

CHAPTER 75

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75 Lucas: Going In LUCAS The air is thick with tension as we approach the heart of the Blackwood pack lands. Every step is calculated, every movement deliberate. One false move can jeopardize everything. A single shifter can alert an entire pack. I can't afford that. Not when Ava's life hangs in the balance. Vester moves like a wraith beside me, his footfalls silent despite the underbrush beneath our boots. The four shifters flanking us are some of the most loyal and strongest members of the pack, well-versed in reconnaissance. Between their skills and the scent diffusers coating us to avoid detection, we make it through their territory without incident. Our cars are still in White Peak, so getting Ava out will be an ordeal, especially since she can't shift. Alpha Xavier's offer of help has come in handy; once we get her, we just have to call in a distraction. 13:05 1/8 75 Lucas Going In Hopefully by the time they realize what it is, we'll be in cars and on our way back to Westwood lands. Nightfall cloaks our approach as we close in on the Grey home, a modest suburban home to the edge of the territory, as most high-ranking wolves are. No wolf likes to be enclosed on all sides by buildings. Vester signals for us to hold position as he links with Ryder, who's already with the Silvermoon forces. With the Whispering Pines pack territory between Silvermoon and Blackwood, Xavier had to submit an informal request to the Whispering Pines pack to allow his forces through. The Whispering Pines pack has turned a blind eye to the situation, allowing them to camp on the border of their lands, and now we have a distraction from a direction that bastard Blackwood would never expect. Moments later, Ryder links with me. They're in position near the border and ready to cause a stir. All we have to do is wait. Each minute passes with agonizing peace. I can see the occasional flash of Ava in her window, looking stressed as she paces. Two guards stroll the perimeter. 28 75 Lucas Gongr They aren't even ranked wolves; they're weak. It won't be hard to overpower them before they can alert anyone. Then, much as a small flame can burst into an inferno. there's activity. A flurry of it, seen in glimpses through bright windows. Alexander Grey and his daughter, Jessa, rush out of the house, taking separate cars. They're silent, though I imagine their minds are cacophonous with pack links. Grace is still inside. She's weaker than she appears, but she's intelligent. We'll have to avoid her mind-linking to warn anyone of what's going on here. I nod to Vester and the four shifters we've dragged into this mess of a mission. Vester, you're with me. We have to overpower the beta's mate before she can sound the alarm. You four, break off into pairs and take the guards. Remember, they can't have the chance to mind-link any of their pack, or we'll be fighting all of them. They all nod in unison, faces grim and determined. Let's go. 75 Lucas: Going In We move in a tight formation, the world around us fading into our breath, our every movement. My focus narrows to the scents drifting on the crisp night air-humid summer nights, pine trees, and the scent of a particular brand of perfume, with jasmine and honey notes carried through an open window. A silent hand signal, and we split off. Vester and I veer toward the back entrance while the others flank the guards patrolling the perimeter. Time slows as we wait with bated breath for the telltale signs of engagement. Suddenly, a muffled grunt shatters the silence. followed by another in rapid succession. The guards have been neutralized with ruthless efficiency, just as we'd planned. Vester meets my gaze. No words are necessary; a single nod and we proceed. The door is unlocked, to our surprise, but as one we slip through it, our steps a mere breath against the hardwood floors. Perfumed fragrance tickles my nose as it grows stronger. My wolf strains against its restraints, growling with the thirst for the hunt. But I can't afford to lose control, not yet. Not until Ava is safe. < 75 Lucas: Going In The kitchen is open and airy, making it easy to slip through without knocking into anything. I can smell my mate's presence, and it's almost impossible to

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wrest control from my wolf as he slinks low in my mind. Vester is a silent shadow at my back with every step closer to our target. In the living room, I can see her silhouette just around the wall. She's peering outside, but her body language isn't on alert. Not yet. I meet Vester's gaze, and he gives a slight nod. In one fluid motion, I draw the syringe filled with wolfsbane from my pocket. It was a calculated risk to bring it with us, in case of any accidents—but it's worth more. than its weight in gold. The only concoction on this planet fatal to every wolf. It shouldn't be enough to kill her... Not yet, anyway. Maybe in a few days, if we're lucky. I rush into the room, watching as her body tenses when she realizes something's wrong. She has no chance to act on her instinct as I stab into her neck with the syringe, depressing the plunger at almost the 105 516 75 Lucas: Going In same time. Even a single drop can interfere in her ability to transmit across mind links. Her body crumples in an instant, unconscious before she can make a sound. I stand over her prone form, my heart pounding in my ears. The scent of jasmine and honey mingles with the acrid tang of wolfsbane, making my nose burn. Part of me wants nothing more than to end her life right here, right now. She's been complicit in Ava's imprisonment, and the thought of her suffering brings a twisted sense of satisfaction. But I can't. It's rare for mates to sense severe injury, but it's impossible not to notice your mate's death. Alerting Alexander is out of the question. -Grinding my teeth, I turn away from Grace's unconscious form. My wolf stirs restlessly, pacing in the confines of my mind as I creep up the stairs. I can't sense anyone except Ava, but I'm not taking chances. The tantalizing scent that grows stronger with each step is torture on my senses. Ava < 75 Lucas: Going In Vester falls in step behind me as we make our way down the hall, our movements purposeful. He's here to keep me from losing my mind in my mate. The area is secure, one of my men reports through the pack link. We've hidden the bodies from view. Good. The last thing we need is for someone to notice the bodies. At last, we reach Ava's room. Her scent is overpowering here, a heady mix of honey, vanilla, and something distinctly her own. My wolf strains against his restraints, desperate to claim what's ours. Steeling myself, I reach for the door handle- A blur of movement, and suddenly there's a knife slashing towards my face. I jerk back just in time, feeling the breeze of displaced air past my cheek. My heart thunders and my wolf howls as I come face-to-face with the woman I've been longing to see. Ava.wwW.NoVeLWorM.com

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