

## Chapter 12 Pups found dad

"No one, my love." Jane lied, pulling out her phone to text Linda.

Linda arrived soon and they went to a more secluded restaurant. Jane felt relieved to have her friend near but the real relief was that Riley let the question go.

Still, her heart ached knowing how poor Paisley must be feeling. Her little voice echoed in Jane's head, crying out for Jane and her sister. Jane wished she could go back and sweep the little girl away this instant, but she knew it was impossible. She had to be patient. She had to wait until the time was right.

--

"I'm sure it was our Daddy." Riley insists, relating the strange events in the restaurant to her brothers. "The little girl who looked like me said I was her sister, and the man looked just like you - only growned up!"

"But how do we find him?" Parker questions, working the problem over in his mind.

"We could ask Auntie Linda?" Ryder suggests, "I bet she knows."

"Mommy won't like it." Riley cautions, "She didn't wanna tell me 'bout Daddy at all."

"Mommy doesn' have to know." Ryder decides, "She's jus'

scared.”

“Ryder’s right.” Parker agrees. “She never wants to tell us ‘bout Daddy. This stays between us.”

“But won’t Auntie Linda just refuse? Riley asks.

“Not if we trick her.” Parker reasons, a mischievous glint in his eye.

A few hours later the pups were safely ensconced in the back seat of Linda’s car while Jane was at work, and one by one, they put their plan into motion.

“Auntie Linda, did you know our Daddy?” Ryder asks slyly.

“I did.” She confirms, not sharing anything more.

“What was he like?” Parker presses.

“Well, he was an Alpha,” Linda shares. “He was very strong and smart, just like all of you.”

“But who is he?” Riley inquires, “why aren’t he and Mommy married?”

“I think these are questions you should ask your Mommy.” Linda sighs.

“But Mommy’s not here!” Ryder complains.

“Please tell us,” Parker requests, giving the she-wolf his best puppy-dog eyes.

“Well,” Linda hedges, “Your Mommy and Daddy aren’t married because sometimes grown up relationships are complicated. You can love someone and not be good for each other... does that make sense?”

"No." The children chime in unison.

"One day you'll understand." Linda promises. "I know it's hard right now, but you'll see. Your Mommy did what she thought was best for you."

"And our Daddy?" Parker questions.

"Your Daddy is a good man, he wants what's best for you, and being with your Mommy is what's best." Linda reasons.

The pups exchange looks, this sounds like the usual things grown ups say, but they aren't convinced. All of their friends have both Mommies and Daddies at home, and they've never understood why they're different. They want to be a real family, and they won't accept anything less.

"Do you know our Daddy's name?" Riley asks.

"I do," Linda admits hesitantly.

"Will you tell us?" Ryder begs.

"All right, but just his first name." Linda agrees. After all, the pups are only four, how much could they possibly learn with so little information? "Your Daddy's name is Ethan."

---

Jane

"We have to leave, Linda." I moan, burying my face in my hands. We're seated at my friend's kitchen table, chatting at the end of the long day. "We've had too many

close calls and the longer I'm here, the more precarious our situation becomes."

Goddess, I've already met Paisley twice, and the second time I was forced to be unconscionably cruel to protect my identity. What kind of woman does that? What kind of mother harms her child to protect herself? I'm so ashamed of my actions I wish I could sink into the ground and disappear.

"If Ethan finds out about Riley, Parker and Ryder he'll take them away from me. I know it." I lament, despite the fact that Linda hasn't argued. The mere thought of losing my babies makes my insides twist into knots.

"Are you sure?" Linda asks, "I can't see Ethan doing something like that." As much as I love Linda, I can't stand it when she defends Ethan. I don't understand why she does it, she knows how bad things were before I left.

"Before we were married I couldn't see Ethan enslaving me either." I argue, "and just look at how that turned out."

"Okay." Linda agrees, "You're right. He had his chance in the past and he blew it." She eyes me curiously. "But what about the deal with Eve?"

"I don't have to be here in person to fulfill the deal." I counter, "I can get her to carry my line without personally overseeing the launch."

"Why are you even working with her?" Linda asks for the fifth time.

"Because she's so desperate to get a win that she's

willing to pay double, and besides, this way I can keep an eye on her. I'll get the contracts signed and then the kids and I will return home. I can't stay here any longer, no matter how badly I want to." Originally I'd planned on staying in the Nightfang territory for a few months. I wanted to be nearby through the final stages of Paisley's treatment, and I never imagined things would get so complicated - especially not this quickly.

"That's probably safest." Linda agrees, looking disappointed. "The pups were asking about Ethan today."

Fear paralyzes me, "What did you tell them?"

"Nothing they could use to find him." She promises, "I simply explained that adult relationships are complicated, and the best place for them is with you."

"That's all?" I ask nervously. Linda doesn't know my children as well as I do, she doesn't realize how clever they can be with only tiny pieces of information. Most four year olds are still grappling with learning shapes, but my little ones are already reading full length books and learning to play instruments.

"That's all." Linda confirms. "They couldn't find him even if they wanted to."

---

"Google: Alpha Ethan." Parker instructs, leaning over Ryder as he sits in front of Linda's desktop computer.

"And Nightfang." Riley adds sensibly, "I saw him here, so this is probably his pack."



Ryder, who the other pups always consider the youngest because he was born ten minutes after Riley and thirty minutes after Parker, dutifully follows his sibling's instructions, slowly pushing down keys and watching the corresponding letters appear on the glowing screen. When the phrase is complete, he excitedly hammers the 'enter' button and all three children wait for the results to populate with bated breath.

Within moments, images of the same man Riley met in the restaurant fill the page, and the boys murmur murmur in unison. "He looks just like us!

"That's him, and look!" Riley exclaims, pointing at a photo a little further down in the results, "that must be our sister!"

Clicking on the link next to the image, their tiny faces light up with glee when they read the imposing Alpha's biography. Ethan Blackwell, age 30: became the youngest Alpha in Nightfang history after challenging his corrupt and tyrannical uncle for control of the pack when he was just 19 years old. Known for his intelligence, extraordinary strength, and integrity, Blackwell's life has not been without tragedy. Four years ago the Alpha's chosen mate, Jane Blackwell, died in childbirth. Devastated by the loss, Ethan's young daughter Paisley provided the only silver lining in this tragedy. He has described her on more than one occasion as "the greatest gift he's ever been given,"

The pups reel back from the screen in surprise. "Why does it say Mommy died?" Ryder wonders aloud.

"They must only think she died." Parker assesses, "After all - that is Mommy's name."

"How are we going to ask her 'bout it?" Ryder replies.

"Leave that to me." Riley instructs with a devious grin.

A little while later, as the young family is walking down the street, Jane stops at a coffee cart and Riley skips over to the news stand. This is exactly what she hoped would happen. She's always loved looking at all the glossy magazine covers while Mommy waits for her coffee, and she knows how often the Alpha in their own territory appears on the front page. Chirping in excitement, her small hand snatches a thick publication from the waiting stack, "Mommy look! It's the man from the restaurant!"

①