispers erupted. Chrissy froze, her heart skipping a beat. For a terrifying second, she thought of paparazzi—or worse, Marty's spies finding her even here.

But it wasn't adults with cameras, or someone after her. It was children. Five of them, ranging from maybe six to twelve years old, wide-eyed and nudging each other.

"Is that really her?" a boy with a mop of sandy hair stage-whispered.

"Ask her!" hissed a girl with pigtails and missing front teeth.

A smaller boy, no more than seven, broke free from the group. "Are you really Chrissy Rivera?" His eyes were huge and hopeful. "The one who saved Jonah?"

Chrissy's tension melted. "I am, but Zev did most of the saving."

The children erupted in excited chatter, crowding closer. The little boy's face lit up like Christmas morning. "It really is her! Jonah said Chrissy Rivera saved him last night, and he was right!"

One of the girls thrust forward a faded beach hat. "Can you sign this? Please? My sister will freak OUT."

Before Chrissy could answer, a deep voice boomed from behind the children. "What are you all doing here?"

Zev strode into view, dressed in khaki cargo shorts and a fitted white polo that emphasized his broad shoulders. His presence seemed to fill the entire clearing, commanding and powerful.

"You know this area is restricted." His voice was firm but not harsh. "Employees only."

The children shrank back, guilty expressions blooming on their sunburned faces. Chrissy's protective instinct flared.

"It's okay, Zev. Really." She flashed him a smile that softened his stern expression. "I don't mind. Actually, it's nice to meet some of your... residents."

Turning to the kids, she held out her hand for the beach hat. "Let me sign this for your sister. And what else do you have?"

Within seconds, she was surrounded by kids thrusting forward notebooks, t-shirts, and even a tennis shoe. Chrissy signed them all, laughing at their breathless questions.

"Do you know Taylor Swift?"

"Can you sing us 'Daddy's Girl'?"

"Are you Zev's girlfriend now?"

That last one made her cheeks flush as she felt Zev's eyes burning into her. Before she could respond, a flash went off. One of the older boys had snapped a picture with his phone.

Zev moved beside her with startling speed. His presence felt like a shield—protective but not possessive like Marty's hovering had been.

"You need to delete that photo immediately. Miss Rivera being here is a secret, and we all know how important secrets are, right?" he said, his voice deepening into what Chrissy was starting to recognize as his Alpha tone.

The children nodded solemnly, though the youngest piped up, "Like how we're wolf shifters, but we don't let anyone else know?"

Chrissy's eyes met Zev's in a moment of perfect understanding. His expression was

caught between amusement and alarm. She bit her lip to stop from laughing.

"Exactly like that secret," Zev said pointedly, his eyes narrowing at the little boy.

"Which we're very careful about who we tell, aren't we, Lucas?"

The boy's eyes widened. "Oops," he whispered, glancing nervously at Chrissy.

"It's okay," Chrissy whispered back, crouching to his level. "I already know. And I'm very good at keeping secrets. I won't tell anyone about your wolves, and you won't tell anyone I'm here. Deal?"

Lucas stuck out his tiny hand solemnly. "Deal."

As Chrissy shook on it, she felt Zev's presence like a physical touch against her back. Heat radiated from him, making her acutely aware of how thin her tank top was, and how her cutoffs exposed the length of her tanned legs.

She could feel his gaze appreciatively admiring her body in this very exposed outfit. When she glanced at him, his eyes had darkened with desire to a stormy blue.

Heat rushed up her neck, spreading across her cheeks. For once, the attention didn't feel invasive or objectifying—it felt like a caress, a private conversation between their bodies.

"So, um," she stammered, searching for a distraction before she did something impulsive like press herself against him right in front of these children. "Zev, didn't you mention you have some professional guitars here at the resort? Maybe we could show these guys?"

The children erupted in squeals and excited chatter.

"Yeah! Can we see them?"

"Do you play too, Alpha Zev?"

"I bet Chrissy is better!"



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Zev's expression shifted from smoldering to amused. "This way, then."

He led their small entourage across the resort grounds to the main lodge. Chrissy was intensely aware of how her shorts rode up with each step. She caught Zev's eyes dropping to her backside more than once, his hands flexing at his sides as if physically restraining himself from touching her.

God, she liked that look on him—hungry but controlled.

Inside the main lodge, Zev guided them to a smaller room. Sunlight spilled through panoramic windows, illuminating two beautiful acoustic guitars displayed prominently on stands.

"Whoa," Chrissy breathed, approaching one reverently. "A Martin D-28? These cost more than my first car."

Zev chuckled. "We spare no expense for our guests."

As she admired the high-end instruments, Chrissy's attention caught on an older guitar tucked into the corner. It wasn't flashy or expensive-looking, but something about it called to her. The worn wood had a patina that spoke of years of being played and loved.

"What about that one?" she asked, pointing to it. "Why's it tucked away like that?"

Zev's expression softened. "That was my grandfather's. He taught me to play on it."

"Can I use it?" The request slipped out before she could think better of it. "I mean, to play a few songs for the kids?"

The look he gave her made her stomach flip—something tender and wistful and possessive all wrapped into one intense gaze. Nobody had ever looked at her quite that way before.

"Nobody's touched it since he passed," Zev said quietly. Then with deliberate care, he lifted the guitar and extended it to her. "But I think he'd approve of you being the first."

The weight of trust in that gesture wasn't lost on Chrissy. She accepted the guitar with reverence, brushing her fingers over the worn strings.

"Miss Chrissy." The little girl with pigtails tugged at her cutoffs, "Will you please sing 'Daddy's Girl'? Pretty please?"

Chrissy smiled down at her. "Only if you guys sing with me. Think you can handle that?"

The children nodded eagerly. Chrissy perched on the edge of a nearby armchair, adjusting the old guitar on her lap. It felt different than her custom instruments, but somehow right—solid and honest.

She strummed a few experimental chords, surprised at how well-maintained the guitar was despite its age. The notes rang clear and true.

"Okay, here we go," she said, beginning the familiar opening chords of the song that had changed her life.

Her voice filled the room, singing about her dad's calloused hands teaching her tiny

fingers where to press on guitar strings. About rainy Sundays spent playing music together. About how much she loved him.

What had become routine on stage—something she performed because it was expected—suddenly felt raw and real again.

As the children's voices joined the chorus, sweet and untrained, tears pricked at her eyes.

She looked up to find Zev watching her with such naked admiration it almost stopped her breath.

There was no calculation in his gaze, no thinking about how much money her talent was worth, or how to package her for maximum profit. Just pure appreciation for the music and the woman making it.

When the song ended, the children clapped enthusiastically. Chrissy wiped a tear from her cheek, laughing at herself for getting so emotional.

"That was beautiful," Zev murmured, his voice pitched low for her ears only.

"Thanks," she whispered back, then noticed a girl hanging back near the doorway. She couldn't be more than eleven, watching with wide, serious eyes.

"Hey there," Chrissy beckoned her closer. "What's your name?"

"Emma," the girl said softly, twisting her hands in her t-shirt.

"Emma writes songs too," one of the boys announced. "She's always singing them when she thinks nobody's listening."

Emma shot him a betrayed look, her cheeks flushing.

"Really?" Chrissy's interest sparked. "Would you sing one for me?"

The girl shook her head vehemently, but Chrissy wasn't deterred.

"Let me tell you a little secret," Chrissy confided, leaning forward. "I was terrified the first time I played for anyone. My dad practically had to bribe me with ice cream."

"But you're famous," Emma said, as if that explained everything.

"Wasn't always," Chrissy laughed. "I think I nearly threw up the first time I played at my school talent show." She patted the spot beside her. "Come on, just a little bit. I promise we're the nicest audience you'll ever have."

After a moment's hesitation, Emma inched forward until she stood beside Chrissy.

"Should I play for you?" Chrissy offered the guitar, but Emma shook her head.

"I just sing," she explained.

"That works too."

Emma closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and began singing—a sweet, clear voice that belied her age. The song was simple but heartfelt, about finding courage within yourself.

When she finished, Chrissy beamed. "That was beautiful, Emma. You know what might make the bridge even stronger? Try holding that last note a beat longer, like this—" She demonstrated the technique.

Emma tried it, her face lighting up at the result. "Oh! That's way better!"

"The mark of a true artist," Chrissy approved, "is being open to making something good even better."

They worked through a few more tweaks to Emma's song, the girl growing more animated and confident with each suggestion. The other children watched, enthralled to see a real star coaching one of their own.

When Chrissy glanced up at Zev, her breath caught.

He was leaning against the doorframe, his arms crossed over his broad chest, watching her with such open affection and pride that it made her heart stutter.

His blue eyes shone with something that looked dangerously like love, and Chrissy realized with a start that she might be tumbling headlong into the same feeling.

TEN

ZEV

When Chrissy glanced up at Zev, he couldn't hide his feelings for her any longer. The wall he'd carefully constructed around his heart had crumbled entirely at the sight of her sitting there with his grandfather's guitar, teaching a young pack member to embrace her talent.

He leaned against the doorframe, his arms crossed over his chest, watching her with open adoration. He knew his eyes betrayed emotions he hadn't planned on revealing so soon – affection, pride, and something that felt dangerously like love.

"Alpha Zev?" One of the younger boys tugged at his shorts. "Are you okay? Your eyes look funny."

Zev cleared his throat, ruffling the boy's hair. "I'm fine, pup."

The truth was far from fine. He was completely enraptured.

When Chrissy had first spotted his grandfather's guitar tucked away in the corner, Zev had felt a moment of hesitation that almost stopped him from sharing it.

That guitar was sacred – a relic from the man who'd shaped him into the Alpha he'd become.

No one had played it since his grandfather passed fifteen years ago, except when Zev

occasionally dusted it off to tune the strings. He remembered those afternoons spent learning basic chords, his grandfather's weathered hands guiding his own.

But today, something had compelled Zev to place it in her hands. And when her fingers had strummed those first notes, it was as if his grandfather's spirit had filled the room again.

"You've got a special gift," he said to Chrissy as Emma scampered off with the other children. "Those kids won't forget this moment."

"It's nothing special," she shrugged, though her eyes sparkled with happiness. "I just remember what it felt like to be that age, loving music but afraid to share it."

"It is special," Zev insisted, his voice deepening to a rumble that seemed to affect her. Her cheeks flushed pink as he stepped closer. "You brought something back to life today."

His wolf paced eagerly under his skin, urging him to claim her now – to announce to everyone that this remarkable woman was their Luna. But Zev held back, determined to do this right.

"The way you played..." He gestured to the guitar she still held. "It was like my grandfather was in the room again."

"I felt something," she admitted, running her fingers along the worn wood. "Like the guitar was showing me how it wanted to be played."

"My grandfather would have loved you." The words escaped before he could filter them. "He always said music was magic. That it could heal what medicine couldn't reach."

Chrissy's eyes widened at his intensity. "Sounds like a wise man."

"He was." Zev moved forward, unable to keep distance between them any longer. "Sometimes I think he had a hand in bringing you here, when we both needed it most."

"You believe in that kind of thing?" Her voice was soft and curious. "Divine timing?"

"I believe in fate." Zev reached out, tucking her hair behind her ear "And in the woman standing in front of me." What he really wanted to tell her was that he believed she truly was his fated mate. But he knew she might not be ready for that knowledge yet.

The spark between them ignited again as his fingers brushed her cheek. The same electricity that had surged when they'd kissed in the cave the night before.

"I think the kids have finally run off to brag about meeting you," he said, nodding toward the now-empty doorway. "We have the room to ourselves."

Her green eyes darkened with realization. "Is that your subtle Alpha way of saying you want to kiss me again?"

A predatory smile spread across his face, the wolf within him rising to the surface. "There's nothing subtle about what I want, Chrissy."

Zev took the guitar from her hands and gently set it down on the stool next to him, his movements deliberate and controlled.

The precious instrument deserved care, but his focus had already shifted entirely to the woman before him.



Her scent—jasmine with hints of honeysuckle—invaded his senses, clouding his judgment in the most delicious way.

He grabbed her by the waist and pulled her flush against his chest, savoring the feel of her soft curves against his hard planes. Her skin felt impossibly warm beneath her thin white tank top, and her cutoff shorts revealed miles of tanned, toned legs that tested his restraint.

He then leaned in and kissed her with a hunger that surprised even him—a raw, primal need that had been building since their moment in the cave. Her mouth opened beneath his, inviting him deeper, and he growled low in his throat at her eager response.

"You have no idea what you do to me," he murmured against her lips, his voice a rough caress.

Chrissy's fingers threaded through his hair. "Then show me," she challenged.

The Alpha in him couldn't resist. He lifted her effortlessly off the ground, her weight nothing in his arms, and kicked the door shut behind them. With one arm still supporting her, he flicked the lock closed, ensuring no interruptions.

She wrapped her legs around his waist, pressing herself against him in a way that made his blood burn hot.

Zev turned and pressed her back against the door, his lips leaving hers to explore the column of her throat.

Her pulse raced beneath his mouth, and his wolf howled with satisfaction at her response.

"Zev," she breathed, her head falling back to give him better access.

His teeth grazed the sensitive spot where her neck met her shoulder, and she shuddered in his arms. The primal part of him knew exactly what it wanted—to mark her, claim her, and make her irrevocably his. His canines lengthened slightly, the wolf so close to the surface he could barely contain it.

The realization of what he was about to do hit him like a bucket of cold water. This wasn't how he wanted their first time to be—rushed against a door in a music room where anyone might hear them. She deserved better. She deserved everything.

With more willpower than he thought he possessed, Zev set her gently back on her feet, though he kept his hands at her waist, unwilling to break contact completely.

"Why did you stop?" Disappointment colored her voice, her lips swollen from his kiss.

"Because when I take you," he said, his blue eyes locked on hers, "it won't be here, and it won't be quick." He brushed his thumb across her lower lip. "I want to savor every inch of you, Chrissy. And that requires a proper bed and all night long."

Her eyes widened at his promise, her pupils dilating with desire. But something flickered across her face—hesitation mixed with uncertainty—and Zev immediately recognized it. His wolf might be demanding satisfaction, but the man in him knew better.

He stepped back, creating distance between them despite every instinct screaming at him to pull her closer.

The white lace of her bra peeked through her thin white tank top, and those denim shorts barely covering her perfect backside were driving him to the edge of his

control. He needed air. Space. Clarity.

Zev carefully retrieved his grandfather's guitar, the wood warm from Chrissy's touch, and tucked it away in its rightful place. His fingers lingered on it for a moment, steadying himself.

"Come on," he said, his voice rougher than he intended. "Let's get some fresh air."

The walk toward the beach gave his wolf room to breathe. The salty breeze ruffled Chrissy's dark hair, sending her intoxicating scent directly to him with every gust. He flexed his fingers, fighting the urge to reach for her.

"You're nothing like the other celebrities who've stayed here," he said, watching as her bare feet left delicate impressions in the sand.

Chrissy laughed, the sound pure and unfiltered. "I never wanted the celebrity part, just the music. The songs, the words, the melody—it's all magic to me." Her smile faded. "Or at least it was, before Marty."

Zev's jaw tightened at the mention of her manager. The rogue shifter who dared to cage what was meant to be wild and free.

"I was just this na?ve twenty-four-year-old girl excited about sharing my music," she continued, hugging herself as if suddenly cold despite the tropical heat. "I thought everyone was good, you know? Trustworthy. But there are people out there who just want to exploit others for money and status."

Her vulnerability struck him like a physical jab. His protective instincts surged forward, and he fought to keep his eyes from shifting to their wolf gold.

"I feel trapped. Scared." She kicked at the sand, frustration evident in the set of her

shoulders.

"You should consider being a music teacher on the side," he offered, deliberately lightening the mood. "The way you drew Emma out of her shell was pure magic. I saw something light up in your eyes when you were teaching her."

Chrissy's smile returned, brightening her entire face.

"That's not a bad idea, actually. I'd have to find time for it though."

"She sighed. "Back home, I don't even have time to sleep or breathe."

All I wanted was two days off to see my dad after my album dropped, and Marty refused. Said I needed to do press."

Zev's anger flared, white-hot and dangerous. He imagined ripping Marty's throat out with his teeth for denying her something so basic and so human. The wolf inside him snarled in agreement.

"That's not unreasonable," he managed, keeping his voice level despite the rage bubbling beneath. "Taking time to see your father after what was probably an exhausting album production? Any decent manager would understand that."

He stopped walking, turned to face her fully. The sunlight caught in her hair, highlighting strands of deep chestnut among the dark brown. His mate was exquisite, perfect in every way.

"Stay as long as you need to decompress," he promised. "I'll keep you safe while you're here."

What he didn't say was that he'd keep her safe forever, if she'd let him. That he'd tear

apart anyone who tried to hurt her, starting with Marty Shriner.

"Thanks," she whispered, and the genuine gratitude in her eyes caused his chest to constrict.

ELEVEN

CHRISSY

They continued walking along the shoreline, Chrissy's bare feet sinking gently into the warm sand with each step. The swish of waves against the shore created a peaceful backdrop to the storm of emotions raging inside her.

The high from singing with those children still lingered in her veins, reminding her of why she fell in love with music in the first place.

It wasn't about album sales or TikTok views or making Marty richer—it was about connection, about that moment when Emma's shy voice had strengthened and gained confidence.

Chrissy stole a glance at Zev beside her, his powerful frame radiating strength even in casual clothes.

Her body still tingled from their encounter in the music room, the way he'd lifted her effortlessly and pressed her up against that door.

The heat of his mouth on her neck. The way his hands had gripped her waist with such possession yet such restraint.

"What are you thinking about?" Zev asked, catching her staring.

"That you keep starting fires you don't intend to finish," she replied boldly, surprising

herself.

His eyes darkened instantly. "Trust me, Chrissy. I fully intend to finish what I started."

The intensity in his voice sent shivers through her body. "Then why pull back every time things get... interesting?"

Zev stopped walking abruptly, turning to fully face her. The breeze ruffled his thick brown hair as he studied her face with those piercing blue eyes.

"Because you deserve more than a quick encounter against a door. Because you've had enough people taking from you without giving back." His jaw tightened. "And because there are things you need to know about me first."

There it was again—that sense that he was holding something back, some crucial piece of information.

"Then tell me," Chrissy said, crossing her arms over her chest, aware of how the action pushed her breasts against the thin fabric of her tank top. "Whatever secret you're keeping, just say it."

The muscle in his jaw jumped. "It's not that simple."

"Actually, it is. Words. Mouth. Out." She tapped her foot in the sand. "I've had enough of powerful men deciding what I need to know and when I need to know it."

Zev's expression hardened, but not with anger—with resolve. He stepped closer to her. "You're right. You deserve the truth." He took a deep breath, his broad chest expanding under his white polo. "Chrissy, do you know what a mate is to a wolf shifter?"

The sea breeze swept across Chrissy's bare shoulders, causing goosebumps to rise on her skin despite the warmth of the day. Her heart hammered wildly, and she curled her toes into the warm sand, grounding herself.

"Olivia mentioned it briefly yesterday during our spa day," Chrissy said, brushing a strand of dark hair away from her cheek.

"She told me that Gerri Wilder is a paranormal matchmaker that brings fated mates together, and when Gerri brings a human to a shifter pack, it usually means they're a shifter's fated mate.

" She paused, swallowing hard, her green eyes searching his face.

"Is that why she really brought me here? Because I'm your fated mate?"

Zev's blue eyes darkened with intensity, his stance widening as if bracing himself. "Yes, I believe so. She called me four days ago around midnight, saying she'd located my fated mate."

"That's... that's right after I called her," Chrissy whispered, her mind racing.

"Just before midnight four days ago. She'd bumped into me at the charity gala we both attended.

" She shook her head in disbelief. "How could she possibly know something so profound and intimate about us? Is she psychic or something?"

A half-smile lifted one corner of Zev's mouth. "I don't understand the full extent of Gerri's powers, but what I do know is that she has a 100% success rate when bringing two mates together. She obviously has some unique gift."



The waves crashed against the shore in rhythmic pulses that matched Chrissy's racing heartbeat.

"She introduced Ewan and Olivia," Zev continued, his eyes locked onto hers. "Among many, many others. She just seems to know how to match perfect pairs."

"Are we a perfect pair?" The question slipped from Chrissy's lips.

Zev stepped closer, his presence overwhelming her senses.

"Yes, Chrissy, we are. You're my fated mate.

"His voice lowered to a rumble that seemed to vibrate through her entire body.

"I've felt more intensely about you than anyone in my entire life.

I knew from the moment we met that I'd do anything for you. "

Chrissy's breath caught. The way he looked at her—like she was rare and precious—was nothing like the calculating, commodifying glances from Marty or industry men.

"That's exactly why I've been trying to give you space," Zev continued. "You came here to escape being controlled. I worried that you tying yourself to me forever, by letting me claim you and mark you as my mate, would make you feel like you're just falling under someone else's power again."

"No," Chrissy interrupted, surprising herself with her certainty.

"In the time I've gotten to know you, you've proven you're nothing like Marty.

You're completely different." Her voice softened.

"And though I'm not a shifter and don't have a fated mate sense, I feel something intensely towards you too.

" She paused as the startling clarity hit her like a tidal wave.

"God, Gerri was right. We are a perfect match. "

The realization settled over her like a warm blanket.

In Zev, she'd seen so many facets—the powerful resort owner, the commanding alpha, and the caring leader who took care of his pack.

He was gentle when needed, strong when required, and utterly real in a way no one in her manufactured world had been.

"I've never known safety like this," Chrissy admitted, her voice trembling slightly. "It terrifies and comforts me at the same time. I want to be closer to you, Zev. In every way possible." Her cheeks flushed at her boldness, but she held his gaze steadily.

The burning intensity in his blue eyes made her feel like he could see straight through to her soul in this moment, past all the glamour and fame to the real Chrissy underneath—the one who just wanted to make music and be loved for who she truly was.

Maybe it was the way Zev looked at her in this moment, or maybe she was just ready to take what she wanted for a change, but something primal ignited inside her.

For once, she wasn't going to wait for permission or approval.

She grabbed the soft fabric of Zev's white polo shirt, bunching it in her fists as she pulled him flush against her body.

The heat of him seared through her thin tank top, his muscled chest hard against her soft curves.

"I'm done waiting," she whispered, rising onto her tiptoes.

She crashed her lips into his, pouring every ounce of desire and gratitude she felt into the kiss.

This wasn't the tentative kiss they'd shared in the cave.

Or the rushed kiss in the music room. This was raw and demanding, a declaration of want that brooked no argument.

His response was immediate and overwhelming.

Zev's arms encircled her waist, lifting her slightly as he matched her hunger.

A growl rumbled from deep in his chest, the sound more wolf than man, sending sparks of excitement racing down her spine.

His hands slid lower, gripping her thighs just below the frayed edges of her denim shorts as he lifted her completely off the ground.

Chrissy wrapped her legs around his waist, her fingers threading through his thick hair.

"Hold on," he commanded against her lips.

Without breaking their kiss, Zev began moving down the beach, carrying her as if she weighed nothing. Every few steps he'd stop, pressing her up against a palm tree or simply holding her tighter as their kisses deepened, growing more desperate with each passing second.

"Where are we going?" Chrissy gasped when they finally broke apart for air.

"Somewhere private," he replied, his blue eyes nearly black with desire. "Trust me."

And she did. Completely. The realization was thrilling.

Soon the main beach fell away, and Zev carried her around a rocky outcropping to a hidden cove sheltered by towering palms and smooth boulders. The small stretch of pristine sand was completely secluded, invisible from the main beach and the resort.

"Your secret spot?" Chrissy asked as he carefully set her on her feet, the warm sand tickling her toes.

Zev brushed her hair from her face, his touch surprisingly gentle after the intensity of moments before. "One of many on the island. But this one's extra special." His eyes burned into hers. "No one comes here except me."

"And now me," Chrissy said, tracing his jaw.

"I had planned for our first time to be in a proper bed," Zev admitted, his voice rough with barely contained desire.

"But I can't wait any longer to claim you.

" He took her hand, pressing it against his chest where his heart pounded wildly.

"I think this is perfect. Just us, the sea, and no one else for a mile. "

"I couldn't agree more," Chrissy whispered, feeling bold and empowered.

She placed her palms flat against his chest and pushed. Surprised, Zev allowed himself to be guided backward until his legs buckled and hit the sand. She gave another gentle push, and he sank onto his back, looking up at her with a mix of surprise and approval.

"My turn," she said, straddling his lap in one fluid motion.

His hands immediately found her hips, steadying her as she settled against him. The fabric of her denim shorts and his cargo shorts did little to disguise how much he wanted her. Chrissy felt a surge of feminine power knowing she could affect this powerful alpha male so completely.

"I like this side of you," Zev growled, his fingers digging into the bare skin of her thighs.

"I'm taking what I want for once," Chrissy murmured against his lips. "Any objections?"

Zev's smile was pure predator. "None whatsoever."

She captured his mouth again, relishing the taste of him—salt and sun and something wild that was uniquely Zev.

His hands roamed from her thighs to her waist, slipping under her tank top to trace patterns on the bare skin of her back.

Every touch left trails of fire, igniting places inside her that had never truly awakened

before.

"You're perfect," he whispered against her neck, his hot breath making her shiver despite the tropical heat.

And at this moment, with Zev openly showing his appreciation and desire for her, after months of feeling like she was nothing to everybody else, Chrissy finally believed she was perfect. Just as she was.

Just Chrissy Rivera, the real Chrissy, taking what she wanted and Zev giving it to her without hesitation.

TWELVE

ZEV

Z ev's hands tightened on Chrissy's hips as she straddled him, her weight pressing deliciously against his growing arousal.

The afternoon sun beat down on them in his hidden cove, but the heat between them was far more intense.

Her green eyes were dark with desire, her lips swollen from their kisses, and her hair tumbled around her shoulders in wild, dark waves.

She was a vision, and she was his. His wolf surged forward, demanding he claim her, but Zev forced himself to stay in control.

This was about her, about giving her what she wanted and what she needed.

"Zev," she breathed, her voice trembling with need as her fingers tangled in his hair, pulling him closer. "I want you to take my clothes off. Slowly. And then lay me on the sand and show me just how much I mean to you."

His wolf howled in approval, but Zev forced himself to stay calm and to take his time. He wanted to savor every moment, every touch, and every sound she made. He wanted to worship her, and to truly show her just how much she meant to him like she asked for.

"As you wish," he said, his voice rough with barely contained need.

He started with her tank top, his hands sliding up her sides to grip the hem.

He pulled it up slowly, revealing inch after inch of smooth, sun-kissed skin.

She raised her arms, letting him lift the shirt over her head and toss it aside.

Her white lace bra was next, and Zev took his time with it, his fingers brushing against her skin as he unhooked it and let it fall away.

Her breasts were perfect, full and round, her nipples hard and begging for his attention.

Zev couldn't resist. He cupped them in his hands, his thumbs brushing over her hardened nipples, eliciting a soft gasp from her.

He leaned forward, capturing one in his mouth, his tongue swirling around the sensitive peak.

Chrissy moaned, her fingers tightening in his hair.

"Zev," she gasped, her voice trembling. "Please, don't stop."

He didn't. He continued to lavish attention on her breasts, his hands and mouth working in tandem to drive her wild. But he knew she wanted more, and he was determined to give it to her.

Her body trembled as he gently laid her down on the soft sand. The sun bathed her in golden light, her skin glowing and her hair fanning out around her like a dark halo. She was breathtaking, and Zev took a moment to just drink in the sight of her.



"You're so beautiful," he murmured, his voice filled with awe.

Chrissy's cheeks flushed, but she didn't look away. "Zev, please," she whispered, her voice trembling with raw need.

He nodded, his hands moving to the waistband of her denim shorts.

He unbuttoned them slowly, his fingers brushing against her skin as he slid them down her legs.

Her white lace panties were next, and Zev took his time with them too, his fingers tracing the delicate fabric before sliding them down her legs and tossing them aside.

Now she was completely bare, her body laid out before him like a feast. Zev's breath caught in his throat as he took her in, every curve, every line, and every inch of her perfect skin. She was already so wet for him, her arousal evident, and the scent of it drove his wolf wild.

"Zev," she whispered, her voice shaky. "Please, more."

He didn't need to be told twice. He lowered his head between her thighs, his hands gripping her hips to hold her in place. His tongue traced her sensitive folds, slow and deliberate, savoring the taste of her. Chrissy gasped, her back arching off the sand and her fingers tangling in his hair.

"Oh God," she moaned. "Zev, please, even more."

He obliged, his tongue delving deeper, exploring every inch of her. He added a finger, then another, curling them inside her as his tongue focused on her most sensitive spot. Chrissy's moans grew louder, her body trembling as he drove her closer and closer to the edge.

"Zev," she gasped. "I'm so close."

His fingers and tongue worked in perfect harmony to push her over the edge.

Her body soon convulsed as her orgasm hit her hard, her back arching off the sand and her inner walls clenching around his fingers.

Zev didn't stop until she was fully spent, her body trembling and her breath coming in short, desperate gasps.

He pulled back, looking up at her with a satisfied smile. "How was that?" he asked, his voice thick with need.

Chrissy's eyes were half-lidded, her body still trembling from the aftershocks of her orgasm. "Amazing," she whispered. "But I'm not done with you yet."

Zev's smile widened, his wolf howling with approval. "Good. Because neither am I."

Chrissy sat up, her naked body glistening under the sun, and pushed Zev back down onto the soft white sand.

Her green eyes darkened, and her lips curved into a playful smile as she straddled him again.

Zev's breath hitched as her hands slid up his chest, her fingers tracing the hard planes of his muscles.

She tugged at his white polo, pulling it up over his head and tossing it aside.

Her eyes roamed over his tanned, muscular chest, and she let out a soft, appreciative hum.

"You're perfect," she murmured, her hands sliding down his abs, her touch sending shivers through him.

She leaned down, her lips brushing against his skin as she kissed her way down his torso, her tongue flicking out to taste him.

Zev's hands clenched at his sides, his wolf howling with need, but he made himself stay still and let her take control.

He loved this—loved seeing her take what she wanted from him and loved the way her confidence made his blood burn.

"Chrissy," he growled softly, his voice rough with restraint. "You're killing me."

She glanced up at him, her lips curving into a wicked smile. "Good," she said, her voice low and sultry. "I want you to feel how much you mean to me."

Her hands moved lower, her fingers hooking into the waistband of his cargo shorts.

She tugged them down, along with his boxers, freeing his hard length.

Her eyes widened as she took him in, her lips parting in a soft gasp.

Zev's chest swelled with pride at her reaction, his wolf preening under her gaze.

"Do you like what you see?" he asked with a smirk on his lips.

"Very much," she said, her voice breathless.

She leaned down, her lips brushing against the tip of his cock, and Zev's breath caught.

Her tongue flicked out, tasting him, and he groaned, his hands fisting in the sand.

She took him into her mouth, her lips wrapping around him in a slow, deliberate rhythm.

Her tongue swirled around him, her hands gripping his thighs as she worked him with a skill that made his head spin.

Zev's eyes slammed shut, his body trembling with the effort to hold back. "Chrissy," he growled, his voice strained. "If you keep doing that, I'm not going to last."

She pulled back, her lips glistening, and looked up at him with a mischievous glint in her eyes. "Then I guess I'll have to stop," she said, her voice teasing.

She moved back up his body, her hands sliding over his chest as she straddled him again.

Her wet heat pressed against his cock, and Zev's breath hitched.

She reached down, guiding him to her entrance, and slowly sank down onto him, inch by glorious inch.

Zev's hands gripped her hips, and his eyes locked on hers as she took him in fully, her body stretching to accommodate him.

"Damn, Chrissy," he breathed, his voice rough with need. "You feel incredible."

She smiled, her hands resting on his chest as she began to move, her hips rocking against his in a slow, steady rhythm.

Zev's hands tightened on her hips, his body trembling with the effort to hold back.

He wanted to take control and drive into her with everything he had.

But he forced his body to let her set the pace, and to let her take what she needed from him.

Her movements soon grew faster, her body riding him with a wild abandon that made him feel dizzy. Her breasts bounced with each thrust and her hair tumbled around her shoulders. Zev's eyes were glued to her, his wolf howling with satisfaction as he watched her take her pleasure from him.

"Zev," she gasped, her body trembling as her orgasm built. "I'm close."

"Let go," he growled, his large hands gripping her hips as he matched her rhythm, driving into her with deep, powerful thrusts. "Come for me, Chrissy."

Her body convulsed, her back arching as her orgasm ripped through her.

Her inner walls clenched around him, her moans filling the air as she came undone.

Zev's control snapped, his own orgasm tearing through him with a force that left him breathless.

His body shuddered, his seed spilling deep inside her as he claimed her unofficially. His wolf howled with triumph.

Chrissy collapsed onto his chest, her body trembling as she caught her breath. Zev wrapped his arms around her, holding her close as he pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

"You're mine now, Chrissy," he murmured, his voice rough with raw emotion.

She looked up at him, her eyes soft with affection. "I'm yours, Zev," she said, her voice filled with a quiet certainty that made his heart swell with joy.

Before long, Zev helped Chrissy back into her tank top, his fingers lingering on the soft skin of her back.

The way her eyes kept finding his, bright green and full of promises, made his wolf preen with satisfaction.

She was his now, in every way that truly mattered, and the thought sent a possessive surge through his body.

"Come home with me tonight," Zev said, his voice a deep rumble as he stepped into her space. "My villa. Room service. No interruptions."

Chrissy tilted her head up, a smile playing on her lips. "Is that an order, Alpha?"

"A request," he countered, though his eyes flashed with heat. "Though I'm not above begging if needed."

Her laugh was like music. "I somehow don't think an Alpha wolf has ever begged for anything."

"There's a first time for everything." Zev traced a finger along her jawline, reveling in how she leaned into his touch. "And you, Chrissy Rivera, are worth getting on my knees for."

"Well, when you put it that way..." She rose to her tiptoes and pressed a soft kiss to his lips. "Lead the way."

The walk back to his private villa felt different from every other time he'd made that

trek.

His wolf was practically strutting, proud and satisfied in a way he'd never known possible.

Chrissy fit perfectly against his side, her body a warm, comforting presence as his arm wrapped possessively around her waist.

Several pack members they passed on their way gave knowing looks, and Zev met each one with an unapologetic stare.

Yes, he'd found his fated mate. Yes, she was human.

And yes, anyone who had a problem with that could deal with him directly.

He didn't feel like he had to announce it to the whole pack this very moment.

That would come in due time. For right now, he was just focused on enjoying his mate's company for the rest of the evening.

His villa sat at the highest point of the property, a sprawling structure of natural wood and glass that blended seamlessly with the surrounding jungle while offering panoramic views of the Caribbean Sea.

As they entered, he watched Chrissy's eyes widen at the open-concept design, the infinity pool visible through the sliding glass doors, and the understated luxury of his personal space.

"Wow," she breathed, stepping further inside. "This is gorgeous."

"For the first time," Zev said, moving to the kitchen to grab his phone for the room

service order, "it actually feels like home."

After calling in for some fresh seafood and local specialties, Zev found Chrissy on his terrace, leaning against the railing and taking in the view of the bay below.

The setting sun painted her in shades of gold and amber, and for a moment, he simply watched her—this woman who had crashed into his life and changed everything in less than a week.

"I still can't believe this is real," she said without turning, somehow sensing his presence.

"What part?" He moved behind her, his arms encircling her waist as he pulled her back against his chest. "The island? Us?"

"All of it." She leaned her head back against his shoulder. "Four days ago, I was trapped in a nightmare. And now I'm here, with you."

Zev pressed his lips to her temple. "I'm glad you found your way to me. Even if it took Gerri's meddling to make it happen."

"What we did earlier in the cove..." she turned in his arms, her palms flat against his chest. "That was perfect, Zev. I've never felt so..."

"Complete," he finished for her.

"Exactly." Her smile was radiant.

Their dinner arrived, carried by a discreet staff member who barely made eye contact—a sign of respect for their Alpha's privacy that Zev appreciated.



They ate on the terrace, sharing bites of each other's food between stories and laughter, but as the meal progressed, Zev noticed a shadow crossing Chrissy's expression.

"What's wrong?" he asked, setting down his fork.

Chrissy hesitated, her fingers twisting the napkin in her lap. "Marty. He's not just going to let me disappear."

Zev's jaw tightened. The mention of the manager's name was enough to stir his wolf to attention.

"He said—" She swallowed hard. "He said if I ran, he'd ruin me. And he's well-connected, Zev. The things he could do..."

"Let him try." The words came out as a growl, his eyes briefly flashing wolf-gold in the fading light. "If he wants to get to you, he'll have to go through me first."

"You don't understand. He's?—"

"A wolf without a pack," Zev cut in, leaning forward. "A lone shifter who preys on humans because he's too cowardly to face his own kind. Trust me, Chrissy, I understand exactly what he is."

He reached across the table, taking her hand in his. "You're mine now. My mate in every way that matters. And I protect what's mine."

The fear in her eyes softened slightly, replaced by something warmer. "You really mean that, don't you?"

"With every fiber of my being." He brought her hand to his lips, pressing a kiss to her

knuckles. "Let Marty come. Let him try to take you. It would be the last mistake he ever makes."

Her smile was small but genuine. "My hero."

"Your Alpha," he corrected, his tone leaving no room for doubt. "And Marty is about to learn the hard way what happens when someone threatens an Alpha's mate."

THIRTEEN

CHRISSY

Chrissy woke up to the sensation of warm skin against her back.

Her naked body was deliciously tangled with Zev's beneath the silken sheets of his bed.

Sunlight filtered through the large windows of his villa's bedroom, casting golden patterns across their naked bodies.

She smiled, nestling deeper into the protective circle of his strong arms.

Never in her life had she felt so completely safe and so utterly cherished. The cocoon of his muscular arms around her was a fortress she never wanted to leave. His chest rose and fell with steady breaths behind her, his stubble tickling the sensitive skin of her shoulder.

"I could stay like this forever," she whispered to herself, running her fingers lightly over the corded muscle of his forearm.

Memories of yesterday flooded her mind—the moment on the beach when he'd told her she was his fated mate, and the instant recognition that had resonated in her soul.

She'd never believed in such things before, but her body and heart recognized what her mind couldn't explain.

He was her missing piece, the half that made her whole.

The way she'd kissed him after that revelation had surprised even herself—wild and uninhibited, claiming what she wanted. And he'd let her. The powerful Alpha wolf had surrendered to her completely on that secluded beach afterwards, his blue eyes dark with desire as she'd taken control.

"The way you looked at me," she murmured, twisting slightly to see his sleeping face over her shoulder. "Like I was everything."

After their passionate encounter in the cove, they'd returned to his stunning villa—a masterpiece of glass and natural wood perched on the highest point of the island.

The dinner they'd shared had been filled with laughter, feeding each other bites of food and telling stories as if they'd known each other forever.

But what happened after dinner... Chrissy felt heat flood her cheeks at the memories.

Every surface in his villa had been christened by their passion—the shower with its multiple heads creating a steamy paradise, the cool marble of the kitchen island against her back, the polished wood of the dining table, the plush softness of his couch, even the terrace chair under the stars.

She'd lost count of how many times she'd shattered in his arms, her body now bearing the delicious soreness of being thoroughly claimed.

She shifted slightly, feeling the pleasant ache between her thighs, and her arousal must have reached Zev's sensitive nose because his breathing changed. His arms tightened around her waist.

"Good morning," he growled against her ear, his morning voice rough with sleep and

desire. His hand slid possessively over the curve of her hip.

"Morning," she replied, turning in his arms to face him. The hungry look in his blue eyes made her breath catch.

He dipped his head to capture her lips, his kiss demanding and thorough. When he finally pulled away from her, she was breathless.

"Maybe we should shower first," she suggested with a small laugh, even as her body betrayed her words by pressing closer to his.

Zev lifted an eyebrow, his lips curving into that predatory smile that made her insides melt. "If you insist," he rumbled, his voice pure alpha male. "Though I quite like how you smell right now—covered in me."

"Zev!" She playfully swatted his chest, though the possessive comment sent a thrill through her.

He laughed, the sound deep and rich as he reluctantly pulled away and slid from the bed. Chrissy took a moment to appreciate the magnificent sight of him standing naked in the sunlight—all tanned skin and defined muscle, moving with the confidence of a man fully comfortable in his power.

He extended his hand to her. "Come. Though I can't promise the shower will be just for cleaning up."

As he guided her into the massive bathroom and turned on the multiple shower heads, steam quickly filling the glass enclosure, Chrissy was transported back to the previous night. The way he'd pressed her against the cool tile, lifting her effortlessly as water cascaded over their joined bodies.

"What are you thinking about?" Zev asked knowingly, his eyes darkening as he pulled her under the warm spray.

"You already know. Last night. In here." She ran her hands up his chest, feeling the rumble of approval that vibrated through him. "I've never had anyone treat me the way you do."

"And how's that?" His hands slid to her waist, holding her steady against him.

"Like I'm precious, but also yours to cherish. Something worth protecting." She met his gaze directly.

His piercing eyes bore into hers with an intensity that made her breath hitch. "Chrissy, I will protect you until my last breath," he said with absolute conviction.

The water cascaded over them both, creating rivulets that traced the contours of his muscular chest before disappearing down the drain.

Chrissy felt her heart swell with an emotion so powerful it threatened to overwhelm her.

Looking at him—this powerful Alpha standing before her like some primal guardian—she realized with stunning clarity that this wasn't just pretty words or romantic promises. This man would literally die for her.

That thought should have terrified her. Instead, it ignited twin flames of excitement and security that burned through her veins.

"Turn around now," Zev commanded softly, his voice a velvet rumble that sent shivers across her skin despite the steam surrounding them.

She obeyed, presenting her back to him. The vulnerability of the position didn't frighten her. With anyone else—especially after a year of being controlled and manipulated—she might have tensed. But with Zev, surrender felt like freedom.

His large hands, slick with expensive soap, moved across her shoulders with reverent care. "You're simply beautiful," he murmured, working the lather down her spine.

Chrissy closed her eyes, savoring the sensation of his strong fingers massaging her muscles, tracing the curve where her waist flared into her hips. "This feels better than any spa treatment I've ever had."

"As it should." His thumbs pressed gently into the small of her back. "No one else should touch you like this."

The possessiveness in his tone made her smile. With Marty, such declarations had felt suffocating. With Zev, they felt like shelter.

He worked his way down her legs, dropping to his knees behind her to soap each calf, each ankle, between each toe with surprising tenderness. The sight of the powerful Alpha on his knees, devoted to her comfort, created an intimacy that transcended even their passionate night.

"My turn," she insisted when he finished, turning to face him.

He arched his eyebrow but handed her the soap without protest. She lathered her hands and started at his broad shoulders, marveling at how the muscles shifted beneath her touch.

"I still can't believe you're real," she whispered, working her way across his chest. "That I found you. That we found each other."

"Mate bonds are never wrong," he replied, his voice deepening when her fingers traced the ridges of his abdomen. "Though I admit, even I didn't expect it to feel this... complete."

She moved to his hair next, standing on tiptoes to work the shampoo into his thick brown waves. His eyes closed in pleasure, and she felt a surge of satisfaction at being able to provide him comfort.

"Four days," she said softly, her fingers massaging his scalp. "I've only known you four days. Logically, I should be terrified about falling this hard this fast."

His eyes opened, pinning her with that intense blue gaze. "And are you? Terrified?"

"No," she admitted, rinsing the soap from his hair. "That's what's crazy. This feels more right than anything in my life ever has."

Zev caught her wrists gently, pulling her hands down to rest against his chest. "Time doesn't matter with mates. What feels like days to humans has been a lifetime of waiting for my wolf."

Before she could respond, he dropped to his knees again, this time facing her. His hands curved around the backs of her thighs, and his intent was unmistakable in his darkened eyes.

"First," he growled, "I need to taste you again."

Her head fell back against the tile as his mouth found her center, thoughts of contracts and legal battles temporarily evaporating under the expert assault of his lips and tongue. She tangled her fingers in his wet hair, anchoring herself as pleasure built within her.



As she shattered under his ministrations, one delirious thought surfaced through the haze of ecstasy. She wouldn't mind waking up this way every morning for the rest of her life.

But even as bliss rippled through her body, a shadow of reality crept in. Before she could truly be his, before she could claim this paradise permanently, there was Marty to deal with. Her contract. The legal battle that would surely come.

Marty would not play nice, and she knew it. But looking down at Zev, his eyes gleaming with satisfaction and devotion as water streamed over them both, she knew she finally had something worth fighting for.

After stepping out of the steamy shower, Chrissy wrapped a plush towel around her curves, watching as Zev's eyes followed her every movement with undisguised appreciation.

"I was thinking we could explore more of the island today," Zev suggested, securing his own towel around his narrow hips. "There are some places I'd like to show you that not even all the pack members know about."

Chrissy's face lit up at the prospect. "I'd love that. Mind if I swing by my villa first to grab a change of clothes? And my phone? I want to take some pictures—just for us," she added quickly. "Nothing for social media or anything. Just memories for myself."

A slight frown creased Zev's face, his protective instincts clearly warring with his desire not to control her. Chrissy recognized that internal battle and reached out to touch his arm.

"I know you're worried about security," she said softly. "But I promise I'll be careful."

His jaw tightened, but then he nodded. "Of course. I don't want to dictate what you

can and can't do, especially something as innocent as taking pictures." He ran his large hands through his damp hair. "That would make me no better than?—"

"Marty," she finished for him. The comparison made her heart swell with gratitude for Zev's understanding. "Thank you."

An hour later, dressed in denim cutoffs that showcased her toned legs and a light blue tank top, Chrissy trekked alongside Zev through a dense section of jungle. The humidity wrapped around them, but the canopy provided merciful shade from the tropical sun.

"How have I been here almost a week and not seen this part of the island?" she marveled, watching a colorful bird dart between the trees.

Zev's hand found her back, steadying her as they navigated a particularly steep section of the path. "Because I was saving the best for when you were ready," he answered with a wolfish grin that made her stomach flip.

When they finally emerged from the trees, Chrissy gasped. Before them stood ancient stone ruins partially reclaimed by nature—crumbling pillars wrapped in vines, weathered steps leading to platforms that might once have been temples or gathering places.

"What is this place?" she whispered, almost afraid to speak too loudly.

"The locals believe it was built by the first shifters who came to this island centuries ago," Zev explained, guiding her forward with his hand still protectively at her back. "They built it to align with the full moon, when their transformations would be strongest."

As they explored the sunken courtyard at the center of the ruins, something stirred

within Chrissy. A melody began to form in her mind, insistent and clear. Without thinking, she began to hum, the notes rising and falling with the gentle breeze that swept through the ancient stones.

Words followed naturally, falling into place as if they'd been waiting for this moment, this place, and this man.

"When the moon finds the stones, and your eyes find mine... Time stands still in this sanctuary we've defined..."

She was aware of Zev watching her, his blue eyes intense with admiration and something deeper. Far from making her self-conscious, his presence seemed to anchor her, giving her the freedom to fully inhabit the creative fugue that enveloped her.

"The world outside fades away, just you and me remain... In this paradise where wild hearts can run untamed..."

As the melody grew stronger and more defined, Chrissy pulled out her phone and captured several pictures of the ruins, the sunlight filtering through the ancient stones, creating patterns on the moss-covered ground.

She turned the camera toward Zev, who stood framed between two columns, powerful and proud, his eyes never leaving her face.

"That's the most beautiful thing I've ever heard," he said, his voice filled with emotion.

She lowered her phone, suddenly shy. "It's still forming. But I'm excited that I'm finally feeling music flow through me like this again."

Zev nodded toward another section of the ruins. "There's more I want to show you over this way."

He moved ahead, picking his way carefully through a section where the stones had collapsed into a natural archway. Chrissy lingered a moment, taking a final look at the courtyard, the melody still vibrating through her.

With Zev a little distance ahead, she pulled out her phone again and hit record, singing the full verse that had come to her plus a new chorus that emerged spontaneously:

"Found myself when I found you, under skies so endless blue

Never knew what freedom meant until your arms surrounded me..."

She saved the recording to her songwriting app, a mixture of excitement and contentment washing through her. This was why she'd fallen in love with music in the first place—this organic connection between emotion and expression.

Tucking her phone away, she hurried to catch up with Zev, taking his outstretched hand when she reached him.

"That song is really great," he said, squeezing her hand. "You're incredibly talented, you know that? And I'm glad to hear something so happy coming from you. Makes me think my island's doing its job."

"It's not just the island," Chrissy admitted, looking up into his face. "It's you."

Zev's eyes darkened with possessive pride. "Good," he growled, pulling her closer. "Because you're mine now, and I intend to keep that smile on your face for a very long time."

The raw declaration sent a delicious shiver through Chrissy's body. With anyone else, such possessiveness would have set off alarm bells. With Zev, it felt like coming home. A home she always longed for and believed she would never find.

FOURTEEN

ZEV

As they moved through the ancient stone pathways of the ruins, Zev couldn't tear his eyes away from Chrissy.

The song she'd created—seemingly out of thin air—had stunned him into reverent silence as they walked hand-in-hand.

That song wasn't just a fragment or rough idea.

It had poured from her fully formed, as though the island itself had whispered the melody into her ear.

"It's like you're connected to this place," he said, watching her trace her fingers along the weathered stone. "The way you sang about it... about us."

His wolf was preening inside him, its tail wagging with unbridled joy.

For generations, his ancestors had protected these sacred grounds, and now his mate had honored them with her gift.

The wolf recognized what Zev was only beginning to understand—she belonged here, had perhaps always been meant to find her way to these shores.

"The song just... came to me," Chrissy said, her green eyes bright with the lingering

creative energy. "I can't explain it."

Zev ran his hand along the back of his neck, realizing he'd been less than forthcoming about the ruins. "I should have told you—these aren't just any shifter ruins. They belonged to my family. My ancestors were the first to claim this island centuries ago."

He frowned, wondering why he'd fallen into his habitual vagueness about Isle Luna's history. For so long, protecting the pack had meant guarding their secrets, even from guests who posed no threat. But Chrissy wasn't just any guest.

"I'm sorry," he continued. "Old habits. We've kept ourselves hidden for so long that sometimes I forget I don't need to hide from you."

As they followed the path back toward the resort, still shrouded by the dense jungle canopy, Zev made a silent vow.

No more half-truths. She was his in every way that mattered—except for the formality of his mark upon her skin.

That would come soon, if she accepted. For now, he would show her exactly who and what she'd given herself to.

He stopped abruptly in a small clearing, sunlight dappling the ground around them.

"Chrissy." His voice deepened to that commanding timbre that came naturally when his alpha instincts surfaced. "Would you like to see my wolf?"

Her breathing quickened, her pupils dilating slightly. "Your actual wolf form? Right now?"

"Right now." He nodded, already reaching for the buttons of his shirt. "Just you and me. No one else around for miles."

A flash of nervousness crossed her features, quickly replaced by excitement. "Yes," she whispered. "I'd like that very much."

Zev efficiently removed his clothing, not missing how her eyes tracked every movement, lingering on his chest, his abdomen, and lower. The admiration in her gaze fed his alpha pride. With practiced ease, he folded his clothes and set them aside, standing before her in all his glory.

"Ready?" he asked, his voice already roughening with the change.

At her nod, he allowed the shift to take him.

The familiar rush of power surged through his veins as bones reshaped, muscles elongated, and fur erupted across his skin.

Within moments, a massive wolf stood where the man had been—silver-gray with distinctive dark brown patches across his belly and chest.

Chrissy's hand flew to her mouth, her eyes wide with wonder. "Oh my god," she breathed. "You're magnificent."

His wolf's ears perked forward at the praise, his tail swishing once in satisfaction. He remained perfectly still as she took a tentative step forward, then another, until her small hand hovered just above his head.

"Can I...?" she asked.

He nudged his muzzle against her palm in answer, and a delighted laugh escaped her.



Her fingers sank into his thick fur, scratching behind his ears in a way that would have been embarrassingly pleasurable if he weren't so captivated by her fearlessness.

Then, in a gesture that sent a primal surge of possessive joy through him, Chrissy knelt before him and wrapped her arms around his massive neck, pressing her face against his fur. No human had ever embraced his wolf form this way—with complete trust and open adoration.

"You're so beautiful," she murmured against him. "So powerful but gentle."

His wolf rumbled with satisfaction, nuzzling against her hair. The acceptance in her touch reached something deep and ancient within him, a part that had always wondered if a human mate could truly understand this side of him. Her wholehearted embrace answered that question definitively.

After savoring the moment, Zev gently disengaged and stepped back, shifting once more into his human form. He retrieved his clothes and put them back on as she stood there watching him, her eyes filled with a mix of disbelief and awe.

"That was truly magical," Chrissy said, her voice filled with wonder. "I've never seen anything so beautiful and perfect. Thank you for showing me."

Zev closed the distance between them, cupping her face in his large hands. "Thank you for seeing all of me," he said roughly. "Many humans fear our wolf forms. You embraced mine."

She smiled up at him. "Maybe someday, when you're feeling especially wild, you could take me for a ride through the moonlit jungle?"

The image hit him with powerful force—Chrissy astride his wolf form, racing through the island under a full moon, her laughter mingling with the night sounds of

the jungle.

"Nothing would honor my wolf more," he growled, pulling her against him. "And nothing would please me more than to share that freedom with you."

He kissed her then, pouring every ounce of the emotions swirling through him into the kiss—pride, passion, gratitude, and the beginnings of something deeper that he wasn't quite ready to name. But his wolf knew. His wolf had always known. She was his.

When they broke apart, Chrissy's cheeks were flushed and her green eyes luminous with desire. Zev traced his thumb across her lower lip, savoring the softness beneath his skin.

"I should get you back to rest for a bit," he murmured, though everything in him rebelled against the idea of separation.

They made their way back to the resort, hands entwined, shoulders brushing with each step.

The connection between them hummed like a live wire, making his skin prickle with awareness.

His wolf prowled just beneath the surface, already possessive of every curve, every smile, and every breath she took.

When they reached her villa, Chrissy turned to him with that mixture of shyness and boldness that drove him wild. "I suppose I should take a short nap before dinner to regain my strength for later." Her eyes flashed with a hint of mischief.

"Of course." Zev's blood began to heat with anticipation. "I'll make reservations for

eight."

"Perfect." She rose on her tiptoes to press a quick kiss to his lips. "Don't be late, Alpha."

The playful challenge in her tone made him growl low in his throat. "I've never been late for anything important in my life."

Zev watched her disappear inside, the curve of her hips in those cut-off shorts nearly breaking his resolve to let her rest. With considerable effort, he turned away, heading toward his office to handle some resort business before their dinner.

He'd barely made it halfway across the grounds when Ewan came barreling toward him, his face locked in a grim expression Zev hadn't seen since their military days.

"We've got a problem." Ewan's voice was clipped and urgent. "A serious one."

Zev's spine stiffened automatically, his alpha instincts surging to the forefront. "Tell me."

"It's about Chrissy." Ewan pulled out his tablet, swiping to a video. "This just hit social media about twenty minutes ago. It's blowing up everywhere."

Zev stared at the screen. There was Chrissy, standing amid the ancient ruins they'd just left, singing the song she'd created—for him, for them. The private, intimate moment where she'd bared her soul through music was now splashed across the internet for millions to witness.

"What the fuck?" His voice plummeted to a dangerous register. "How?"

"The song recording app on her phone. Marty's team has backend access to

it—probably written into her contract.

The moment she saved the recording, it uploaded to their cloud.

"Ewan's expression darkened. "They released it immediately, complete with tagging it as 'Chrissy's jungle escape song. ' It's already trending."

A primal fury swept through Zev, his wolf clawing for release. That song was theirs—a gift she'd created in the sacred place of his ancestors. Now it was being paraded for profit by the very man who'd driven her to seek sanctuary.

"The comments are overwhelmingly positive," Ewan continued. "People are calling it her most authentic work. But that's not the real problem."

Zev's jaw clenched. "What else?"

"The recording app Chrissy used—it captures location metadata." Ewan's expression darkened further. "Marty knows she's here. He called the resort's direct line demanding to speak with you."

A low growl rumbled deep within Zev's chest, his wolf snarling beneath his skin. No one made demands of an Alpha, especially not some rogue shifter who had abused his mate.

"Good," Zev said, pulling Marty's business card from his wallet. "I've been looking forward to this conversation."

He dialed the number, putting it on speaker as Ewan stood sentinel beside him. The call connected immediately.

"Shriner." The voice was smooth and cultured, with the unmistakable edge of a

predator.

"This is Zev Landon. I understand you've been looking for me."

"Ah, the island owner himself." Marty's tone dripped with false cordiality. "You have something that belongs to me."

Zev's fingers tightened around the phone, his knuckles whitening. "Chrissy Rivera belongs to no one."

"Legally, you're incorrect." Papers rustled on Marty's end. "She's contractually obligated to Empire Records—and by extension, to me. You're harboring a runaway asset, Landon."

"Asset?" The word tasted like poison. "She's a human being who's been exploited and abused."

Marty's laugh was sharp and cold. "Please spare me the hero complex. I made her famous. I made her rich. I made her everything she is."

"You broke her spirit and put your hands on her." Zev's voice dropped dangerously low. "For that alone, I should hunt you down."

"Threats now? How primitive." Marty's voice hardened. "Here's a counter-offer: return my star within twenty-four hours, or I'll release the exact coordinates of your precious little island to every tabloid and social media influencer on the planet."

The threat hit its mark. Zev's eyes flashed with lupine fury as he imagined his ancestral land swarmed with humans, cameras clicking and drones buzzing overhead—the sanctuary his family had protected for generations exposed and violated.

"You have no idea who you're threatening," Zev snarled.

"Oh, I think I do. One reclusive Alpha wolf with a soft spot for pretty humans.

" Marty's voice oozed smug satisfaction.

"Just imagine this, thousands of fans arriving by boat and seaplane and helicopter, desperate to see the magical place where Chrissy created her 'jungle escape song.

' Your precious isolation destroyed overnight. "

Zev was just about to deliver a counter-threat—one involving what happened to rogues who challenged pack territory—when a soft voice interrupted.

"I'll come home."

Zev whirled around to find Chrissy standing there, her green eyes wide and resolute. His heart plummeted as she stepped forward, close enough to speak into the phone.

"Marty, I'll be back in time for tomorrow's press."

"Chrissy—" Zev started, but she shook her head slightly.

"Excellent decision," Marty purred. "My jet is already en route to the closest airfield. It lands at 6 PM. Be on it, or I release the coordinates. Oh, and wear something presentable—the paparazzi will be waiting at LAX."

He rattled off a string of instructions about upcoming interviews and appearances before hanging up abruptly.

Zev stared at Chrissy, unable to process what had just happened. His wolf howled in

furious protest, demanding he stop her, mark her properly, and refuse to let her walk back into that man's clutches. Every instinct screamed that his mate was slipping away.

"Why?" The single word carried the weight of his confusion and pain.

The afternoon sun cast a golden glow across her face as she stepped closer, reaching up to touch his cheek. "Because he'll destroy everything you've built here."

"I don't care," Zev growled, capturing her wrist. "Let them come. This island has survived hurricanes and invasions—it can survive tourists."

"But can your pack?" Her voice was soft but unwavering. "Your people didn't ask for this. They don't deserve to have their home exposed because of me."

Ewan tactfully stepped away, giving them privacy in the middle of the sunlit grounds.

Zev's chest tightened painfully. His mate was choosing to sacrifice herself to protect his pack—a more Alpha move than many born wolves would make. Pride and anguish warred within him as he pulled her against his chest, burying his face in her hair to inhale her scent one more time.

"This isn't over," he promised, his voice a rough whisper against her ear. "You're my mate. No contract or threat will change that."

FIFTEEN

CHRISSY

As Chrissy stood in the middle of the resort grounds with her head against Zev's chest and his strong arms wrapped around her, she breathed him in—that intoxicating scent of sea salt, cedar, and something wild that was uniquely him.

His heart thundered against her ear, strong and steady, while hers felt like it was shattering.

When he'd uttered the word 'mate,' something broke inside her. Chrissy tried to keep her composure and to be strong the way she'd been forced to be for the past year, but her walls crumbled. Tears spilled down her cheeks, hot and unstoppable.

"I don't want to go back," she confessed, her voice cracking. "God, Zev, I don't want to leave you. But I heard them—your people—whispering about me. They were right to worry."

She pulled back just enough to look up at his face.

"Those first few days, I overheard the staff talking when they thought I couldn't hear.

They were afraid I'd bring trouble, that someone like me—tied to powerful men in the entertainment industry—would endanger everything. And they were right all along."

"Chrissy—"



"I won't be responsible for exposing centuries of your pack's secrets." Her fingers clutched at his shirt. "I won't let paparazzi and fans swarm this place, risking everything that makes it wild and beautiful."

Zev's hands framed her face, his thumbs wiping away her tears with a gentleness that belied his strength. "That won't happen. We'll protect our home." He paused for a heart beat. "We'll protect you. The pack will stand by you when I tell them you're my fated mate."

Chrissy shook her head, her dark hair falling across her shoulders. "They don't even know me, Zev. They haven't seen my heart the way you have." Her laugh was brittle. "They just see a human celebrity who's bringing a wolf shifter avalanche down on their heads."

The reality of what she had to do hit her with full force. She needed to be alone, to pull herself together before she faced Marty again. Before she had to pretend that the most beautiful five days of her life hadn't just happened.

"I need to go," she said suddenly, stepping back. "I have to get ready for my flight."

"No." Zev's hand closed around her upper arm, not painfully but with unmistakable authority. "We're not done talking about this."

"Let go of me." The words came out sharper than she'd actually intended.

Zev froze, alarm flashing across his face. His hand dropped away as if she'd burned him.

"Shit—Chrissy, I didn't mean to?—"

But she was already backing away, wrapping her arms around herself. "I just need

space. Please."

Before he could say anything else, she turned and ran toward her villa, her bare feet slapping against the smooth stone pathway. The tears came faster now, blurring her vision as she fled from the man who had made her feel truly alive, protected, and cherished.

Sobs racked her body as she burst through her villa door, slamming it behind her. She slid down against it, hugging her knees to her chest.

"Stupid," she whispered fiercely to herself. "So stupid to think I could have this."

Five perfect days. Five days of freedom, of being seen for who she really was, of feeling Zev's touch, and finally understanding what it meant to be worshipped rather than possessed. And now it was ending, just like she should have known it would.

The irony wasn't lost on her—that she'd recorded that song about finding her peace, her home, and her wild heart in Zev's arms, only for it to become the very thing that tore them apart.

She should have known Marty would find a way to monitor even her private creative moments.

That he would exploit even this most intimate expression of her newfound joy.

Chrissy pressed her palm against her mouth, trying to muffle the sound of her breaking heart as the afternoon sun painted golden stripes across the villa floor. In just a few hours, she'd be back in her cage, with only memories of how freedom tasted.

Her sobs subsided into hiccups as a commotion outside her villa door broke through

her misery. Raised voices ricocheted off the walls, punctuated by angry exclamations that made her skin prickle. Wiping her swollen eyes with the heel of her palm, she pushed herself up from the floor.

When she pulled the door open, the noise hit her like a physical force.

At least two dozen pack members crowded her porch, their expressions ranging from openly hostile to bitterly disappointed.

She recognized a few faces—the children she'd sung with and what she assumed were their parents, and resort staff who'd smiled at her just yesterday.

A tall woman with silver-streaked black hair thrust her phone in Chrissy's face. "Is this how you repay our hospitality? By exposing our home to the world?"

On the screen, Chrissy saw herself among the ancient ruins, singing the song she'd composed for Zev—their private moment, now viewed by millions.

"That wasn't me," Chrissy protested. "I didn't post that. I would never?—"

"Save your celebrity lies," a middle-aged man cut in. "My daughter follows you online. She showed us as soon as it went live on your official account."

"My account was hacked by my manager's team," Chrissy explained, her voice breaking. "They monitor everything I do. I thought I was just recording something private?—"

"Just like a human," someone muttered from the back. "Coming here like she owns the place, then broadcasting our location to the world."

A younger woman pushed forward. "Do you have any idea what you've done?"

Decades—centuries of secrecy, blown apart because you wanted social media attention."

Chrissy's cheeks burned with both shame and frustration. "I understand why you're upset, but please believe me—this wasn't intentional. I'm already planning to leave. My manager is sending a plane at six, and I'll be gone before sunset."

The silver-haired woman exchanged glances with the others, her nostrils flaring slightly. "We'll wait right here until you go. Make sure there are no more... accidents."

Staring into their distrustful faces, Chrissy felt a stab of bitter irony. For five days, she'd been free from the prison of scrutiny and judgment—only to face a different kind here, from people who refused to see past the image Marty had created for her.

"Fine," she said, lifting her chin. "Whatever makes you feel better."

She closed the door with deliberate control, though every cell in her body wanted to slam it. Turning the lock with trembling fingers, she leaned against the cool wood and peered through the side window. They were still there, their arms crossed, and their faces set in stone-like determination.

The unfairness of it burned like acid. She'd finally found a place where she felt alive again—where she'd discovered what it meant to be loved for who she really was—and now she was being forced to leave, treated like an outcast by the very people whose Alpha had claimed her as his mate.

Where was Zev now, when she really needed him? Why wasn't he here, standing up for her?

As if summoned by her thoughts, she caught a glimpse of movement at the back of

the crowd. Her heart leapt, then plummeted as she realized it wasn't him. Just more pack members, joining the vigil.

"This isn't fair," she whispered to the empty room, hugging herself tightly as she slid down onto a nearby chair. "I didn't do this."

Through the window, she could see the pack members settling in, some sitting on the steps, others standing guard like sentinels. The message was unmistakable. You're not welcome here anymore.

Five days of perfect freedom. Five days of passion, connection, and belonging—gone in an instant because of Marty's ruthless manipulation.

Chrissy brushed away a fresh tear. If Zev truly wanted her, truly believed she was his mate, where was he? Why wasn't he here, fighting for her?

She pulled her knees to her chest in the armchair, her nails digging into the soft flesh of her calves as another sob threatened to break free.

"Perfect," she whispered bitterly. "Always have to be so damn perfect."

Her entire life had been a constant chase after perfection—the perfect daughter for her dad who'd sacrificed everything including his own music career, the perfect student with straight A's through college, and now the perfect pop star with the perfect image that wasn't even hers to control.

And where had it gotten her? Right back where she'd started five days ago—trapped, controlled, and utterly alone.

She dug into her pocket, finding her phone. The screen lit up with notifications—thousands of them. Comments on a video she never meant to share.

"I tried so hard," she choked out, scrolling through the tsunami of messages from fans praising her 'authenticity' in a moment that had been stolen from her. "God, I did everything right, and it's still not enough."

For a few magical days, she'd tasted the life she truly wanted.

Zev had looked at her—really looked at her—and seen past the glossy exterior that Marty had cultivated. He'd touched her with reverence instead of ownership. He'd made her feel worthy just for being herself.

"What a joke," she laughed through her tears, tossing the phone onto the bed. "Fated mates. If he can't even feel how broken I am right now, what's the point?"

Her chest constricted with each ragged breath. All the beautiful moments—their first rain-soaked kiss in the cave, the way his eyes had followed her movements when she'd sung to those children, the tender way he'd washed her body in the shower—were fading like watercolors in the rain.

"Back to square one," she whispered, catching her reflection in the mirror.

Even without the layers of professional makeup, she was still beautiful—full lips, bright green eyes, and curves that had made Zev's eyes darken with hunger.

But beauty hadn't protected her from Marty's control, and it wouldn't save her now.

Just beyond her villa, she could hear the pack's voices rising, arguing among themselves. The words "human" and "risk" floated through the walls like poison.

"I'm never going to live the life I want," she said to her reflection. "Never going to be with who I want. Just back to being Marty's puppet and everyone's performing monkey."

The sob that had been building finally broke free, a raw, animalistic sound that tore through her. She doubled over onto the floor, her hair falling across her face as her shoulders shook. All the pain of the last year seemed to converge with the fresh wound of rejection, leaving her gasping.

Suddenly, a deep, commanding voice cut through the ambient noise outside.

"ENOUGH!"

The single word reverberated with such authority that the villa's windows seemed to vibrate. The voices outside fell silent.

"Move. Now."

Chrissy lifted her head, wiping her swollen eyes. That was Zev—but not the gentle, teasing Zev who'd held her through the night. This was pure Alpha, the voice of a predator who'd found his mate threatened.

"Alpha, we're just ensuring—" a woman's voice began.

"I said MOVE."

Chrissy's breath caught. She stood up, drawn to the window by an invisible thread.

Through the gauzy curtain, she saw Zev cutting through the crowd like a blade, his body radiating power and fury.

His eyes—those mesmerizing blue eyes that had looked at her with such tenderness—now glowed with supernatural intensity.

The pack parted before him, some lowering their gazes submissively. Others looked

defiant but stepped back nonetheless.

Chrissy's heart hammered as Zev reached her door. He didn't knock. He didn't need to.

"Chrissy," he called, his voice gentler but still thrumming with that undeniable authority. "Let me in. Please."

The 'please' nearly broke her again. Five days of bliss, shattered in an instant—yet here he was, fighting for her.



SIXTEEN

ZEV

Z ev stood outside Chrissy's villa door, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides. The crowd of his pack members had dispersed, slinking away under his furious glare, but their betrayal still burned in his gut like acid.

"Chrissy," he called again, softening his tone despite the rage still coursing through his veins. "Please, let me in."

Twenty minutes ago, he'd been pacing his office like a caged animal.

Chrissy's decision to leave the island and sacrifice herself for his pack's protection had sent him into a panicked frenzy, strategizing his next move of how to deal with the rogue shifter who dared threaten what was his and to ensure his mate's rightful place here on Isle Luna.

Then it had hit him—a crushing weight on his chest that had doubled him over mid-stride. For a moment, he'd thought he was having a heart attack—his lungs had refused to fill, and his vision had blurred at the edges.

Then understanding had crashed through him. That wasn't his pain. It was Chrissy's. The mate bond, still fresh between them, had opened a channel to her emotions—and what poured through nearly had brought him to his knees. Fear. Heartbreak. Utter desolation.

Zev had straightened, his wolf clawing at his insides. His mate was suffering, and he wasn't by her side. He'd been respecting her request for space, giving her time to process—and in doing so, he'd left her vulnerable.

He'd sprinted across the resort grounds, following the invisible thread that connected them.

The closer he'd got to her villa, the stronger the emotional bombardment became, until he had nearly been blinded with her pain.

When he'd rounded the final corner and saw what had awaited him, his temper had snapped.

His pack—his family—had formed a hostile barricade around his mate's sanctuary. Some had sat on her steps, others had leaned against the railings or had stood sentinel-like in small clusters. The message couldn't have been clearer if they'd posted signs. You're not welcome.

The primal, territorial part of him—the part that was Alpha—had taken over.

The crowd had froze at his command and dozens of heads had swiveled toward him. He'd stalked forward and the grass had scorched beneath his furious strides.

When he'd told them to move out of his way, most had obeyed instantly, their instincts responding to the Alpha's command. A few—the older, more stubborn ones—had hesitated.

Now, as he waited for Chrissy to open her door, Zev felt the dual forces of rage and tenderness battling within him. How dare they treat his mate this way? He'd chosen her—claimed her—and still they'd formed this mob against her.

"Chrissy," he tried once more, pressing his palm against the wood that separated them. Through the bond, he could feel her hesitation, the frayed edges of her trust. "I can feel what you're feeling now. Let me help you."

The door cracked open, revealing her tear-stained face. Then, she opened it a bit wider. Her blue tank top hugged her curves, and her cut-off denim shorts showed miles of her smooth legs, but it was the devastation in her eyes that caught and held his attention.

"They hate me," she whispered, her voice raw from crying.

The Alpha in him wanted to hunt down every pack member who'd made her feel this way. The man in him just wanted to hold her.

"They don't know you," he said, his voice firm but gentle. "And they don't get to decide who stays on my island."

Zev stepped forward, crossing her threshold with the absolute certainty of a predator claiming his territory. The door closed behind him with a soft click that felt like the period at the end of a declaration.

"You are not getting on Marty's plane," he stated, his eyes locking onto hers.

Chrissy rushed into his arms with such force she nearly knocked him backward.

His body instinctively adjusted, bracing against her momentum as his arms enveloped her small frame.

She fit perfectly against him, her curves molding to his hardness as if they'd been designed as complementary pieces of the same whole.

The scent of her—jasmine and something uniquely her—filled his lungs, calming the rage that had been building since he'd seen his pack gathered outside her door.

"I'm not letting you go back to that life of abuse and feeling alone," he growled, his voice vibrating against the top of her head.

His hands splayed possessively across her back, one traveling up to tangle in her dark waves.

"You are my mate, and I vowed to protect you and keep you safe. That's what I intend to do."

He felt her exhale against his chest, her fingers clutching the fabric of his shirt like she might float away if she let go. The sensation strengthened his resolve—no one would ever make her feel this small again. No one.

"And as for my pack," he continued, his jaw tightening as he remembered their hostile formation, "I am calling a pack meeting right now. I will tell them and set the record straight that you are my fated mate and their Luna."

Chrissy pulled back just enough to look up at him, her eyes wide with curiosity despite their redness from crying. "What's a Luna?"

Zev cupped her face with one large hand, his thumb brushing away the remnants of a tear track on her cheek. His wolf preened at the opportunity to educate his mate about her rightful place.

"The Alpha's mate," he explained, his voice lowering to a deeper register that made her pupils dilate. "To be respected just as much as the Alpha himself. No questions asked and no hesitation."

Her eyebrows pulled together in concern. "Some of them will resist because I'm human, won't they?"

Zev's lips quirked into a predatory smile that showed just the edge of his teeth. "I've already chosen you, already claimed you. There isn't anything they can say or do to change the Alpha's mind."

Her face softened, and she pressed a hand against his chest, directly over his heart. "How did you know I needed you? That I was in complete distress?"

Pride swelled in his chest at her questions—she was beginning to understand what it meant to have a wolf for a mate.

"Our mate bond is growing stronger by the day," he explained, covering her hand with his own. "Because I claimed you yesterday, I can feel your emotions through it. When you were upset, it hit me like a physical blow. I couldn't breathe until I got to you."

She tilted her head, curiosity and skepticism battling in her expression. "You can actually feel what I'm feeling?"

"It's special," he said, drawing her closer. "It's proof that we're true mates, a perfect match. You should embrace it as evidence of our connection."

Her lips parted as if to ask another question, but instead, she rose up and pressed her mouth to his. The kiss tasted of salt and promise, and Zev had to restrain himself from deepening it into something more primal. There would be time for that after he'd dealt with his pack.

Breaking away reluctantly, he reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone, quickly finding Ewan's contact. His second-in-command answered on the first ring.

"Send word to all one hundred pack members," Zev commanded without preamble. "Emergency meeting outside the main lodge in twenty minutes. Attendance is mandatory."

"Already on it," Ewan replied, his voice calm despite the tension in Zev's tone. "Olivia's helping spread the word. Anything else?"

Zev looked down at Chrissy, her bright eyes locked on his face with a mix of trust and trepidation that made him want to conquer worlds for her.

"Have security stationed at all access points," he added. "No one leaves or comes onto the island until after the meeting. And Ewan—" he paused, making sure his message was clear, "—tell them their Luna will be at my side. It's time they understood exactly who she is."

Zev walked with Chrissy toward the main lodge, hyperaware of her presence beside him.

She had changed into a white sundress that flowed around her curves like water, making her look both innocent and utterly desirable at the same time.

The golden late afternoon light caught in her dark hair, highlighting the subtle undertones of mahogany that he'd only noticed when they were tangled together in his bed last night.

His wolf prowled under his skin, restless and eager to publicly claim what was his.

"You look beautiful," he said softly. "Like you belong here."

Chrissy's fingers tightened around his. "I'm nervous."

"Don't be." He stopped, turning to face her fully. "They'll accept you or deal with me."

His tone brooked no argument. The Alpha in him couldn't conceive of any other outcome. His pack might have concerns, might have reservations about a human mate—especially one with Chrissy's high profile—but they would fall in line. The alternative wasn't an option.

As they approached the gathering place outside the main lodge, Zev felt his posture shift automatically. His shoulders squared, his stride lengthened, and his chin lifted. The Alpha wasn't just a title; it was woven into every fiber of his being.

One hundred pack members stood waiting, arranged in a loose semicircle with the oldest and most respected families toward the center.

Ewan stood slightly apart, his position as second-in-command clear in his stance.

When Zev and Chrissy stepped into view, a ripple of whispers moved through the crowd.

Zev met the eyes of those who had gathered outside Chrissy's villa earlier. Several had the grace to look ashamed. Good. They should feel ashamed. His mate had been reduced to tears by their actions, and the memory of her pain still burned in his chest.

"Thank you all for coming." His voice carried across the crowd without effort. "I've called this meeting to address recent events and to make an announcement long overdue."

He placed his hand on Chrissy's lower back, feeling the subtle tremble that ran through her body. His wolf wanted to nuzzle and comfort her, but the Alpha knew that strength was required here.

"Chrissy Rivera is my fated mate." The declaration rang out, clear and undeniable. "Though I have not yet marked her, and she has not yet committed to becoming one of the pack, she is your Luna. This is not up for debate or discussion."

The crowd's reaction was mixed—some nodded in understanding, others exchanged surprised glances, and a few of the elders frowned. Zev's eyes narrowed at their hesitation, his deep voice dropping to a dangerous rumble.

"Those of you who surrounded her villa and made her feel unwelcome will step forward now and apologize directly to your Luna."

For a moment, no one moved. Then, slowly, dozens of pack members stepped forward. One by one, they approached Chrissy and offered sincere apologies. The last, a gray-haired woman named Eliza who had been particularly vocal, bowed her head low.

"Forgive us, Luna. We feared for our safety, but that's no excuse for how we treated you."

Chrissy, to Zev's immense pride, accepted each apology with grace. His chest swelled with possessive approval—she was already acting like the Luna she was born to be.

"Now, let me be absolutely clear," Zev continued after the apologies were complete. "Anyone who treats our Luna with anything less than complete respect will answer directly to me."

The threat hung in the air, and Zev allowed it to settle before moving on.

"As for Marty Shriner's threats—we will not be intimidated. This island has been run by my family for centuries. We've faced threats before and survived."



He outlined their action plan, his voice steady and commanding. The resort would be temporarily closed to outside guests. Security would be doubled at all access points. The pack would run patrol shifts around the clock.

"But what about drones or helicopters?" someone called out. "They could breach our airspace."

Zev's lips curved into a confident smile. "The jungle canopy is our shield. It's how we've remained hidden for generations. Any aerial surveillance would only see trees and more trees—our buildings are designed to blend with the natural landscape."

As he spoke, watching understanding dawn on his pack's faces, Zev felt the tide turning. Their initial fear was transforming into something else—resolve, protectiveness, and pride. They were beginning to see what he saw in Chrissy: not a liability, but their Luna. Someone worth protecting.

"This island is our sanctuary," he reminded them. "But it's also our fortress. We have protocols in place for exactly this type of situation."

When he was satisfied that his message had been received—the nods were firmer now and the postures straighter—he turned to face Chrissy fully. He took both her hands in his, forgetting for a moment the hundred pairs of eyes watching them.

"If you truly want to return to California because it's what you want—not what Marty demands—I'll respect that choice," he said, his voice softening just for her. "But if you want to stay here with me, I will move mountains to break his hold on you."

His thumbs drew small circles on the backs of her hands, a contrast to the fierce determination in his eyes.

"Money isn't an issue. Connections aren't an issue. I will hire an army of lawyers if

that's what it takes. I will do whatever is necessary to free you from that contract."

He pulled her closer, one hand sliding up to cup her cheek. The possessive gesture was as much for his pack as it was for her—marking his territory in the most unmistakable way.

"Just tell me you'll stay," he whispered, the Alpha's command slipping into a lover's plea. "Tell me you'll be my Luna in more than just name."

SEVENTEEN

CHRISSY

Chrissy's heart thundered as she gazed up into Zev's impossibly blue eyes. The entire pack watched them—a hundred sets of eyes trained on their Alpha and the human woman he'd just declared as his Luna. The enormity of the moment crashed over her like a wave.

Six days ago, she'd been trapped in a life that was suffocating her. Now, she stood at the precipice of something wild and wonderful.

"I want to stay," she said, her voice catching. Her white sundress fluttered around her legs in the gentle island breeze as the sun dipped lower on the horizon, casting everything in a golden glow. "I want to be with you, Zev."

A collective murmur rippled through the pack. Relief, surprise, and approval—she could sense it all, even without wolf senses.

Zev's face transformed, his controlled Alpha expression giving way to something raw and primal. His fingers tightened against her cheek, and Chrissy swore she could feel the wolf inside him howling with victory.

"I trust you," she continued, her voice growing stronger. "I believe you when you say we can fight Marty together. That we can keep everyone safe." Her hand found his chest, resting over his heart. "I've spent so long being told what I can't do. I want to start focusing on what I can."

The piercing intensity in his blue eyes made her knees weaken, but she kept going. "This island—it feels more like home than anywhere else has in a long time. And you..." she smiled softly, "you make me feel like I've finally found where I belong."

Zev pulled her against him, claiming her mouth in a kiss that left no doubt about who she belonged to. Cheers erupted from the pack, but Chrissy barely heard them over the roaring in her ears. His kiss was possession, promise, and protection all at once.

When he finally broke their kiss, she was breathing hard, her lips tingling and her body flushed with heat. Several of the older pack members looked scandalized, while the younger ones grinned widely.

"Be on alert for the next twenty-four hours," Zev commanded the pack without taking his eyes off Chrissy. "When Marty discovers she didn't board his plane, there will be consequences. But we'll be ready."

The gathering dispersed quickly, with pack members heading off to their assigned posts. Ewan approached, his expression serious but with a hint of amusement in his eyes.

"I'll double security at all access points as requested," he told Zev, then nodded to Chrissy. "Welcome to the pack, Luna."

Luna. The title still felt foreign, but not unwelcome. She was a human pop star with a wolf pack that answered to her. The absurdity of it almost made her laugh.

After a brief conference with Ewan about security protocols, Zev led Chrissy away from the main lodge. His hand rested possessively on her back as they walked toward a secluded garden overlooking the sea.

"I'm sorry about the public declaration," he said once they were alone, brushing her

cheek with his hand. "It wasn't how I planned to ask you to stay."

Chrissy reached up, trailing her finger along his jaw. "It needed to be done. They needed to see us together and united."

"You're extraordinary," he murmured, pulling her closer. "Most humans would be running screaming from a pack of wolves."

"Lucky for you, I've always been a little reckless." She smiled at him, still marveling at how this powerful man—this Alpha—treated her like she was the most precious gift in his world. "Besides, I've spent the last year surrounded by wolves in suits. At least yours are honest about their teeth."

Zev laughed, the sound rich and vibrant. "I love you, Chrissy Rivera. I think I've loved you since you stepped off that helicopter."

The words hit her with unexpected force, stealing her breath. For a moment, she couldn't speak, could only feel the truth of his words resonating through their bond.

"I love you too, Zev," she finally whispered, surprised at how easy it was to say. After years of guarding her heart, of being used by people who only saw her as a commodity, the words flowed from her like a song that had been waiting to be sung. "I don't know how it happened so fast, but I do."

"Fate," he said simply, his thumbs drawing circles on her hips. "Like I said, the mate bond doesn't make mistakes."

Zev's expression suddenly intensified, his eyes darkening as they locked on hers. The breeze ruffled his thick wavy hair, and Chrissy felt her heart racing against her ribs. Something shifted in his gaze—a vulnerability that seemed almost shy despite his commanding presence.

"Chrissy," he said, his voice slightly rough with emotion. "Would you be willing to accept my mate mark tonight?"

The question hung between them, profound in its simplicity. Chrissy knew what this meant—a permanent bond, a declaration to his pack and the entire supernatural world that she belonged with him. Forever.

To her own surprise, she didn't hesitate. Not even for a heartbeat.

"Yes," she breathed, certainty filling her like sunshine. "Yes, more than anything. I've never been more certain about anything."

The look that transformed his face was pure Alpha possession—primal, intense, and utterly male. Satisfaction and excitement flashed across his features as his hands tightened on her hips.

"Mine," he growled, lifting her off the ground in one fluid motion.

Chrissy laughed, wrapping her arms around his neck as he carried her bridal-style toward his villa.

The white fabric of her sundress fluttered against his arms, and she could feel the energy humming through his body—a barely contained wildness that thrilled her.

His muscles tensed under her touch as he strode purposefully down the path.

"Somebody's eager," she teased, tracing her finger along his jawline.

Zev looked down at her, his eyes reflecting the last golden rays of the setting sun. "You have no idea how long I've waited for this moment."

When they reached his villa, he kicked the door open with a smooth motion that made Chrissy's stomach flip with anticipation. The door slammed behind them with an equally forceful kick, and then he was carrying her up the stairs to his bedroom, taking them two at a time.

Inside his bedroom, Zev set her down gently on her feet, his hands framing her face.

"How do you want this?" he asked, his voice thick with desire. "Do you want to take control, or do you want me to?"

Chrissy felt a flash of boldness surge through her at the possibility of taking control again. After spending so much time having her choices stripped away and people controlling her, being given this power felt like a gift.

But tonight, for this life-changing experience, she wanted something different entirely.

"You," she said, surprising herself with the steadiness of her voice. "I want you to take control. Show me how much you want to mark me and make me yours forever."

His eyes flashed, something wild and barely restrained flickering behind them. Without a word, his hands found the straps of her white sundress, sliding them down her shoulders. The fabric pooled at her feet, leaving her in just her lace bra and panties.

"Beautiful," he murmured, his gaze traveling over every inch of her exposed skin.

Chrissy stood before him without shame, her curves on full display. She'd spent a year being told her body needed to be shaped, contained, covered or exposed according to others' demands. But Zev's appreciation was different—reverent and honest.

He unhooked her bra with practiced ease, then knelt to slide her panties down her legs. When she stood completely naked before him, he stepped back to remove his own clothes, never taking his eyes off her.

Chrissy's breath caught as his muscular body was revealed. Tanned skin stretched over hard muscle, his chest broad and powerful, narrowing to lean hips. Every inch of him was perfection—powerful, primal, and utterly alpha male.

"Come here," he commanded softly, reaching for her.

She went to him willingly, a shiver running through her as his warm hands touched her bare skin. He laid her on the bed and began a slow, deliberate exploration of her body with his lips and tongue.

"I'm going to worship every inch of you before I mark you," he promised, his breath hot against her collarbone. "By the time I'm done, you'll never doubt who you belong to."

Chrissy's breath hitched as Zev's warm hands slid down her body, his touch igniting a fire that burned hotter with every second.

She lay beneath him, her skin tingling as his lips traced a path from her collarbone to the curve of her breast. His tongue flicked over her hardened nipple, and she arched into him, a soft moan escaping her lips.

"You're perfect," he murmured, his voice rough with desire. "Every inch of you."

She shivered, not from cold but from the intensity of his heated gaze. His hands moved lower, skimming over her hips, her thighs, until he reached her knees. He pressed a kiss to the inside of each one, his breath warm against her skin, and she felt a thrill of anticipation shoot through her.



"Zev," she said softly, her voice trembling. "I'm ready. I want this. I want you."

He looked up at her, his blue eyes dark with need. "Are you sure? Once I start, I won't stop. I'm going to claim you fully, Chrissy."

She nodded, her heart pounding in her chest. "I'm sure. Show me how an Alpha fully claims his mate."

A growl rumbled deep in his chest, and he moved up her body, his weight pressing her into the mattress.

His hands framed her face, and he kissed her deeply, his tongue sliding against hers in a way that caused her toes to curl.

She could feel the heat of him, the hard length of him pressing against her thigh, and she wrapped her legs around his hips, pulling him closer.

"You're mine," he growled against her lips, his voice thick with possession.

She gasped as he entered her in a slow and deliberate motion, inch by inch, until he was fully sheathed inside her. The stretch was intense, but it was exactly what she wanted—what she needed. She felt so full and complete, as if he was the missing piece she'd been searching for all her life.

"Zev," she breathed, her hands gripping his shoulders. "You feel... incredible."

He groaned, his forehead resting against hers. "You're so tight and so perfect."

And then he began to move, his thrusts deep and powerful, each one driving her closer to the edge. She matched his rhythm, her hips rising to meet his, her body moving with a wild abandon she'd never known she was capable of. It was primal,

raw, and utterly intoxicating.

"Yes," she moaned, her nails digging into his back. "Just like that. Don't stop."

He growled, his pace quickening, his thrusts becoming harder and more urgent. She could feel the pressure building inside her, coiling tighter and tighter until she was teetering on the edge of release. But she held on, wanting to wait for him, wanting to feel him come undone with her.

"Chrissy," he said, his voice rough with need. "I'm close. I'm going to mark you now. Are you ready?"

She nodded, her breath coming out in short, shallow gasps. "Yes. Do it. Mark me. Make me yours."

He leaned down, his teeth lengthening, and then they grazed the sensitive skin where her neck met her shoulder.

She felt a sharp pain as his teeth pierced her flesh, but it was quickly replaced by a wave of pleasure so intense it sent her over the edge.

She cried out, her body convulsing around him as he thrust into her one last time.

His own release crashed over him, his body shuddering as he spilled his seed deep inside her.

He licked her wound, sealing the mark, and then collapsed on top of her. She wrapped her arms around him, holding him close, her heart still racing.

"You're mine forever now," he whispered, his voice filled with awe. "My mate. My Luna."

She smiled, her fingers tracing the mark on her neck. "And you're mine now. Forever."

He kissed her softly, his lips lingering against hers. "Together forever."

EIGHTEEN

ZEV

Z ev woke up with the first light of dawn streaming in through his floor-to-ceiling bedroom windows.

His muscles were still pleasantly sore from the night before when he fully claimed Chrissy and marked her as his mate, officially making her his Luna.

The weight of Chrissy's head rested against his chest, her dark hair spilling across his arm.

He couldn't resist trailing his fingers lightly down her bare shoulder, marveling at the softness of her skin.

His eyes fixed on the mark at the junction of her neck and shoulder—his mark. Though barely hours old, it was already healing, the angry red giving way to a perfect impression of his teeth that would forever brand her as his. A surge of possessive pride rushed through his veins, hot and potent.

"Mine," he whispered, brushing his lips against her forehead.

Seven days ago, Zev Landon had been simply the owner of an exclusive island resort, Alpha of the Isle Luna pack, and a committed bachelor with no intention of changing his status. Then Chrissy Rivera had stepped off that helicopter, and his entire world had tilted on its axis.

Now, everything felt right. Complete. As though he'd been walking through life with a missing piece he hadn't even realized was gone until she filled it.

"You're going to make me a better Alpha," he murmured against her hair. Her wild, carefree spirit had already begun to temper his rigid perfectionism, loosening the tight control he'd maintained for so long.

Zev knew the threat of Marty loomed somewhere beyond their island paradise.

By now, the manager would have realized Chrissy never boarded his plane, and his retaliation was inevitable.

But Zev had complete faith in Ewan and the security protocols they'd put in place.

For today, at least, he wanted to savor this new beginning.

He pressed his lips to the curve of her ear. "Wake up, Luna."

Chrissy stirred against him, her body stretching like a cat's before her green eyes fluttered open. "Mmm, morning," she mumbled, her voice thick with sleep.

"I have plans for us today," Zev announced, his hand sliding possessively down her naked back.

She blinked up at him, suddenly more alert. "What kind of plans? Should I be worried?"

Zev laughed, the sound rumbling through his chest. "No, not worried. How do you feel about trying one of my favorite hobbies?"

"Depends on what it is." She propped herself up on one elbow, her long hair falling in

a curtain around her face. "If it involves jumping off cliffs or wrestling alligators, I might need some convincing."

He captured a strand of her hair between his fingers. "Nothing that extreme. But it will get your adrenaline pumping." He sat up, pulling her with him. "We'll need to stop by your villa first. You'll need a bikini."

Her eyebrows shot up. "Now I'm intrigued."

Zev slid out of bed, not bothering to hide his nakedness as he strode to his closet. He pulled on a pair of board shorts, leaving his chest bare. When he turned back, he caught Chrissy watching him, her teeth catching her bottom lip in a way that caused his blood to heat.

"Like what you see?" He didn't bother hiding his smirk.

"You know I do." She slipped out of bed, making a show of bending over to pick up her white sundress from the floor.

Zev let out a growl, crossing the room in two strides to pull her against his chest. "Keep that up, and we won't be leaving this room today."

"Promise?" She grinned up at him, her hands splayed across his bare chest.

"Later," he promised, dropping a quick kiss on her lips before releasing her. "First, I want to see how you handle yourself in the water."

Ten minutes later, they reached Chrissy's villa.

While she disappeared into the bathroom to change, Zev prowled around the space, scenting the air.

Her scent had already begun to mingle with his—a result of their mating—but he wanted more.

He wanted every inch of this island to smell like them together.

When she emerged in a tiny blue bikini that showcased every perfect curve, Zev nearly abandoned his plans on the spot. His wolf surged forward, hungry for her again.

"Christ, Chrissy," he breathed, his voice rough. "You're testing my self-control."

She grinned, twirling in a circle. "Good."

He grabbed her hand, tugging her toward the door. "Come on, before I change my mind and take you right here."

They walked hand-in-hand to the beach, the morning sun casting a beautiful golden-orange glow over the sand. Zev led her to a small storage shed near the water's edge, unlocking it to reveal several surfboards propped against the wall.

"Surfing?" Chrissy asked, surprise lifting her voice. "That's your big plan?"

Zev pulled out two boards—a longer one for her, his own shorter board for himself. "Problem with that?"

Her face broke into a genuine smile. "No, actually. My dad taught me when I was a kid. I used to be pretty good at it."

"California girl through and through," he teased, balancing both boards under one arm as he led her toward the water. "Show me what you've got, pop star."

"I'm rusty," she warned, taking the board he offered. "It's been quite a while."

Zev waded into the water beside her, his free hand finding her lower back. "The island will guide you. Trust it. Trust yourself."

For the next hour, they rode the waves together. Chrissy wobbled at first, but it didn't take long for her muscle memory to kick in. Soon she was cutting across the water with surprising skill, her unbridled laughter carried back to him on the wind.

Watching her, Zev felt something in his chest expand. This was his mate—wild and free, her face alight with joy as she conquered the waves. The island had accepted her completely, embracing her as if she'd always belonged here.

"You're a natural," he called as she paddled back to him after a particularly smooth ride.

Her smile could have powered the entire island. "This is amazing. I forgot how much I loved this."

"Well, the island loves you back," he told her, reaching out to brush wet hair from her face. "Almost as much as I do."

When Zev and Chrissy finally emerged from the water, surfboards tucked under their arms, Zev felt completely at peace. The morning sun had dried the salt water on their skin, and Chrissy's laughter still rang in his ears, a sound he'd never tire of hearing.

"You're full of surprises, Luna," Zev said, sliding his free arm around her waist. "I didn't expect you to outride me on that last wave."

Chrissy grinned up at him, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "I told you my dad taught me. But I might have forgotten to mention I won a local surfing championship



when I was twelve."

Zev's eyes filled with awe. This woman never ceased to amaze him. "I wouldn't expect anything less from you. You're incredible, you know that, Chrissy?" He lowered his head for a quick kiss that tasted of ocean and sunshine.

As they trudged up the beach, Olivia appeared, waving enthusiastically as she approached. Zev noticed the knowing smile on her face immediately.

"There you two are!" Olivia called out. "Perfect timing."

Zev raised his eyebrow. "Why do I feel like you're plotting something?"

"Because we are," Olivia admitted, not bothering to deny it. "The pack has arranged a surprise for you both. You'll need to change into something more... celebratory. The event center is being prepared as we speak."

"The event center?" Zev questioned, immediately alert.

The pack's private venue was used only for their most significant occasions—mating ceremonies, pack leadership transitions, and birth celebrations.

It sat nestled in a protected valley, far from the resort and closer to the pack's residential area.

Chrissy looked between them, confusion evident in her expression. "What's happening?"

Olivia's smile widened. "Your official welcome, Luna. The pack sensed the claiming last night, and they want to celebrate properly."

The realization finally dawned on Zev. Of course—the pack bond would have alerted everyone the moment he marked Chrissy. The primal energy of their union would have rippled through the collective consciousness of the Isle Luna wolves. And now they wanted to honor their Alpha's mate.

"I didn't expect this so soon," Zev admitted, a surge of pride rising in his chest.

"You know how traditions work," Olivia replied with a shrug. "Once a Luna is marked, the celebration follows." She turned to Chrissy, linking arms with her. "Come with me. I've got something perfect for you to wear. This is a big deal, trust me."

Zev nodded his approval. "I'll meet you at my car in front of the main lodge in an hour. We'll drive to the event center together."

As Olivia whisked Chrissy away, Zev returned to his villa, his mind racing with pride.

Just yesterday, some members of his pack had surrounded Chrissy's villa, demanding she leave.

Now they were planning her welcome celebration.

The shift in energy told him everything—they had accepted her as their Luna, their Alpha female, despite her being human.

Zev showered quickly, washing away the salt and sand. He selected a tailored charcoal suit with a crisp white shirt, leaving the top buttons undone in a nod to island casualness. His wolf paced inside him, anxious to present his mate to the pack in her official capacity.

An hour later, Zev leaned against his black BMW, waiting. The sound of the resort's front door opening caught his attention, and he turned.

He almost forgot to breathe for a split second.

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:07 am*

Chrissy descended the steps in a floor-length red gown that hugged every curve of her body with loving precision.

The neckline dipped just enough to reveal a tantalizing glimpse of cleavage, while the slit along one side flashed her toned leg with each step.

Her dark hair cascaded down her back in glossy waves, topped with a delicate circlet of white island flowers.

The mate mark on her neck was proudly visible, a declaration to all who saw her.

She was magnificent. Regal. His.

"Damn," Zev muttered under his breath, his body instantly responding to the sight of her. He pushed off the car and strode to meet her at the bottom of the steps, his eyes never leaving hers.

"Well? Will I do?" Chrissy asked, her voice carrying a hint of nervousness as she gave a small twirl.

Zev's hand shot out to grasp her waist, pulling her against him with possessive force. "You're beyond perfect," he growled, his voice rough with desire. "Every male wolf in the pack is going to lose their mind, which means I'll be spending the entire day making it clear who you belong to."

Her eyes widened, darkening with a matching hunger. "I like the sound of that."

Zev helped her into the car, his hand lingering possessively on her lower back. As they drove through the jungle roads toward the event center, he couldn't stop glancing at her, memorizing how the sunlight caught in her hair and illuminated her skin.

"You're staring," she teased.

"I can't help it." His hand found hers, their fingers intertwining. "My wolf can't believe you're really ours now."

The event center came into view—an elegant structure of natural wood and stone that blended into the landscape. Lights twinkled from within, and soft music drifted through the open doors. Zev parked and came around to open Chrissy's door, offering his hand.

"Ready to meet your pack, Luna?"

Chrissy took his hand, her chin lifting with quiet determination. "Lead the way, Alpha."

The moment they stepped through the doors, a hush fell over the gathered crowd. One hundred pairs of eyes turned to take in their Alpha and his newly marked mate. Then, as one, the pack members dropped to one knee, heads bowed in respect.

Zev felt Chrissy's grip tighten on his arm in surprise. These were the same wolves who had surrounded her villa in anger just yesterday, now kneeling before her in absolute submission.

Ewan stepped forward first, rising to his feet. "On behalf of the Isle Luna pack, we welcome our Luna." He turned to the assembly. "Rise and celebrate!"

The room exploded into jubilant sound as tables laden with food were unveiled and

music swelled. Pack members approached one by one to introduce themselves properly to Chrissy, each showing deference that clearly both surprised and moved her.

"They're completely different," she whispered to Zev between greetings. "Yesterday they wanted to run me off the island."

"Yesterday you were an outsider," Zev explained, his arm never leaving her waist. "Today you're Luna. The mark changed everything—you're pack now."

As the evening progressed, Zev watched his mate charm every member of his pack. She remembered names, asked thoughtful questions, and laughed generously at their stories. His wolf preened with satisfaction. They had chosen well.

When the band struck up a slower melody, Zev pulled her onto the dance floor, wrapping his arms around her waist and drawing her close against him.

"Happy?" he asked, his lips brushing her ear.

"More than I knew was possible," she admitted, her arms looping around his neck as they swayed together. "I never thought I'd find this—belonging, freedom, you."

Zev's hand slid down to the small of her back, pressing her tighter against him. "When this celebration ends, I'm taking you home and showing you exactly how much you belong to me now," he promised softly.

Chrissy's lips curved into a smile against his neck. "Is that a threat or a promise?"

"Both," Zev growled, spinning her in a slow circle as the music enveloped them. "Definitely both."

The way her red dress shimmered in the light as they moved sent fire racing through his veins.

His wolf paced, already impatient for the celebration to end so he could claim her again.

The pack had honored her beautifully today, but now he wanted her alone, and wanted to peel that dress from her body inch by tantalizing inch.

Zev inhaled deeply, drawing in the intoxicating scent of her. That scent now carried notes of his own, a primal declaration to any wolf shifter that she was claimed. She was his, now and forever.

The song drew to a close, and Zev dipped her dramatically, earning delighted laughter from his mate and appreciative cheers from the pack members watching. As he pulled her upright, he caught sight of Ewan shoving through the crowd, his expression grim.

Zev's instincts flared instantly. He'd known Ewan since childhood—the man didn't panic easily. Something was very wrong.

"Alpha." Ewan's voice was tight, barely controlled as he reached them. Sweat beaded his forehead, his breath coming in quick bursts. "We have a situation. A major one."

Zev's arm tightened around Chrissy's waist, his body automatically shifting to place himself between her and any potential threat. His wolf lunged forward under his skin, teeth bared. "What is it?"

Ewan's eyes darted to Chrissy, then back to Zev, clearly weighing whether to speak freely in front of her.

"She's my mate," Zev growled, the possessive edge in his voice leaving no room for argument. "Whatever it is, she hears it too."

The music around them seemed to fade as a cold knot of dread formed in Zev's stomach. Only one thing could cause his second-in-command to look this alarmed on tonight of all nights.

Marty. The rogue wolf shifter had sensed their mate bond had fully formed—had felt Zev's claim marked officially and permanently on Chrissy. And now Marty was coming for what he still considered his.



NINETEEN

CHRISSY

The music around Chrissy seemed to fade as a knot of dread twisted in her stomach. The white flower circlet in her hair suddenly felt too heavy and the red gown too constrictive as she fought to breathe. Only one thing would make Ewan look this panicked on her special day.

Marty. Marty was coming for her himself.

"Someone at the airfield and boat access point must have special connections with Marty Shriner," Ewan explained, his words clipped. "He's breached our security perimeter. He's en route to the island on a boat and—" he hesitated, his expression grim, "—he has a hostage."

"Who?" Chrissy demanded, stepping out from behind Zev's protective stance, her heart pounding wildly.

"Your father, Luna." Ewan swallowed hard. "He's threatening to harm your father if you don't return immediately to California with him."

The world tilted dangerously. "My dad?" Her voice cracked. "No! He wouldn't—" But even as the denial left her lips, she knew better. Her fingers clutched at the silky material of her gown, bunching it between her white knuckles.

"I need to get to him," she said, panic rising like a tidal wave within her. "I'll go back

with Marty. I have to. He can't hurt my dad—that's all I have left."

Zev caught her shoulders, forcing her to look at him. His blue eyes burned with a ferocity that would have terrified her if it had been directed at her. "I'm not letting you sacrifice yourself again, Chrissy."

"You don't understand." Her voice broke. "My dad gave up everything for me. He put his whole life on hold to raise me after my mom left. I won't let him die because I ran away."

Ewan cleared his throat. "There's more. In the manila envelope Gerri gave us... there were articles about several missing persons. All connected to Marty. All vanished under mysterious circumstances."

Chrissy's knees nearly buckled. "He'll kill him," she whispered. The room spun around her, faces blurring and the lights too bright. "Zev, please—get me to a boat. Now. Take me to my dad."

She saw the struggle in Zev's eyes—his alpha instinct to protect her warring with his understanding of what her dad meant to her. His jaw clenched, the muscles in his neck straining against the collar of his white shirt.

"I would do anything for my dad," she said, her eyes locked with Zev's. "Even sacrifice this—us. Please understand."

Something shifted in Zev's expression. His hands tightened on her shoulders before he nodded once, sharply. "Ewan, prepare the fleet. We intercept Marty's boat before it reaches our shores."

"Already on it," Ewan replied, pulling out his phone. "I'll have our fastest boat ready for you in ten minutes at the north dock."

Zev took Chrissy's hand, pulling her through the crowd of pack members who had fallen silent, sensing the urgency. "We'll get your father back, Chrissy," he vowed, his voice a deep rumble that vibrated through her bones. "And Marty will regret the day he challenged my mate and her family."

The slit in her gown allowed her to keep pace with Zev's long strides as they rushed from the celebration hall and into the warm night air. Her circlet of flowers tumbled from her hair, but she didn't look back.

"I can't lose my dad," she whispered, more to herself than to Zev. "He's the only one who has always loved me just for me, not for what I could do or who I could be."

Zev's grip on her hand tightened. "Not anymore, Luna." The alpha tone in his voice made her meet his eyes. "You have me now. You have the pack. And we protect what's ours to the death. And both you and your father are ours now."

Chrissy's throat tightened, the fabric of her red gown catching the silver moonlight as her chest rose and fell with rapid breaths.

She'd never seen Zev like this—his eyes glinting with a primal ferocity and his jaw set in a hard line of fierce determination.

This wasn't just the resort owner or even the Alpha leader—this was the wolf, ready to hunt and protect what was his.

They hurried to his black BMW, the tires squealing as he raced through the jungle roads. The mate mark on Chrissy's neck throbbed in rhythm with her pulse as she gripped the door handle, her knuckles white against her fair skin.

"Here's the plan," Zev said, his voice a controlled rumble as he navigated a sharp turn. "You'll play along. Act like you're giving in and going back to California with

him. Position yourself close to your father on Marty's boat."

"And then?" Her voice sounded small against the roar of the engine.

"And then me and the pack will do the rest." He flashed a predatory smile that sent a shiver—not entirely of fear—down her spine. "We're connected now, Chrissy. The mate bond is fully formed. We should be able to communicate telepathically and guide each other through this."

Chrissy swallowed hard. "I've never... how do I even?—"

"Focus on me. On us." His hand left the steering wheel long enough to brush against her cheek. "Trust it. Trust me."

They arrived at the north dock where a sleek boat waited, its engines already humming. Ewan stood ready, his expression serious.

"The pack is in position," Ewan reported. "Awaiting your signal."

Zev nodded, helping Chrissy aboard. "I need a few minutes first. Get Chrissy to Marty, let him think he's won."

Heart hammering, Chrissy pulled out Zev's phone from his pocket. She dialed Marty's number and put it on speakerphone. Marty answered on the first ring.

"We're coming to you," she said, forcing a tremor into her voice. "I'm so stupid for leaving. I'm sorry. I'll do whatever you want from now on. Just don't hurt my dad."

"Good girl," Marty's voice oozed satisfaction. "I knew you'd be smart about this. You and I are going to have a fresh start, Chrissy. I'm going to parade you around exactly as I see fit."

His voice lowered to a predatory purr. "I've always wanted to know what you tasted like. And soon, you'll be all mine."

Chrissy felt Zev stiffen beside her, a barely audible growl rumbling in his chest.

"The Alpha wolf thinks he's claimed you," Marty continued. "But that means nothing to me. When we get back to California, I'm making you mine forever."

"Sounds perfect, Marty. See you soon," Chrissy said with feigned sweetness. She ended the call, trying not to throw up. She glanced at Zev, seeing him fighting for control, the muscles in his neck straining.

"It's okay," she murmured, then pressed her forehead against his, focusing on their bond. I have this handled. Trust me.

Zev's blue eyes locked with her green ones. "I trust you completely, Luna." The power in those simple words fortified her like nothing else could.

As Marty's boat came into view, a knot formed in Chrissy's stomach. It was larger than she'd expected, gleaming black against the blue sea. She could make out figures on deck—one of them had to be her dad.

"Ready?" Zev asked, his voice calm but his eyes blazing.

She nodded, straightening her shoulders. The red gown suddenly felt like armor as she stepped onto the transfer platform.

"I'll be right behind you," Zev promised, his voice for her ears alone as he helped her across to Marty's vessel. "Always."

Then he was gone, his boat disappearing into the darkness, leaving Chrissy alone on

Marty's deck, her heart pounding with equal parts fear and determination.

Chrissy immediately connected eyes with her dad who was tied up at the wrists and his mouth gagged.

Jim Rivera's salt-and-pepper hair was disheveled, and his kind face was etched with worry lines she'd never seen before.

But when their eyes locked, she saw that familiar spark – the unwavering belief he'd always had in her.

Her heart thundered in her chest, the mate mark on her neck pulsing with each beat.

Seeing the man who had taught her to play guitar at eight years old, who had kissed every scraped knee and attended every school recital, reduced to a helpless victim ignited something primal inside her.

The wrath that flooded her veins was foreign and fierce – she literally wanted to tear Marty's throat out with her bare hands.

Calm. Focus. Play along. She channeled the performance skills that had made her famous, forcing her lips into a coy smile as she turned to face Marty.

"Marty," she purred, smoothing the silky fabric of her red gown. "I never realized how... commanding you look when you're in your element." She let her gaze travel appreciatively over his tailored navy suit. "Being away from you these past days has given me... perspective."

Marty's ice-blue eyes gleamed in the moonlight. "Smart girl," he said, circling her like prey. "You finally understand who's in charge."

"More than that." Chrissy stepped closer, fighting the revulsion crawling up her spine. "I discovered what you really are. A wolf shifter. A rogue." She lowered her voice to a breathy whisper. "That's so much sexier than some pack-bound Alpha who needs a hundred others to feel powerful."

His chest puffed up visibly. "I answer to no one. That's real power."

"And now I'm going to be your mate." She forced excitement into her voice while inching closer to her dad. "Just think of the headlines – 'Pop Princess and Music Mogul: The Ultimate Power Couple.'"

Marty's smile widened, revealing teeth too sharp for a human mouth. "Our celebrity wedding will break the internet. Every magazine, every social media platform..." He gestured grandly. "And after we're properly mated, you'll understand what real control feels like."

Chrissy suppressed a shudder, moving another step toward her dad while keeping her eyes locked on Marty. "Tell me everything you've planned for us."

"I've already talked to Vogue about an exclusive spread," Marty preened, loosening his tie slightly.

"And after the wedding, we'll launch your rebranding.

Something edgier and sexier. You'll be the first openly human mate to a shifter celebrity.

All the shifters in the supernatural world will bow to me for that. "

Your ego is going to be your downfall , she thought, now standing just a foot from her dad. She felt his presence like a physical anchor keeping her grounded.

"And you'll wear what I tell you and sing what I tell you. You'll do exactly everything I want you to do, when I want you to do it, including pleasuring me," Marty continued, lost in his power fantasy. "I'll finally taste what that Alpha thinks he claimed, and you'll love it."

Bile rose in Chrissy's throat, but she forced a seductive laugh. "I can't wait."

She dropped her hand to her side, brushing her fingers against her dad's. Their childhood signal – three quick taps followed by a squeeze. I've got this.

Her dad's fingers moved against hers – a single tap back. I trust you.

"The best part," Marty said, stalking toward her, "is watching Zev's face when he realizes I've won. That I've taken his precious Luna and made her mine forever."

Chrissy positioned herself between Marty and her dad, creating a shield with her body. She closed her eyes briefly, focusing on the mate bond that thrummed through her veins like electricity.

Now, Zev. We're ready.



TWENTY

ZEV

Z ev's jaw ached from clenching his teeth as he steered his sleek boat away from Marty's vessel.

Every instinct in his body screamed for him to turn back, to leap aboard and protect his mate, but Zev forced himself to maintain the charade.

His fingers gripped the wheel until his knuckles whitened, the mate bond pulsing with fierce protectiveness.

"Touch her and I'll rip your throat out with my teeth," he growled under his breath, the memory of Marty's voice on speakerphone making his wolf surge dangerously close to the surface again.

The Alpha wolf thinks he's claimed you... I'm making you mine forever.

The words had triggered something primal in Zev, something beyond rage. Nothing in thirty years of life had prepared him for the visceral possessiveness that flooded his veins at the thought of another wolf—especially a rogue—threatening and claiming what was his.

He cut the engine as he rounded the peninsula to the hidden cove where twenty of his pack's strongest fighters waited. Ewan stood at the shoreline, his muscled arms crossed over his chest, his expression deadly serious.

"Everything ready?" Zev called as he leaped from the boat, not bothering with the dock. The cold water splashed up to his knees, soaking through his expensive trousers, but he couldn't care less about the ruined suit.

Ewan nodded once. "The stealth crafts are prepped. We've got thermal imaging of Marty's boat." He pulled out a tablet, showing Zev the glowing outline. "Three heat signatures on deck—Chrissy, her father, and Marty. Two more below deck."

"Five total." Zev stripped off his jacket and shirt in swift, economical movements. "I want four of our strongest on those two below deck. You focus on securing Chrissy and her father. I'll handle Marty personally."

A sleek black wetsuit waited for him, and Zev stepped into it, zipping it with a savage tug. His blue eyes glittered with deadly intent in the moonlight.

"Remember, no one touches Marty but me," he ordered, his voice carrying the unmistakable command of an Alpha. The assembled wolves nodded in unison, their eyes reflecting the same fierce loyalty.

"Getting more possessive in your old age?" Ewan's attempt at levity didn't quite mask his concern.

"That bastard dared to threaten my mate," Zev growled. "He kidnapped her father. He violated our territory. He dies tonight."

Ewan clasped his shoulder. "Just remember we need to secure Chrissy and her father first. Your mate needs you thinking clearly."

Zev dragged in a deep breath, forcing his wolf's bloodlust to recede just enough. "I'm clear. I'm focused." The scent of the sea filled his lungs, cooling his rage to something cold and purposeful. "But he's mine to deal with."

They boarded the two sleek underwater crafts—marvels of technology that Zev had commissioned years ago for island security. Silent engines and thermal dampening. Perfect for approaching undetected.

As they glided through the dark water, Zev reached through the mate bond, feeling for Chrissy's presence. There—a bright thread of connection, humming with tension but unbroken. He could sense her fear, her determination, and her fierce protectiveness toward her father.

I'm coming, Luna, he pushed through the bond. Just keep him talking.

The crafts slowed as they approached Marty's boat from opposite sides. Zev signaled silently to his team, their movements synchronized with military precision. Years of training as a pack had made them lethal when they needed to be.

Then, clear as daylight, Chrissy's voice flooded his mind: Now, Zev. We're ready.

"That's our signal," he whispered to Ewan. "Thirty seconds to breach."

Zev took a final deep breath, letting his wolf rise just enough to sharpen his senses, strengthen his muscles, and quicken his reflexes. His eyes glinted with predatory focus.

"Anyone hurts my mate or her father, they don't live to see dawn," he said softly. "Let's go get our Luna."

With the silent grace of a predator, Zev scaled the side of Marty's boat, his fingers finding purchase on the sleek hull.

Each movement was calculated and economical, his body coiled with lethal purpose.

The scent of his mate—floral with a hint of fear—drove his wolf to a near frenzy, but he tamped it down. Strategy first. Bloodlust second.

He vaulted over the rail and landed in a silent crouch on the deck.

The tableau before him burned into his memory.

Chrissy in her red gown, fierce and beautiful despite the danger, her father bound and gagged but with defiant eyes that showed where Chrissy got her spirit, and Marty, the rogue wolf who'd dared to touch what belonged to him.

"Surprise," Zev drawled, straightening to his full height. "Bet you didn't expect to see me so soon."

Marty whirled around, his face contorting with shock before smoothing into calculated arrogance.

"What do you think you're doing? Chrissy has willingly agreed to return to California with me and become my mate.

" He adjusted his expensive jacket with a smug smile.

"Our celebrity wedding is already being planned as we speak. Vogue will have a field day."

"Hate to be the wedding crasher," Zev replied with deadly calm, "but that's just not how this fairy tale is going to play out."

Marty's ice-blue eyes narrowed as he turned to Chrissy. "I thought you were completely on board with my game plan."

Chrissy's lips curled into a smile that was all teeth. "Oops. I guess I can be manipulative and lie just as well as you can, Marty."

Zev couldn't hide the smirk that spread across his face. His mate was magnificent in her defiance—a perfect match for an Alpha. Pride surged through him, hot and possessive.

"You think you've won? That you'll have the last laugh?" Marty sneered, his hand sliding inside his jacket. "You've underestimated me."

From the corner of his eye, Zev spotted two sleek boats approaching in the distance, each carrying five shifters. Under normal circumstances, he might have been concerned. But Zev hadn't become Alpha by being unprepared.

"Backup plan?" Zev replied calmly. "Predictable. Rogue wolves always think alike."

He let out a piercing whistle that cut through the night air. In response, the water around the approaching boats churned as fourteen of his pack members—those stationed in the underwater crafts—rose to intercept the threat.

"No," Marty sputtered, watching his reinforcements engage in battle with Zev's pack. "How did you?—"

"You're not the first rogue I've dealt with." Zev advanced slowly, enjoying the way panic crept into Marty's eyes. "Just the most annoying one."

Behind Marty, Zev saw Ewan silently positioning himself near Chrissy and her father. A few more seconds and they would be safe. But Marty sensed the trap closing.

With a howl of rage, Marty's body contorted, his bones cracking as he shifted. His

russet wolf form lunged—not at Zev, but toward Chrissy's father, going for the vulnerable human.

Time slowed to crystal clarity. Chrissy threw herself in front of her father, her red gown flaring like blood in the moonlight. Marty's jaws, aimed for the kill, were seconds from her throat.

Not my mate . The thought exploded through Zev's mind like wildfire.

His own shift happened with unprecedented speed, the wetsuit tearing as his body transformed.

His massive grey wolf form, larger than Marty's by a significant margin, intercepted the attack with surgical precision.

His teeth clamped around Marty's foreleg just before the rogue's jaws could close on Chrissy's vulnerable flesh.

The taste of blood flooded his mouth as Marty howled in pain. Zev used the momentum to fling the russet wolf across the deck, giving Ewan the opening he needed to pull Chrissy and her father to safety.

Marty recovered quickly, circling with a limp, his ice-blue eyes now glowing with feral hatred in his wolf form. He lunged again, his teeth snapping at Zev's throat.

Zev sidestepped with Alpha grace, raking his claws down Marty's exposed flank. The fight was brutal and primal—two wolves locked in ancient combat for dominance, territory, and the right to claim a mate. But where Marty fought with desperate rage, Zev fought with cold, calculated fury.

Every move Marty made, Zev countered. Every attack, Zev turned back on him with

greater force. Blood matted their fur—mostly Marty's. The rogue was fast and vicious, but he lacked the discipline that came from leading a pack and from putting others before himself.

When Marty feinted left then lunged right, Zev was ready. His powerful jaws closed around the rogue's throat, clamping down with inexorable force. Marty's struggles grew frantic, then weaker.

It didn't have to end this way, Zev thought as he felt the life draining from his opponent. But you threatened my mate. Nobody lives to tell that tale.

With one final, decisive move, Zev ended it. Marty's body went limp, then still.

The deck fell silent except for Zev's heavy breathing. He turned, still in wolf form, his blue eyes seeking and finding Chrissy in the moonlight. She stood protected in Ewan's shadow, but her gaze was locked on Zev with a mixture of awe and relief.

Jim, her father, had been freed from his bonds and stared at the enormous wolf with undisguised shock. But there was something else in his eyes too—a father's gratitude to Zev for saving his daughter's life and the recognition that his daughter had found a protector worthy of her.

Zev padded toward Chrissy, his posture relaxing from battle-ready to vigilant guardian. The wolf inside him quieted, satisfied that their mate was safe, and that their enemy was vanquished.

No one would ever threaten what was his again.

TWENTY-ONE

CHRISSY

Zev's massive wolf form padded slowly toward Chrissy on the deck of Marty's boat.

His blood-matted grey fur glistened under the moonlight and his blue eyes locked intensely on hers.

Even in animal form, he moved with unmistakable authority.

Her breath caught—not from fear, but from overwhelming pride and love.

"My God," her dad whispered beside her, his voice hoarse from the gag Marty had forced on him. "That's... that's your boyfriend?"

"My mate," Chrissy corrected, her voice strong despite the trembling in her limbs. The red gown clung to her curves, one leg exposed through the slit that now bore a small tear from when she'd lunged to protect her dad. "That's my mate, Dad."

She watched Zev's ears prick forward at her words, his wolf's posture straightening with unmistakable satisfaction.

Despite everything—the terror of nearly losing her dad and the fight to the death she'd just witnessed—warmth flooded her chest. She sensed her dad's eyes on her, taking in her expression.



"He loves you," her dad said, not a question but a statement. His salt-and-pepper hair was extremely disheveled, and his wrists were red from the ropes, but his eyes were clear as they moved from Zev back to his daughter. "You could see it in how he fought for you."

"He'd die for me," Chrissy whispered, the weight of that truth settling over her. "And I'd do the same for him."

Two pack members emerged from below deck, nodding to Ewan. "The enforcers have been neutralized," one reported crisply.

Chrissy peered beyond the boat's railing to where splashes and growls indicated the ongoing battle in the water.

Zev's pack—her pack now—moved with coordinated precision, systematically securing the perimeter to protect their Luna and her father.

The knowledge that all these people—these wolves—had rallied to save her and her dad left her breathless.

"They're nearly finished," Ewan said, his black wetsuit still dripping seawater. "Marty's enforcers didn't expect organized resistance."

With a final look at Chrissy, Zev's wolf form trotted toward the cabin entrance and disappeared below deck.

"He's going to shift back," Ewan explained to Jim, who still looked somewhat dazed. "More dignified that way."

Her dad nodded, swallowing hard. "That—what I just saw—was real, right? Not some kind of combat drug hallucination?"

"Very real, Dad," Chrissy laughed, the sound almost giddy with relief. She squeezed his arm. "Welcome to the supernatural world. Sorry you had to find out this way."

"Better than finding out at your wedding," her dad murmured, which made Chrissy's heart swell at the implicit acceptance.

Minutes later, Zev emerged from below, now human and dressed in the clothes Ewan had thoughtfully brought along—dark jeans and a black henley that strained against his muscular chest. His hair was damp, and his jaw was set in lines of authority that made Chrissy's heart race.

His eyes, still glowing slightly with residual wolf energy, softened when they landed on her.

He crossed to her dad in three powerful strides, extending his hand. "Mr. Rivera. Zev Landon. I wish we could have met under better circumstances."

Her dad hesitated only a moment before clasping Zev's hand firmly. "Jim, please. Thank you for everything. And I—" His voice broke slightly. "I don't know how I can ever repay you for saving my daughter."

"Having Chrissy as my mate, and her standing by my side from now on is repayment enough," Zev replied. "Thank you for raising such a fierce, brave, and special woman."

Chrissy's eyes welled with tears. She'd spent her life being praised for her voice, her appearance, and her marketability—never her courage or spirit. The fact that those were the qualities Zev valued most made her heart feel too large for her chest.

"We should head back," Ewan announced, casting a professional glance over the now-secured perimeter. "The island security team will handle cleanup here."

Zev nodded, then turned to Chrissy, extending his hand. When she took it, he pulled her firmly against his side, his arm encircling her waist with unmistakable possession.

"Are you alright?" he murmured against her hair, his voice for her alone.

"I am now," she whispered back, melting into his strength. "You were magnificent."

His arm tightened, his lips brushing her temple. "No one threatens what's mine."

The words should have rankled her independent spirit, but instead they wrapped around her like armor. After what felt like a lifetime of being everyone else's possession, she'd finally found someone who belonged to her as completely as she belonged to him.

"Let's go home," she said, including both her dad and Zev in her gaze. "Our home."

Chrissy closed the door to her villa with a sigh of relief, the warm island air wafting through the open balcony doors.

Her body still hummed with residual adrenaline, the chaos of the night's events leaving her simultaneously wired and exhausted.

But having her dad here—alive, safe, and standing in her sanctuary—filled her with a happiness so overwhelming it almost hurt.

"So, this is where you've been hiding out," her dad said, his voice still rough from being gagged. He surveyed the elegant open-plan villa with its white gauzy curtains dancing in the breeze. "Definitely beats that cage of a mansion Marty had you in."

Chrissy tossed him a towel from the linen closet, trying not to wince at the bruises forming on her dad's wrists. "The bathroom's through there. Ewan said he'd drop off

some clothes while you're cleaning up."

"Honey, I look like I was dragged through seven circles of hell and back. No fancy island shower is going to fix that." Her dad's attempt at a joke was undercut by the haunted look in his green eyes—the same eyes she'd inherited.

She squeezed his arm. "Go. I'll be here when you get out."

While her dad showered, Chrissy peeled off the torn red gown that had begun to feel like a second skin.

The fabric slid from her curves, pooling at her feet like spilled wine.

She changed into a worn band t-shirt and cut-off denim shorts, relishing the comfort of clothes that actually felt like her.

When her dad finally emerged with damp hair and dressed in the clothes Ewan had thoughtfully delivered, Chrissy felt a lump rise in her throat. He looked older somehow—the lines around his eyes deeper and the silver in his temples more prominent.

"It happened so fast," he said, lowering himself onto the couch beside her. "One minute I was making coffee, the next these guys were in my house. Marty kept saying you belonged to him—kept talking about you like you were property. God, Chrissy, I was so scared."

She couldn't stop the tears that sprang to her eyes. "Dad, I'm so sorry?—"

"Don't you dare apologize," he interrupted fiercely.

"This wasn't your fault. That son of a bitch—" He broke off, shaking his head.

"When he turned into a wolf, I thought I was hallucinating.

Then, I thought we were both going to die, and all I could think was that I wouldn't get to tell my little girl I loved her one last time. " His voice cracked.

Chrissy leaned into him, inhaling the familiar scent that had meant safety throughout her childhood. "I love you, Dad. So much."

"When that boy of yours showed up—" Her dad shook his head in wonder. "I've never been more grateful to anyone in my life."

"That boy of mine," Chrissy repeated with a watery smile.

She pulled aside the collar of her t-shirt to show the mark Zev had left—teeth punctures already healing into a silvery scar at the juncture of her neck and shoulder.

"I'm his mate now. His Luna. It means I'm his equal—we lead the pack together. "

"Luna," her dad tested the word. "Suits you. Always did have a bit of moonlight in you, even as a little girl."

Chrissy felt warmth spread through her. "Once I get out of Marty's contract, I'm staying here permanently. With Zev." She held her breath, watching his reaction.

"What about your career? All those fans?"

"I can make music anywhere. Real music—not the overproduced garbage Marty was forcing on me." She leaned forward, sudden passion coloring her voice. "Dad, I want you to stay here too. With us."

She expected hesitation, or a request for time to think about such a massive change.

Instead, he laughed—a free, unrestrained sound that reminded her of carefree days before fame had complicated everything.

"Honey, you couldn't drag me away from this island with wild horses," he said, his eyes crinkling. "Besides, I'll need to be close when those grandkids start arriving."

"Dad!" Heat rushed to her cheeks, though she couldn't deny the flutter in her stomach at the thought of children with Zev's piercing blue eyes.

"What? That Alpha of yours isn't exactly subtle about staking his claim. The man looks at you like he's planning your future right in front of everyone." Her dad's teasing expression softened. "He loves you, Chrissy. That's all I ever wanted for you."

Chrissy felt a fierce joy bubble up inside her. This—this connection, this freedom to be herself with the people she loved most—was what she'd been missing all year in the spotlight's harsh glare.

"So," her dad said, a familiar mischievous twinkle returning to his eyes. "Think they've got room for an old guitar player in this pack of yours?"

"Funny you should mention guitars. They have some in their music room that will make you swoon," Chrissy replied with a wide grin. "Do you want to go check them out?"

"Lead the way, Luna."

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:07 am*

Chrissy led her dad through the resort pathways, her bare feet padding across the polished stone.

The jungle night hummed around them, a symphony of cicadas and distant waves that seemed to play backup to her racing heartbeat.

Her dad's eyes widened at every turn—at the torch-lit paths, the cascading flowers, and the glimpses of the moonlit sea through the trees.

"This place is breathtaking," he whispered, shaking his head in disbelief. "No wonder you didn't want to go back."

Chrissy squeezed his arm. "Just wait until you see the music room. It's small but... special."

When they reached the main lodge, she guided him to the tucked-away room where she'd sung for the pack children days earlier.

Pushing open the door, she watched her dad's expression transform from curiosity to reverence.

The two professional acoustic guitars gleamed under the warm lighting, their polished wood reflecting the glow like honey.

"Oh my God," her dad whispered, approaching them with the hesitant reverence of someone entering a sacred space. His fingertips hovered over the strings of the nearest one. "These are?—"

"Custom Martin D-28's," a deep voice finished from behind them.

Chrissy's heart skipped as Zev stepped into the doorway, leaning his muscular frame against the jamb. He wore dark jeans and a simple black henley that stretched across his broad chest, his stubbled jaw catching the light as he nodded toward her dad.

"Please, feel free to play," he added, his commanding presence filling the small room. "They're meant to be used, not just admired."

Her dad turned to Zev, his green eyes bright. "You sure about that? These are expensive."

Zev's lips curved up into a half-smile that made Chrissy's stomach flutter. "I'm sure. Besides, I want to hear where Chrissy got her talent from."

The simple compliment made her chest warm. She'd spent twelve months surrounded by people praising her voice while simultaneously trying to change it. But Zev just appreciated who she actually was.

Her dad lifted the nearest guitar with a reverence that bordered on worship, settling it against his chest like reuniting with an old friend. He strummed once, the perfectly tuned strings resonating through the small room, and closed his eyes in appreciation.

"This is incredible," he murmured, adjusting his fingers on the fretboard. Then he began to play.

Chrissy recognized the opening notes instantly—a lullaby he'd written for her after her mother left, a song that had never been recorded but had been played at her bedside through countless childhood nights. Tears sprang to her green eyes as the familiar melody filled the room.



Zev moved behind her, his strong arm encircling her waist as he gently pulled her back against his chest. "Play with him," he whispered, his breath warm against her ear. "Use my grandfather's guitar."

He nodded toward the corner where the older instrument sat, its worn wood bearing the patina of generations of music. The significance of his offering wasn't lost on her—it was solidification into his family and his lineage.

Her hands trembled slightly as she lifted it, feeling its perfect weight in her hands again. "Dad," she said, her voice wavering, "let's play 'Rainy Sundays.'"

Her dad's eyes lit up. "We haven't played that together since?—"

"Before all this 'pop star' madness," she finished, settling on a stool across from him. "I think it's finally time."

Their fingers found the strings simultaneously, muscle memory taking over as they began the song they'd written on a stormy weekend when she was fifteen. It had never been recorded, never performed—just theirs, a private language between father and daughter.

"Remember watching raindrops race down the window," she began singing, her voice pure and unprocessed in the intimate space. Her dad's harmony joined her on the chorus, their voices twining together in the familiar pattern they'd created in their tiny kitchen a decade ago.

Chrissy's gaze lifted to find Zev watching them, awe etched across his features. His piercing blue eyes glistened with something suspiciously like tears, though his powerful stance hadn't changed. The Alpha who'd killed to protect her hours earlier now stood transfixed by their simple melody.

As the final notes faded, the silence held something sacred—a moment untouched by contracts or obligations or predatory managers. Just music and family.

"That was simply beautiful," Zev said, his voice rougher than usual. "You two should record that together."

Her dad laughed. "Not sure Empire Records would be interested in a folk duet with a has-been almost-was."

"Screw Empire Records," Chrissy said, suddenly fierce. "We'll build our own studio right here on the island. Record whatever we want."

The rebellious declaration hung in the air. Suddenly, after months of hopelessness and despair, Chrissy felt herself planning a future she actually wanted—one filled with authentic music created on her own terms.

Zev's eyes darkened with approval, his stance shifting as he crossed the room to her. His fingers brushed her cheek gently.

"Whatever you need, Luna," he murmured. "This island is yours now."

TWENTY-TWO

ZEV

Z ev slammed his large palm against his polished desk the next morning, making the stacks of papers jump. "This fucking bastard," he growled, the pages in front of him filling in horrific blanks he hadn't expected.

The morning sunlight shone through the windows of his office, casting golden rectangles across the evidence of Marty Shriner's true identity. Or rather, Matthew Silas Rourke's identity - a name that appeared on the FBI's most wanted list alongside photographs of a slightly different-looking man.

"Surgery," Ewan said, tapping one of the medical records they'd uncovered. "Changed his appearance enough to slide under the radar six years ago after the Nashville murders."

Zev's jaw clenched so hard he felt a molar creak. The wolf inside him paced with furious energy at what they'd discovered about the man he'd killed. His only regret was not making Rourke suffer more.

"Five women, Ewan. Five women disappeared and were presumed murdered. All with the same profile."

"Young, beautiful, and talented," Ewan agreed, his usual calm demeanor darkened by what they'd learned. "Dark hair, curvy, fair-skinned..."

"Just like Chrissy," Zev seethed, the Alpha in him barely contained. "The bastard was grooming her."

"His pattern was consistent. He'd isolate them from family, insert himself as their primary support system, then..." Ewan trailed off, not needing to say more.

Zev paced the length of the office, his veins standing out on his forearms as he fought to control his rage.

"He was kicked out of his pack for preying on young females, turned rogue, and built an entire fucking business to create a pipeline of potential victims." He drove his fist into the wall, leaving a dent in the expensive wood paneling.

"I should have torn his throat out the moment she set foot on my island. "

"You got her in time, Alpha." Ewan's voice was steady and grounding. "You saved her."

"Barely." The thought of what might have happened to Chrissy made Zev's blood run cold. "The contract..."

"That's the thing," Ewan interrupted, a rare hint of excitement breaking through his professional facade. "Look at the signature line."

Zev snatched up the document from the desk—Chrissy's iron-clad recording and management contract that had effectively turned her into Marty's property. His eyes zeroed in on where 'Martin J. Shriner' was signed with a flourish.

"The contract is with Martin J. Shriner," Ewan continued, his lips turning up into a predatory smile. "Not Matthew Silas Rourke. It's legally worthless."

Zev stared at the document, his mind racing. "You're telling me she's free?"

"Legally? You could drive a truck through the holes in this thing," Ewan confirmed, tapping on the contract. "His entire operation was based on fraud. Fake identity, fake credentials, fake companies—it all unravels the minute we reveal who he really was."

After a week of feeling restless and unsure of how to help Chrissy with this contract, Zev finally allowed himself to smile. It wasn't a pleasant expression—more like a wolf baring its teeth.

"Call our lawyers. I want this bulletproof." He gathered the papers, already anticipating the moment he could tell Chrissy she was truly free. "And get me everything on Leslie and the rest of his associates. I want to know if they were complicit or just useful idiots."

Ewan nodded, already reaching for his phone. "What about Empire Records?"

"They'll either distance themselves from this disaster or I'll buy them and burn them to the ground." The declaration wasn't hyperbole—Zev's family wealth made such threats entirely feasible.

"You're really going all in on this, aren't you?" There was something knowing in Ewan's voice.

Zev paused, his hand on the doorknob. "She's my Luna, Ewan. She's going to be the mother of my children." The declaration came naturally, his voice roughened with utter certainty. "I'll tear down the entire fucking entertainment industry if that's what it takes to keep her safe."

Zev stormed down the path to Chrissy's villa, the morning sun casting dappled patterns through the palm fronds overhead.

The file in his hand felt like it weighed a ton, its contents more explosive than dynamite.

His wolf prowled close to the surface, still agitated from the revelations that had come to light.

After killing Marty, he'd expected to feel closure, but these new discoveries had reopened everything with a vengeance.

He didn't bother knocking. As Alpha and her mate, he had every right to burst in—though he tempered his entrance out of respect for Jim. The scent of coffee and pancakes hit his nose as he stepped through the door.

Chrissy looked up from where she sat across from her father at the small dining table, her hair piled messily atop her head, wearing a faded band t-shirt that slipped off one shoulder. The sight of her—safe, alive, and his—momentarily soothed the rage burning in his gut.

"Morning, sunshine," she said, her smile faltering as she took in his expression. "What's wrong? You look like you're about to shift and bite someone's head off."

"That's exactly what I wish I could do," Zev growled, tossing the file onto the table between their plates. "We found out who Marty really was."

Chrissy's father set down his coffee mug, suddenly alert. "What do you mean, 'who he really was'?"

Zev dragged a chair closer to Chrissy and sat down, taking her hand in his, his thumb absently stroking her pulse point as if reassuring himself of her heartbeat.

"His real name was Matthew Silas Rourke. He's been on the FBI's most wanted list

for six years." Zev's voice came out rough, each word carrying the weight of suppressed fury. "For the murders of five women."

Chrissy's face drained of color. "What?"

"Five talented young women. All with dark hair and fair skin. All curvy and beautiful." His grip tightened on her hand. "All like you."

Jim let out a strangled sound, his face ashen. "Jesus Christ."

"He was grooming you, Chrissy. Isolating you from your father and controlling every aspect of your life.

" Zev's eyes burned with intensity. "You weren't just another client to him.

You were his next victim." He paused, taking a steadying breath.

"My guess, he was going to marry you and make a big spectacle out of it.

Milk you for some more money and fame, painting himself as the doting husband and manager, and then...

" Zev didn't need to finish his thought.

Chrissy swayed in her chair, and Zev's arm shot around her waist to steady her. "I think I'm going to be sick," she whispered.

"I should have been there," Jim muttered, his hands shaking. "I should have seen it?—"

"There's more," Zev cut in, gentling his voice as he looked back to Chrissy. "There's

good news too."

He flipped open the file to the contract page, his finger landing on the signature line. "Your contract is with Martin J. Shriner—a man who doesn't legally exist. The entire thing is worthless. His company, his credentials, all of it was built on fraud."

Chrissy stared at the paper, her bright green eyes widening. "You mean...I'm free?"

"You're free," Zev confirmed, giving her a fierce smile. "Though I want our legal team to make absolutely certain there are no loose ends with Empire Records."

"Can you..." Chrissy bit her lip. "Can you and your team help me with that? I don't even know where to start."

Zev let out a low laugh that held more wolf than human. "I have a better idea." He leaned in, the possessive gleam in his eyes making her breath catch. "I'm buying Empire Records."

"You're what?" Chrissy and Jim exclaimed in unison.

"I'm a billionaire, remember?" Zev's voice held a predatory edge. "I'll acquire the label, rebrand it whatever name you want, and you and your father will be the first artists signed. On your terms, with contracts that respect your talent and autonomy."

Jim let out a disbelieving laugh. "You'd do that?"

"For my mate?" Zev's gaze never left Chrissy's face. "I'd burn down the entire industry and rebuild it from ashes if that's what she needed."

Chrissy shook her head, her expression cycling through shock, horror, relief, and disbelief. "I can't believe this. If Gerri didn't get me out when she did... if you



hadn't..." Her voice broke.

"I didn't want to say this to make you feel even worse.

But we found evidence just this morning that he was planning to take you on a 'honeymoon' in six months.

You would have disappeared, just like the others.

" Zev pulled her closer, the wolf in him needing to feel her alive and safe.

"The thought of what could have happened?—"

"You're a guardian angel," Jim said quietly. "Both of you—you and Gerri. You saved my little girl's life."

Zev shook his head, even as his chest swelled with pride.

"Gerri started the ball rolling. That woman knew something was wrong the moment she met Marty months ago.

She's the one who gathered the initial intelligence, and who helped Chrissy escape.

I just did what any mate would do—protect what's mine. "

Chrissy was staring at him, her eyes luminous with emotion. "So I'm really free? I can make my music, my way?"

"More than free." Zev cupped her face in his large hand.

"You're powerful now. With my resources behind you, you can reshape the industry

however you want.

Make music that means something. Help other artists avoid the traps you fell into.

" He pressed his forehead against hers. "And I'll be right beside you, supporting every wild, beautiful idea that comes out of that brilliant head. "

"That's one hell of a business proposition, Alpha," she whispered, her lips curling into a teasing smile despite the tears in her eyes.

Zev growled softly, a sound that made Jim clear his throat and suddenly become very interested in his coffee mug.

"It's not business, Luna. It's an investment in our future together. All of us." Zev met Jim's eyes, and Jim gave a knowing nod of approval.

TWENTY-THREE

CHRISSY

Chrissy stared at the stack of damning evidence against Marty—no, Matthew—and found herself unable to reconcile the charismatic snake-oil salesman with the predatory monster laid bare in Zev's file.

Her stomach twisted into a nauseating knot that wouldn't dissolve no matter how hard she tried to focus on the positive outcome.

"Jim," Zev said, leaning toward her dad with that casual authority that seemed to make everyone instinctively straighten their posture.

"Would you mind if I stole your daughter away for the afternoon?"

I think we could both use a break from..

." His eyes flicked to the file, leaving the thought unfinished.

Chrissy absently tugged at the hem of her faded band t-shirt where it slipped off her shoulder. She glanced up to find her dad's eyes twinkling with something unmistakably knowing.

"By all means," her dad replied with a smile that bordered on conspiratorial. "I'll just head back to that music room and get better acquainted with those gorgeous guitars." He winked at Chrissy. "I might just put a bed in there and sleep with them. Never

seen craftsmanship like that."

Despite the emotional rollercoaster of the morning, Chrissy couldn't help but laugh. "You'd marry a Martin if you could, Dad."

"At least it's a stable relationship," her dad quipped back, rising from his chair with newfound energy. His smile softened as he looked between them. "It's good to see you happy, Chrissy-bear. I'm looking forward to having my little girl close by again."

The fullness in her heart threatened to bubble over into tears. Her dad—staying here, with her, on this magical island. No more Marty, no more isolation, no more having her light slowly extinguished by people who saw her as nothing but a commodity.

"Let's go," she said to Zev, desperate to escape the lingering shadows in her mind. "Before I start ugly crying and ruin my reputation as a badass Luna."

Zev's eyes darkened at her use of the wolf title, and the corner of his mouth quirked up in that possessive half-smile that made her insides flutter.

They headed out into the jungle, the early afternoon heat softened by the canopy of leaves overhead. Once they'd gone far enough from the resort paths, Zev turned to her with a predatory gleam.

"Remember when you said you wanted to ride through the jungle on my back?" He was already unbuttoning his shirt, his muscles rippling beneath his tanned skin. "I think that's exactly what you need right now."

"Are you saying I look like I need wolf therapy?" Chrissy teased, but her heart was already racing.

"I'm saying," he growled, stepping close enough that she could feel the heat radiating

from his body, "that I know my mate. And I know when she needs to feel the wind in her hair and forget everything but the moment."

God, he did know her, didn't he? Better than anyone had.

Zev stepped back, stripped completely naked, and shifted into his magnificent wolf form.

The process still amazed her—bone and muscle rearranging, fur emerging from skin—until the enormous grey wolf with dark brown patches on his belly stood before her, blue eyes unmistakably Zev's despite the changed form.

Chrissy approached him with reverent hands, stroking the thick fur at his neck. "You're showing off now," she murmured, burying her fingers in his coat.

He huffed, lowering himself for her to climb onto his back. A thrill shot through her as she settled between his powerful shoulders, clutching handfuls of fur.

"Don't you dare drop me," she warned, and he made a sound suspiciously like a wolf snort before launching into motion.

The world became a blur of green and gold, the wind whipping her hair free from its messy bun.

Exhilaration coursed through her veins as he leaped over fallen logs and wove between trees with impossible grace.

Chrissy laughed, wild and unconstrained, each breath filling her with oxygen that seemed purer than anything she'd inhaled in California.

This was freedom. This was life. No stylists, no cameras, no schedules—just her and

her mate and the primal joy of movement.

When they finally slowed, Chrissy found herself facing a secluded waterfall cascading into a crystalline pool. The scene looked ripped from a fairy tale—sunlight filtering through the canopy to create dancing patterns on the water's surface.

He lowered himself, allowing her to slide off before padding behind a cluster of rocks. Moments later, Zev emerged in all his naked glory—broad shoulders, sculpted abs, and every delicious inch of him on display.

"Show-off," she whispered, but her body was already responding to the sight of him.

He stalked toward her, unashamed of his nudity or his obvious arousal. "You needed this," he said simply.

"I need you." Chrissy closed the distance between them, rising on her toes to capture his mouth in a kiss that tasted of sunshine and salvation.

His strong arms encircled her waist, lifting her against him. "You have me," he growled against her lips. "Forever."

The words wrapped around her like a promise, solid and unbreakable. Forever. The thought of it filled her with a completeness she hadn't known was possible. She pulled back slightly, her eyes locking with his, and smiled. "Good. Because I'm not letting you go."

Her hands moved to the hem of her faded t-shirt, and she tugged it over her head, letting it fall to the ground.

The cool jungle air kissed her skin, but it was nothing compared to the heat of Zev's gaze as it raked over her.

She unhooked her lace bra, letting it slip from her shoulders, and then shimmied out of her cut-off denim shorts and panties until she stood bare before him, the sunlight warming her skin.

Zev's eyes darkened, and he took a step toward her, but she held up a hand, a mischievous grin spreading across her face. "Not so fast, Alpha." She turned and pushed him into the pool with a splash, laughing as he surfaced, his hair slicked back, water droplets clinging to his tanned skin.

"You're going to pay for that," he warned, his voice a rumble that sent a thrill through her.

"Promises, promises," she teased, then leaped into the water after him.

The coolness enveloped her, a refreshing contrast to the heat of the jungle. She surfaced, shaking her hair out of her face, and found Zev already swimming toward her. He reached her in a few powerful strokes, his hands gripping her slim waist as he pulled her against him.

Their lips crashed together again, the kiss deep and consuming.

His tongue tangled with hers, and she felt like she was the oxygen he needed to survive.

Her arms wrapped around his neck, her legs instinctively circling his waist as he carried her to the edge of the pool.

He propped her up on the rocks, his hands sliding down her thighs to part them, his head dipping between her legs.

"Zev," she gasped, her fingers tangling in his wet hair as his mouth found her

sensitive folds.

His tongue and mouth were relentless, licking and sucking until she was squirming and gasping for air. Just as she teetered on the edge of release, he pulled away, leaving her trembling and wanting.

"Zev!" she protested, her voice a mix of frustration and need.

He grinned, that predatory smile that made her heart race, and climbed out of the pool.

Water cascaded down his muscular body as he reached for her, lifting her effortlessly and carrying her to a smooth rock surface beneath the waterfall.

The sound of the rushing water filled the air, a natural symphony that only heightened the intensity of the moment.

"On your hands and knees," he commanded softly.

Her breath hitched, but she obeyed, her body humming with anticipation.

She felt him behind her, his hands grabbing onto her hips, and then he was there, his large cock pressing against her entrance.

He entered her slowly, inch by inch, the angle allowing him to go deeper than ever before.

She gasped, her fingers digging into the rock as he filled her completely.

"You feel so good," he murmured, his voice husky with desire.



He began to move, his thrusts slow and deliberate, drawing out her pleasure with agonizing precision. She moaned, her body arching as he hit a spot that made her see stars.

"Zev, please," she begged, her voice trembling. "More."

He didn't hesitate. His pace shifted instantly, his thrusts becoming hard, fast, and deep, pounding into her with a primal intensity that left her gasping for air.

One hand reached around to massage her clit in rhythm with his thrusts, and she felt the coil of pleasure tighten until it snapped.

Her orgasm rocked through her, her body convulsing as she cried out, her inner walls clenching around him.

The sensation pushed him over the edge, and with one final, powerful thrust, he came, his release spilling deep inside her. His body shook with the force of it, his growl of satisfaction echoing through the jungle.

They collapsed together on the rock, their bodies slick with sweat and water, their breaths coming in ragged gasps. Chrissy turned to face him, her green eyes soft with affection. "You're amazing," she whispered, her fingers tracing the line of his jaw.

"And you're mine," he replied, his voice a low growl that sent shivers through her sated body.

He pulled her close, his arms wrapping around her as they lay there, the sound of the waterfall a soothing backdrop to their shared moment of bliss.

Chrissy soon arched a brow, mischief dancing in her eyes as she traced the hard lines of Zev's abdomen with her fingertips. The waterfall's mist clung to their skin, the

jungle humming around them like an audience holding its breath.

"Ready for another round?" she purred, already shifting to straddle him, her thighs bracketing his hips.

Zev's hands immediately found her waist, his grip possessive. "With you, I'm always ready. You don't even need to ask." His voice was rough, edged with that Alpha growl that sent heat spiraling through her.

She smirked, lowering herself onto him in one slow, deliberate slide. A breathy moan escaped her lips as he filled her, stretching her in the most delicious way. "I want to feel you inside me for longer," she murmured, rolling her hips in a slow, maddening rhythm. "Savor how deep you go."

Zev's jaw clenched tight, his fingers digging into her hips hard. "Christ, Chrissy." His voice was strained, his cock twitching inside her.

She reveled in the control, rocking against him with agonizing slowness, each movement designed to drag out the pleasure. His breath came in ragged bursts, his muscles taut beneath her palms as she braced herself against his chest.

"You're not going to last much longer, are you?" she teased, biting her lower lip.

His eyes burned into hers. "Not if you keep moving like that."

"Hold on just a little longer," she commanded, her voice breathless but firm. "I'm not done with you yet."

Zev growled, his hands sliding up her back to tangle in her damp hair. He pulled her down into a searing kiss, his tongue claiming her mouth with the same dominance as his body claimed hers earlier. She melted into him, her movements never faltering,

each thrust sending sparks through her nerves.

The dual sensations—his mouth on hers and his cock buried deep—coiled the pleasure tighter and tighter until she completely shattered. Her orgasm ripped through her with blinding intensity, her body convulsing around him as she cried out against his lips.

That was all it took. Zev's control finally snapped. With a roar, he surged up, flipping her onto her back and driving into her with relentless, possessive strokes until his own release tore through him. He collapsed over her, his forehead pressed to hers, their breaths mingling in the humid air.

"You're magnificent," he murmured, brushing his lips over hers. "I love you so much, Chrissy."

Chrissy traced along his jaw, her heart so full it ached. "You're the best thing that's ever happened to me." She kissed him back softly. "I love you so much, Zev."

In that moment, with the jungle singing around them and Zev's weight warm against her, she knew—their future would be everything she'd ever dreamed of. Freedom. Joy. Love. And a lifetime of this—raw, untamed passion with the man who'd fought the world just to claim her as his mate.

Zev rolled onto his back, pulling her against his chest. She nestled into him, listening to the steady beat of his heart.

"Think your dad heard us from here?" he joked.

Chrissy burst out laughing, swatting his chest. "If he did, he's probably moving to the other side of the island for sure."

Zev's chuckle rumbled through her. "Good. More privacy for us."

She grinned, already plotting their next adventure—one where clothes were optional, and his Alpha dominance was very, very mandatory.

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 7:07 am*

The front door swung open without warning, and Gerri Wilder sailed into the villa in a pink pantsuit that somehow looked both elegant and ready for business.

"Miss the wedding of my favorite success story? Not a chance." Gerri winked, then lowered her voice conspiratorially. "Congratulations are definitely in order today. So, six months along?"

"Very anonymous," Gerri agreed with a mysterious smile. "The world's certainly not mourning him. Good riddance to bad rubbish, I say." She raised her glass. "To freedom—and to that new record label of yours. Island Freedom Records! I love the name."

A knock at the door made her heart leap. Her dad peeked in, his eyes immediately welling with tears.

"Ready, Chrissy-bear? Your wolf is prowling the beach like he might start howling any minute."

Chrissy laughed, the sound bubbling up from a place of pure joy. "He wouldn't dare. The pack would never let him live it down."

As her dad offered his arm, Chrissy took one last look in the mirror. The moonlight streaming through the windows caught the mate mark on her pale neck, visible above the sweetheart neckline of her gown. She traced it gently with her fingertips.

"That man," she whispered, "is about to be so permanently stuck with me."

Her dad squeezed her hand. "He's the lucky one, honey. And he knows it."

Chrissy's arm was linked with her dad's as they made their way down the moonlit beach, a path of white rose petals guiding them toward the wooden arch where Zev stood waiting.

Torches flickered on either side of the makeshift aisle, casting a golden glow across the pristine sand while the full moon hung heavy in the night sky, showering everything in ethereal silver light.

"Look at him," her dad whispered. "He's actually nervous."

Chrissy's heart skipped a beat at the sight of Zev—powerful, fierce Zev—shifting his weight from one bare foot to the other.

His casual linen suit perfectly highlighted his broad shoulders, the open collar revealing just enough of his tanned skin to make her mouth water.

His eyes locked on hers, an almost predatory intensity radiating from him even now.

"He's facing scarier things than rogues tonight," she whispered back, fighting tears. "A hormonal bride and her overprotective father."

Her dad chuckled softly. "I think he'd take on an army for you, Chrissy-bear."

The small gathering of pack members stood in respectful silence as she approached, but Chrissy only had eyes for Zev.

His usually stoic expression had softened, those impossibly blue eyes filling with unmistakable emotion as he took in her silk gown flowing over her baby bump and the orchids adorning her loose updo.

When she finally reached him, Zev didn't wait for formalities. He stepped forward and placed a possessive hand on her rounded belly, his large palm splaying over where their son grew.

"Mine," he murmured, just loud enough for her to hear.

A delicious chill ran through her at the raw possessiveness in that single word. Six months of pregnancy had only intensified his protective instincts, as if that were even possible.

"Yours," she agreed softly.

Her dad kissed her cheek before placing her hand firmly in Zev's. "Take care of my little girl," he whispered to his soon-to-be son-in-law.

"With my life," Zev promised, his deep voice carrying the weight of an Alpha's oath.

The ceremony began under the full moon's blessing, ancient wolf tradition blending seamlessly with human ritual. When the time came for their vows, Zev's voice deepened with emotion.

"Chrissy Rivera," he began, his thumbs tracing circles on her hands. "Before you, I was half of what I am now. An Alpha without purpose beyond duty." His eyes darkened. "You crashed onto my island and into my life like a hurricane, and I've been gloriously wrecked ever since."

The pack chuckled, but Zev's gaze never left hers.

"I vow to protect you with every breath, to cherish every note you sing, and to stand between you and any threat for as long as I live." His hand returned to her belly. "And I vow to be a father worthy of the gift you're giving me."

Tears spilled down Chrissy's cheeks as she spoke her own vows.

"Zev Landon, I was lost when I found you.

Playing someone else's songs and living someone else's life.

" She squeezed his hands. "You gave me back my voice, my freedom, and showed me what real protection feels like—not control disguised as care, but genuine love. "

The simple gold bands they exchanged seemed to catch both moonlight and torchlight as they slid them onto each other's fingers.

"By the power of the moon and the laws of both human and wolf," the officiant declared, "I now pronounce you husband and wife, Alpha and Luna, bonded in both worlds."

Zev didn't wait for permission to kiss his bride.

He pulled Chrissy against him with a growl that sent goosebumps racing across her skin, one hand cradling her bump while the other tangled in her hair, somehow avoiding disturbing a single orchid.

His lips claimed hers in a kiss that bordered on inappropriate for public viewing—deep, possessive, and filled with promises of what would come later.

When he finally released her, his eyes had taken on the golden glow of his wolf—a sign she'd learned meant his emotions were running too high to fully contain his animal side.

"My Luna," he whispered against her lips. "Now and forever."

Chrissy smiled up at her Alpha, her husband, the father of her child, and the man who



had risked everything to save her from a nightmare.

"Forever," she whispered back.

The predatory smile that spread across his face made her heart race. "And we've only just begun," he promised.

Chrissy's heart thudded as her dad guided her through the pack's event center.

The space had been transformed with twinkling fairy lights and white orchids that matched those in her hair, the scent of the sea and flowers mingling in the air.

Her six-month baby bump pressed gently against the delicate fabric of her wedding dress as she absorbed the scene before her - a hundred pack members plus her closest human friends gathered to celebrate the union that had saved her life in more ways than one.

"You ready for this, Chrissy-bear?" Her dad squeezed her hand, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

"More than ready," she whispered, her gaze finding Zev across the room.

Her husband—the word still sent thrills through her body—stood in conversation with Ewan, his muscular frame casually dominating the space in his linen suit. As if sensing her eyes on him, he turned, his blue gaze tracking her through the crowd with predatory intensity.

After the elegant dinner and cake cutting, Chrissy caught her dad's eye and nodded. The moment they'd been secretly practicing for had arrived. Her dad stood and cleared his throat, silencing the celebratory chatter.

"If I could have everyone's attention," he announced, his voice carrying that same

melodic quality that Chrissy had inherited. "The bride has a special gift for her groom."

Zev's eyebrows shot up in surprise as her dad retrieved two guitars, handing Zev's grandfather's guitar—now officially Chrissy's—to her.

"What are you up to, Luna?" Zev's deep voice rumbled with amused suspicion.

Chrissy's fingers trembled slightly on the smooth wood of the guitar, her heart swelling with everything she felt for this man.

"I wrote you something," she said softly, the microphone catching her words as she settled on the stool her dad had positioned center stage.

Her dad took his place beside her, his fingers finding their position on his own guitar strings. The pack fell silent as Chrissy began to strum the opening chords. She'd poured everything into this song—her gratitude, her passion, and her promises for their future.

"When I was lost in shadows, you found me in the dark," she sang, her voice cutting straight to Zev's soul if his expression was any indication. "You didn't try to change me, you loved each broken part..."

As the melody rose and fell, telling the story of their meeting, their battles, and their love, Chrissy watched Zev's composure crack. His normally stoic expression softened, his eyes—those fierce Alpha eyes that could command a hundred wolf shifters with a glance—grew suspiciously bright.

Her dad's harmonies wrapped around her melody like a protective embrace, their guitars speaking to each other in complementary rhythms that they'd perfected over weeks of secret sessions.

"And when our son is born beneath the island moon," she sang, her free hand resting briefly on her rounded belly, "I'll tell him of the wolf who always protected me and will protect him too."

A single tear tracked down Zev's cheek—the fierce, protective Alpha undone by a song. Chrissy's own eyes welled as she sang the final chorus, their shared future spilling from her lips in promises of moonlit runs and lullabies.

The final chord hung in the air for a heartbeat before the room erupted in applause. But Chrissy only had eyes for her Alpha, who crossed the space between them in long, purposeful strides.

"You wrote that for me?" His voice was rough with primal emotion as he reached her.

"Every word," she whispered.

He pulled her to her feet, one hand possessively cradling her baby bump. "My Luna," he growled before claiming her mouth in a hot, searing kiss. His lips possessed hers with fierce ownership that made her knees weak and her pulse race.

The pack hooted and whistled around them, but Zev only deepened the kiss, his large hand splayed protectively over their growing son.

When he finally pulled away from her, Chrissy gasped for breath, her cheeks flushed with heat.

"That's the most beautiful gift anyone has ever given me," he said softly. "I love you, Chrissy."

"I love you, Zev," she whispered, leaning into his strength. "Thank you for saving me."

"Thank you for saving me," he countered, pressing his forehead against hers. "Nine months ago, I was half-alive. Now I have everything—my Luna, my son, and my future."

Gerri appeared at their side, her blue eyes flashing gold with delight. "Now that," she declared, "is what I call a perfect match."