

CHAPTER 26

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26 Lucas: Watching Chapter 26: Lucas: Watching LUCAS Her scent dances around me. Every breath I take fills my lungs with the sweet, honey and vanilla notes that have haunted my dreams since that fateful night at the Lunar Gala. Ava. Just the thought of her name sends a shiver down my spine. For weeks, I've been watching her from the shadows, unable to resist the pull of her presence. The need to be near her has consumed me, driving me to break into her apartment just to bask in the lingering traces of her essence. I'm a desperate man, lost in the throes of an obsession I can't explain nor control. As I stand before her now, my wolf howls with unbridled joy inside my head, reveling in her proximity. Part of me had hoped that the fact she didn't run when she realized I'd found her meant something more. An acknowledgement of the connection that binds us together. But as her gaze meets mine, devoid of any emotion, I 1/9 20 Lucas: Watching feel the weight of disappointment settle heavily in my chest. She regards me with the same polite indifference she would show any other customer, and the realization stings like a slap to the face. Leaning over the counter, I can't help but ask, "How have you been? Are you okay?" The words tumble out, laced with concern and a hint of desperation that I can't quite mask. For a fleeting moment, I see her falter, a crack in her impassive facade. But it's gone as quickly as it appeared, and she meets my gaze with a cool detachment that cuts deeper than any blade. "I'm sorry, sir, but I need you to order or step aside for the other customers." Her voice is clipped, professional, devoid of any warmth or recognition. It's as if our shared moment in the garden never happened, as if the connection that ignited between us was nothing more than a fleeting fantasy. I want to protest, to demand that she acknowledges the bond that ties us together. But the words stick in my throat as I remember the look on her face right 2/9 26 Lucas: Watching before she turned and ran. All I can do is nod mutely and order something random off the menu. When I give her my card, our fingertips brush together, and the spark of our connection floods through me. My wolf yips and whines. My mate, he howls, and I can only apologize to him again. It's my fault that our mate isn't in our arms, after all. I watch Ava as she glides behind the counter. Every movement she makes is fluid, almost hypnotic, drawing my gaze. The gentle sway of her hips as she leans over to grab a mug, the way her delicate fingers curl around it—it's all I can do to tear my eyes away, even for a moment. A pang of jealousy twists in my gut as her coworker approaches her, an easy grin plastered across his face. My wolf snarls within me, hackles raised as he watches the exchange, bristling at the familiarity between them. That asshole leans in, whispering something that makes Ava's lips quirk upwards in a smile that should be reserved for me alone. The urge to storm over there and rip him away from her is overwhelming, my fists clenching at my sides as 14:47 3/9 26 Lucas: Watching I imagine the satisfying crunch of his nose breaking beneath my knuckles. It would be so easy, so deliciously satisfying to put him in his place and remind him that Ava is mine. But I force myself to remain still, my nails digging crescents into my palms as I wrestle with the animalistic impulses raging within me. I can't afford to do anything that might jeopardize what little chance I have of winning her over. One wrong move, one slip of control, and I could lose her forever. So I watch, and I wait, and I seethe in silence as Carlos throws his head back with a laugh, basking in the warmth of Ava's attention. Every fiber of my being screams at me to intervene, to stake my claim and remind her of the bond we share, no matter how tenuous it might seem at the moment. But her eyes never turn towards me, not even for a fleeting second. It's as if I'm invisible to her, a ghost haunting the periphery of her world, unable to break through the barrier she's erected around herself. After a couple hours of staring at the woman I want more than anything, an older woman approaches me with a warm smile, her eyes crinkling at the corners in 14:47 – 26 Lucas: Watching a way that speaks of a lifetime spent laughing. "Good morning," she greets me cheerfully. "Can I get you anything else?" I shake my head, offering her a polite smile in return. "No, thank you. I'm all set." She nods, but doesn't move to leave, her gaze drifting over to where Ava is chatting with the dickhead behind the counter. There's a knowing look in her eyes as she regards me, one that makes me shift uncomfortably in my seat. "You know our Ava, don't you?" she asks, her tone casual but laced with a hint of protectiveness. I sigh, running a hand through my hair as I contemplate how to respond. Part of me wants to deny any knowledge of her, knowing she's probably told these people nothing. But there's something about the woman's gentle demeanor that compels me to be honest. "Yes, I know her," I admit quietly. "But I'm afraid I've done something terrible to her, and I'm not sure how to make it right." Her gray eyebrows rise, but she doesn't press me for 5/9 26 Lucas: Watching details. Instead, she pulls out the chair across from me and settles into it, her expression one of patient understanding. "Well, the first step is recognizing that you've made a mistake," she says sagely. "That's more than a lot of people can manage." I bark out a humorless laugh, shaking my head ruefully. "Trust me, it was more than just a mistake. I..." I trail off, swallowing hard as the memories of that night come flooding back. The way Ava had looked at me with such hurt and betrayal in her eyes. The scent of her tears mingling with the sweet honey and vanilla that clings to her skin. The anguished howls of my wolf as our mate fled from us, leaving us both bereft and hollow. Knowing what I know now, my soul shrivels even more. She must have looked at me as salvation, and I'd betrayed her hopes. It's little wonder she wants nothing to do with me. "I hurt her," I finally manage to choke out, my voice thick with self-loathing. "Badly. And I don't know how to make it right." 26 LucV(w)w.No(v)@l(w)erm.Co®

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as. Watching She regards me with a thoughtful expression, her fingers steepled beneath her chin as she considers my words. Finally, she leans forward, her voice lowered to a conspiratorial murmur. "Have you tried apologizing?" she asks gently. I blink at her, thrown by the simplicity of her suggestion. "Apologize?" I repeat, flummoxed. It occurs to me that I've never said those words to her. Granted, I haven't spoken to her at all until just now, but—how can it be that the first words out of my mouth weren't I'm sorry I was such an asshole? She nods, her gaze unwavering. "Sometimes, the most powerful thing we can do is admit our mistakes and ask for forgiveness. It's not easy, mind you," she adds with a wry smile. "But if you truly regret what happened and want to make amends, it's the first step." "You're right," I murmur, more to myself than to her. "I need to apologize. To tell her how sorry I am for the way I treated her." The old woman nods, reaching across the table to pat my hand gently. "I can't promise that it will be easy, or 14:47 7/9 26 Lucas Watching that she'll accept your apology right away," she cautions. "But it's a start." I grip her hand tightly, feeling a surge of gratitude towards this kind-hearted woman. "Thank you," I say, genuine in my gratitude. Somehow, she'd shed light on such a simple oversight. I've apologized to Ava a million times in my heart, but how would Ava know that? Of course she doesn't know. She smiles at me, her eyes shining with a warmth that reminds me of my own mother's gaze. "I have a feeling that if you approach her with an open heart and true remorse, she'll surprise you," she says softly. "Our Ava is one of the kindest, most forgiving souls I've ever known." With a gentle squeeze of my hand, she rises from her chair and moves to greet another customer. My gaze drifts back to Ava, drinking in the sight of her. Apologize. Such a simple concept. It's only the first step—but I'll take thousands of steps until she finally turns and calls my name. She's worth everything