

CHAPTER 152

152 Lucas: A Lesson in Patience LUCAS My mate has the guiltiest look on her face, looking everywhere but at me. On the one hand: It's good to know that she's a terrible liar, once caught. But it takes every ounce of control within me to not rage at the danger she somehow placed herself in. I don't understand any of this, but I'm determined I will before I leave the apartment. Keeping my mouth shut is a lesson in patience, but it works. Ava slowly drips more information my way. It's a struggle to keep the smile on my face even as my molars grind together in frustration. And I remind myself in an endless litany that I have no right to be furious with her for holding secrets. Even when her life is on the line, and every molecule in my body is screaming to protect her. The words come at an agonizing trickle from Ava's lips, spilling secrets I struggle to comprehend. The vampire attack. Sister Miriam's concern. Fae food—not that we understand much about it -that compels honesty. Bizarre magic that spirited her out of this room and into another place, from right beneath my nose. Each revelation twists my gut, stoking the embers of my barely restrained fury. 152 Les A LOGO HLE Nationco "Why would a vampire help a wolf?" The question escapes before I can temper it, my voice rough with the effort of control. Ava blinks, confusion clouding her features as she evades my gaze once again. "I don't know." "You didn't think to ask?" I press, the wolf within me prowling, eager to break free and demand answers. She fidgets, twisting her hands in her lap. "I'm pretty sure I did? But Sister Miriam was evasive. She didn't give me a straight answer." Of course she didn't. Why pin down the vampire for concrete information when you can just waltz into danger blindly? My molars grind together, my jaw clenched so tight it aches. My wolf snarls in the recesses of my mind, seething at the risks Aval took. Risks that could have stolen her from me forever. But I swallow the rage, the fear. I force a smile. Encourage her to continue. Because as much as I want to roar my frustration, I know it will only push her away. And right now, I need her to trust me. To confide in me. So I listen, even as every instinct screams to spirit her away to safety. To lock her in my arms and never let go. The tension slowly drains from her shoulders as she speaks, her body relaxing inch by painstaking inch when I don't react explosively. It takes every shred of self-control I possess. Every ounce of discipline honed over years of leadership. But I maintain the facade of calm, the illusion of understanding. 152 Lucas A Lesson in Patience Because beneath the anger, beneath the terror, lies something far more profound. Love. For the first time, I can sense her meeting me halfway. Coming to me without hesitation. I'm not going to ruin this moment. I've waited for so f@cking long. My love for her pulses through my veins, fierce and unrelenting. It tempers my fury, softens my edges. It whispers in my ears, telling me that this incredible, infuriating female is mine to cherish, to protect. Even from her own reckless bravery. So I swallow my pride, my possessiveness. I meet her tentative gaze with a steadiness I don't feel, offering silent support as she bares her secrets. And with each word, each halting confession, I fall a little harder. A little deeper. Even when she admits to truths that floor me. Like the fact that Selene isn't just a dog, but her wolf. Mate. Mine. My wolf whispers in my head, and I finally understand his obsession with that damned husky. He's not mated to a dog. He's mated to a wolf. Our mate's wolf. I've never heard of a wolf outside of our body. We share $w^{(w)}.No(v)\tilde{e}lw\odot rm.C\odot m$

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mind, soul, and body. That's how it works. But my Ava is extraordinary in every way, it seems. 보고 152 Lucas. A Lesson in Palionon When I accept this new truth, reaching over to grab her hands, never once berating her for her silence—for her fears—she seems to finally, finally, let her guard down. Her voice is raspy from talking and overuse, so I give her a break by heading into the kitchen for a glass of water. She follows, sliding her hand into mine, and my heart jumps for f@cking joy. "I'm sorry, Lucas. It's a mess, isn't it?" Yeah, it f@cking is. "It's fine, Ava." I squeeze her hand gently. "We'll figure it out together from now on." "I didn't mean to dump it all on you-" "I know, sweetheart. Here." I pour her a glass of water, and she hovers beside me, anxiety once again tensing her shoulders. She's easy to read, now that her guard is down. "I'm not upset," I lie through my teeth without batting a single. eyelash. "I'm just concerned." "Oh. That's good." Sweet Ava is a massive flight risk, and I'm not taking my chances. I just need to figure out how to yell at her without ruining the progress we've finally made. She can't go off putting herself in danger like this again. If that vampire hadn't sent her back- 152 Lucas. A Lesson in Patience War, my wolf whispers. Hell yeah, it would be f@cking war. But having to find her, when she was taken by magic? I'm not sure how easy that would have been. Knowing how easily I could have lost her tonight is a sobering experience. That, and learning how woefully uneducated we are as wolf shifters. We don't know enough about vampires. I've heard of some parlor tricks that vampires can perform, but nothing like the things Ava's told me about tonight. And to have those damned bloodsuckers yearning after my mate is unacceptable. "Lucas?" Shit. She was talking to me, and I missed all of it. "What is it, Ava? Sorry. I was thinking about things." Her hair's half covering her face, so I reach over to tuck the stray strands behind her ear. A faint red tinge colors her cheeks when I do so. "There's more," she says, with the kind of hesitation that has my stomach dropping. After everything she's already told me, I didn't think there would be anything bigger to admit to. Her body language tells me otherwise. $\mathbf{W}^{(w)}w.nov\acute{e}l\hat{V}\acute{o}(r)mm.co(m)$