

Chapter Three – Levi

There was a distinctive smell of smoke in the air, but Levi ignored it as he padded down the street, his tail held high in the air. His normally gray coat was green from all the damp culverts he had been sneaking through as he plotted his next escape from anybody who decided to chase him, but he didn't care.

Nothing could ruin his mood right now. Not when he had just pulled off the most masterful of all plots. He smirked as he slipped into the back of a store, where he had left his clothes before going on his mission. He rinsed himself off at the sink before pulling on the clothes and jogging back to the pack's apartment building.

Wait until Steven heard about this! He'd probably freak out. It was half of the reason Levi did it – to see how his brother would react. Immature, sure, but whatever. But if Steven wasn't going to start treating him like a full-blown Beta, then he wasn't going to act like one. And imagining the cops' expressions when they found out...

Levi began chuckling, and by the time he reached his brother's apartment, he was full-on laughing at his own cleverness. Steven was with his mate, persuading his three-year-old daughter to eat some oatmeal when Levi burst in.

The Alpha took one look at him and closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. "What did you do this time?"

Levi shrugged, fishing his phone out of his pocket. "Hey, quick question. Say you just met a beautiful, sexy woman and went back to her apartment to..." he glanced at his little niece, "...talk, and she gave you her number – how long do you have to wait until you contact her?"

"It's probably a fake number. And what did you do, Levi? Is it going to cause trouble again?"

"Nah." He started chuckling again. "I ordered two hundred donuts to be sent to the police precinct that's in charge of 'policing' our area."

"Donuts!" his niece cried, clapping her hands. "Yum!"

Steven growled. He closed his eyes for a long time before grabbing Levi's arm and dragging him to another room. He whirled on his brother. "What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking they're always harassing us, and they hate the police and donuts stereotype, so why not get back at them the only way you'll let me?" Levi grinned. A vein popped out on Steven's forehead, just the way the younger Coyote hoped it

would. "Now, if you gave me more responsibilities around the pack, then I wouldn't have the time to pull such childish pranks, now would I?"

"If you weren't always being such a child—" Steven cut himself off, pulling in a deep breath.

Levi waited, surprised at his brother's sudden restraint.

"You want to have more responsibilities? You want to be more involved in leading the pack?"

"Yes. It's what I've been saying for years. And if you think about it, then giving me something to do will let you do your thing, so I'm not egging drug dealer's cars or spreading garbage over the mayor's lawn to get my results."

Steven nodded, looking put out. "Fine. Then I want you to prove to me that I can trust you with certain tasks. I want you to arrange a neighborhood garbage pickup. Get everybody together and clean up our parks, our streets, our hallways. Everything."

Levi scowled. That wasn't what he had in mind. "Why don't I organize a march against the city laws that allow businesses to turn us away for simply being shifters? You know, something that will actually make a difference?"

"Because that is what I am taking care of, and you haven't proved yourself trustworthy enough to handle that kind of responsibility. Clean up the neighborhood, and then we'll go from there. And Levi?" Steven grasped his shoulders and stared seriously at him. "I need you to stay on it. No more pranks, no more running around stealing cops' guns."

"How did you find out—?"

Steven shook his head, cutting Levi off. "Never mind that. The cops think that the pack is running drugs like some sort of gang. I need you to just concentrate on being a good, law-abiding citizen. Scratch that, I need you to be a model citizen. Do this cleanup, volunteer at the clothing donation center, I don't care. Just stop being an idiot, got it?"

"Yeah, got it." Levi repressed a scowl. "Fine, I'll be a model citizen. I won't break any laws, not even jaywalking. Although public nudity shouldn't be illegal in the first place."

"Levi!"

"What? I'm just saying."

Steven's mate, Heather, peeked around the door. "Stevie, there are some cops here to see you. I'm going to take the baby to the park."

Steven's face was grim, but he nodded. Levi attempted to look serious as he followed his brother out into the main room again. A couple of cops stood in the room, looking arrogant and self-righteous. Both of them were in suits, with their hair plastered to their scalps and with the distinctive superior sneers on their faces.

"Gentlemen," Steven greeted, nodding towards them as Heather left the apartment. "What can I do for you?"

"Do you know a man by the name of Aaron Knox?"

The realtor? Levi's brow arched and he glanced at his brother for a reaction. Steven's face was utterly blank, a twitch in his hands the only thing giving away that he wasn't as calm as he appeared. "Yes. Aaron and I have been working together to try to make some improvements in the neighborhood. Why?"

One of the cops stared hard at Levi. The Coyote felt his hackles raising at the obvious challenge, but attempted to keep himself calm. Now was one of those times when he had a chance to prove to his brother that he could be serious and helpful, wasn't it? Besides, given his most recent actions with Moose and Forsythe, it was probably a not a good idea to provoke the cops.

"Mr. Knox was killed in an explosion at his office yesterday."

Steven jolted. His eyes widened and his face paled. "What? Are you certain?"

"Very. Can you tell us exactly what the nature of your business with Mr. Knox was?" the cop flipped open a notepad and posed a pen over it. The second one was still staring at Levi.

A growl rose up his throat as he realized what these two were investigating. They thought the Coyotes were responsible for Knox's death. Of course. Why investigate the crime when they had a pool of suspects that everybody would assume were guilty?

If it was up to Levi, they'd have a big-time lawyer bringing up multiple lawsuits against the city for the way they treated the Coyotes. Steven always said they couldn't afford it, but maybe Levi would just go ahead and find a way to get one to take their case anyway. Things could not continue like this.

Steven turned towards him. "Heather forgot her inhaler. Levi, can you run and give it to her?"

Levi turned on him, furious, but the warning look in his Alpha's eyes stopped him from saying what he thought. Instead, he swallowed and nodded. "Yeah, I can do that. Assuming that these fine detectives here don't need me for anything?"

He glanced at them. The first one shook his head, though the second remained sullen. Levi grabbed Heather's inhaler and jogged out the door, grinding his teeth together as he did so. He understood Steven's desire to get him out of the apartment while he spoke with the two cops. After all, Levi wasn't exactly a model for self-control. But it was also worrisome that this Knox guy had been killed...

Probably a gas leak, Levi thought. Who would want to kill a realtor?

After dropping the inhaler off at the park, Levi wandered through the neighborhood. Anger still burned through him, but he forced himself to relax. As much as he disagreed with his brother's methods, Steven was still the Alpha. He needed to talk to him about this before he made a move. Maybe that was what the Alpha meant when he said Levi had to be more mature...

Levi had other things to consider. With this new development, would Steven still want him to put together the cleanup project? Probably – and even if Steven forgot all about it, Levi could still do something. It wasn't like the Coyotes were terribly dirty, but the littering was getting out of hand. And maybe he could push the project further. Clean up everything, lay in new sod at the parks, and get the dead stumps pulled out and new trees or flowers put in. Put his own spin on it, rather than just following orders.

That was something worth looking into, at least. Carrying on with a beautification project after the cleanup was done. First things first, though, he had to pick a day for the big cleanup and start advertising it. And then he'd need all the supplies. Garbage bags, gloves, and poking sticks for the volunteers.

Levi nodded in satisfaction. A month ought to be enough time to get the word out. And he could print out flyers and posters...

His head turned as a scent caught his nose. It was a delicious scent, one that was sweet as cupcakes and spicy as hot peppers. He turned and followed it, keeping his face raised in the air to keep getting more of that delicious scent. It led him away from the apartment buildings. He rounded a corner and stopped. Of course... that was why the scent was so familiar. Levi grinned, leaning against the wall.

Lucy stood staring into a building that had a big 'for rent' sign in the window. Her face was pressed against the glass, hands cupped over her eyes to reduce glare. He admired the side view of her curves. His grin widened. He had never been with such a sexy woman before. Lucy may have never invited a man she had just met back to her place, but he had never followed a woman he'd just met home either.

But Lucy... Well, she was just too irresistible. Humans and Coyotes rarely became mates. Everybody knew that. For some reason, humans were more drawn to other shifters, Wolves, Bears, and others of that ilk. Steven's own mate was human, but even she had serious doubts about being with the Alpha. Probably because of the negative associations with Coyotes as opposed to the 'majesty' of Wolves.

The fact that the neighborhood was in such rough shape probably didn't help, either.

Levi fished his cellphone from his pocket and called Lucy, hoping that Steven was wrong and she had given him her real number. His grin widened when she answered. He turned the corner, hiding.

"Hey, this is Levi."

"Levi. Hi." Lucy's voice was surprised. "I didn't expect to hear from you."

"I said I'd call."

"I know. I just didn't expect that you would. I mean... It's just not something that I... Look, right now isn't that great of a time, can I call you back later?"

Levi peered around the corner again. Lucy looked distressed, walking his way. She jolted suddenly, and he knew she had seen him. He hesitated a moment, then stepped around and waved as he turned off his phone.

"Hey," he said. "Uh... I was calling to see if it was a good time to talk. But I guess it's not, so..."

A small, pained smile crossed Lucy's face. "Sorry."

Levi frowned. When he first saw her, she looked confident, excited even. Now her shoulders hunched and she didn't look in his eye. "Is it because of what we did?"

Lucy turned wide eyes on him. Guilt flashed through them, but she shook her head. "No. It's just... You remember when I said that I was meeting a realtor? Well, just after I left there was some sort of gas leak or something. His office blew up. I was right outside in my car, and it's just really shaken me."

"Aaron Knox," Levi realized. He dragged a hand through his hair. "Yeah, I heard about that. My brother was working with him... Are you okay? That just happened yesterday... Shouldn't you be in a hospital or something?"

Lucy rubbed her arms and shook her head. "I'm fine. I was in my car. I just... I thought that keeping busy might help, but I think I might need to just go home and rest."

"I'll come with you," Levi replied automatically.

He reached for her, but she shied away from him. He dropped his hand. So they had had sex. Thousands of people had casual sex all the time and never saw each other again. Plus, there was the explosion... She probably thought that he

was trying to take advantage of her scare.

"I'll call you," she said. "I just don't think... right now..."

She shook her head, clearly at a loss of what to say. Levi stepped back and nodded. "It's fine. But I would like to see you again if that's okay."

To his surprise, Lucy flinched. She looked up at him with a pained expression and nodded silently. "Yeah. That'd be nice."

Her words rang hollow. Levi mumbled a goodbye and walked away. Well, that was crystal clear. She might have given him her real number, but she didn't want anything to do with him. And she probably wouldn't have been with him in the first place if she had known he was a Coyote.

But what did it matter? She didn't want him? Her loss. He was already past it.