

CHAPTER 44

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44 Lucas: Shocking Return 44 Lucas: Shocking Return LUCAS The highway flies by in a blur of white lines and endless pine forests as I grip the steering wheel tightly with one hand, the other holding a cigarette I shouldn't be having. I quit smoking a long time ago, but the past forty-eight hours have been hell. I didn't get to see Ava for a couple days after flying out when I got the news that our scout was murdered, his body hanging between the Blackwood and Westwood territories. I don't even know what Ava thought of my note taped to her dining table, explaining that I'd be back as soon as I could. Is she grateful I'm not there? Or is she missing me? My cell phone is pressed between my ear and shoulder while I shout into it in between puffs of the cancer-causing burn stick I've been craving for the past twenty miles, "I don't give a flying f@ck, Kellan," I growl, cutting off his protest. "I'm not leaving Washington for the next three days, so don't even f@cking think about calling 14:58 44 Lucas: Shocking Return me back there." "Lucas, come on. The Blackwoods-" "Aren't going to do anything first." My jaw clenches as I take a sharp turn, tires screeching. "You know they're trying to bait us into the first move. We have no proof the Blackwoods killed him. Until we do, we can't do shit. And since we can't do shit, I need to see Ava." "You're playing a dangerous game, Alpha." Kellan's sigh crackles through the speaker. "If Blackwood finds out you're sniffing around Grey's daughter..." "He'll what? Start a war?" I let out a harsh laugh. "He won't alienate his allies. He's hoping they'll help him when the war comes. He won't take the first step." "It changes everything and you know it." I can practically hear Kellan's disapproved frown. He's been frustrated, saying my obsession with Ava keeps me too far from the pack and the issues going on there. He's not wrong, but nothing is more important than my mate. I need to bring her home. Once I do that, everything 14:58 2/9 44 Lucas: Shocking Return will fall into place. "I'm going to make things right with her, Kell." My voice softens as I picture Ava's face, those wide blue eyes that so easily sucker-punch me with so many feelings. "I'm finally making progress. I'm going to fix this." "And if she doesn't want you back?" The question hangs heavy in the air, but I refuse to consider the possibility. Ava and I are meant to be together. I can feel it in my bones, in the way my wolf howls for her. "She will," I say firmly. "I'll make her see." Kellan mutters something under his breath that sounds suspiciously like "stubborn asshole," but I choose to ignore it. He doesn't have a fated mate connection. He doesn't understand the pull between us, the raw, primal need that consumes me whenever she's near. God, just the thought of seeing her again has me half-hard in my jeans. I shift uncomfortably, trying to adjust myself without taking my hands off the wheel. It's been months since I last touched her, since I felt 14:58 • 3/9 44 Lucas: Shocking Return her soft skin under my fingers and tasted her sweetness on my tongue. I want her beneath me, writhing and moaning as I claim every inch of her body. I want to bury myself inside her tight heat and make her scream my name until she forgets anyone else ever existed. A low growl rumbles in my chest as I imagine it: Ava spread out on my bed, her blonde hair fanned across the pillow as I hover over her. I'd take my time with her, worshipping every curve and valley until she's trembling with need. And when she's right on the edge, begging for release, I'd finally give it to her, thrusting deep as I spill myself inside her. f@ck. I'm fully hard now, my cock straining against the confines of my zipper. I press down on the gas pedal, urging the car to go faster. I need to get to Ava now, before I combust from the sheer force of my desire. "I have to go," I grunt into the phone, not waiting for Kellan's response before I end the call and toss it onto the passenger seat. The "Welcome to Cedarwood" sign flashes by in my peripheral vision, and I feel a sense of anticipation 14:58 44 Lucas: Shocking Return building in my gut. I'm so close now, just a few more miles until I'm at Ava's doorstep, ready to grovel at her feet if that's what it takes. I don't care about the potential war with Blackwood or the dead scout or any of the other bullshit waiting for me back home. All that matters is Ava and earning her forgiveness. And if I'm lucky, maybe I'll even get that st

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eamy reconciliation I've been fantasizing about. The thought brings a wolfish grin to my face as I take the exit into town, my heart pounding in anticipation of what's to come. I burst through the doors of The Novel Grind, my eyes scanning the cozy interior for any sign of Ava. The scent of coffee and old books usually brings a sense of comfort, but today it only fuels my anxiety. She's not behind the counter, and a quick glance around the seating area confirms she's not here at all. f@ck. Where is she? Mrs. Elkins catches my eye from her usual table, waving me over with a grim expression. I make my way to her, dodging the mid-morning rush of customers. 14:50 44 Lucas: Shocking Roturn "Lucas," she greets me, her voice strained. "Have a seat." I comply, my body tense as I perch on the edge of the chair. "What's going on? Where's Ava?" Mrs. Elkins sighs, her hands clasped tightly in front of her. "That's what I was hoping you could tell me. She hasn't shown up for work in the past couple of days. No call, no explanation. Her dog is missing, too." My heart clenches painfully in my chest. Ava's missing. I leave on pack business and now she's gone. Did she leave on her own? Or is it something more sinister? Shit—has Blackwood found her? Those assholes have been looking for her, like they finally realized what they lost. "I don't know where she is," I admit, my voice rough. "I've been out of town for a few days. f@ck, I should have been here." Mrs. Elkins leans forward, her eyes narrowed. "Lucas, I need you to be straight with me. Is Ava a packless shifter?" 14.50 -) 44 Lucas: Shocking Return The question catches me off guard, and I blink at her in surprise. "What makes you ask that?" "The shifter presence in Cedarwood has been... strange lately. A lot of rogues, a lot who aren't from the Aspen pack. They're always around. I've seen the way they look at The Novel Grind, like they're searching for something. Or someone." I run a hand through my hair, my mind racing. If other shifters are sniffing around, it can only mean one thing - they're looking for Ava. But why? And who? There's only one answer: Blackwood. No one else would know anything about her. f@ck. "Yes," I finally answer, seeing no point in lying. "Ava is a shifter. She should be part of my pack, but-" Mrs. Elkins nods. She already knows. "I had a feeling. But Lucas, if she's caught up in something dangerous... "I'll find her," I vow, my voice fierce. "I won't let anything happen to her." I stand abruptly, my chair scraping against the hardwood floor. I need to get out there, to track down any lead I non find Buery minute Aun'a minning in 14:58 7/0 44 Lucas: Shocking Return another minute she could be in danger. "Keep this between us for now," I tell Mrs. Elkins, my tone brooking no argument. "I don't want to cause a panic. If anyone asks, just say Ava's out sick." She nods, her expression grim. "Of course. But Lucas, be careful. Whatever's going on, it feels bigger than just Cedarwood." I give her a tight smile, already heading for the door. "I know. But I'll do whatever it takes to bring her home safe." I need to call Kellan. It's time for war. I need to get my mate back. 66 Lucas, you're going the wrong way... Lenaleia Creator's Thought B9 45 Ava: Clearminded@ww.novEL@orm.com