

Chapter 23 Ethan Wakes Up

"Well," Paisley muses out loud, "she hates kids. She hates getting dirty and poor people... I think if we're just loud and messy and all over her..."

"She'll get really mad." Ryder surmises, finishing her thought.

"Exactly." Paisley agrees, "and we just have to be sure Daddy is there when she does."

"But how can we make sure we'll all be together again?" Parker asks, "Mommy clearly doesn' wanna be around Daddy."

"If you can handle Mommy," Paisley suggests. "I can handle Daddy."

"We can do this." Riley agrees. "We just have to work together. Deal?"

All four pups glance at one another before nodding in agreement. "Deal."

Jane

"You can't hide forever, Janey." Linda informs me matter-of-factly, her voice sounding distant over the phone.

"Not forever." I agree, speaking quietly into the receiver and hoping the pups are too distracted to pay attention.

"just until he's gone."

"Yeah, well the doctor said he could be asleep a couple of days - it's really hard to tell with head injuries." My friend reminds me. It's been less than twelve hours since the incident - as I'm now calling it - and I've done my best to keep myself and the pups out of the house. Even now, after picking up Riley from the hospital, I've taken the kids to get ice cream rather than returning home. I'm currently contemplating staying at a hotel tonight, but when I told Linda she insisted I was being silly.

"Or he could wake up before this afternoon." I argue, "By the time we're done running errands he could be gone."

"I don't think that's likely." Linda drawls, "that was one heavy vase, girl."

"Yes, and he has one very thick skull." I counter, ignoring the guilt bubbling up inside me for knocking Ethan out so ruthlessly. It's a blessing he was so drunk. I'm sure he remembers nothing of the incident, and even if he does he's much too proud to admit a tiny she-wolf got the better of him. It will be much easier to simply agree that he fell and hit his head.

"Mommy, can we go home now?" Riley asks, tugging on my skirt. The poor little thing must be so tired, and I know she hated spending so many nights in the hospital away from me and the boys.

"Hold on one sec, Linda." I murmur, lowering my cell to address my daughter. "Actually, I think Auntie Linda could use a break from having house guests. How would you all feel about staying in a hotel tonight?" It's true that Linda could probably use a break. I've arranged a rental apartment for the remainder of our stay here, but it won't be ready for another few days. "We can go to the fancy one by the mall, with the swimming pool and the arcade? You love it there."

To my shock, all three pups exchange glances before turning back to me with deep frowns. "No!" They exclaim in unison.

Linda snorts in my ear, and I resist the urge to growl at her. "You don't want to go have a mini vacation?" I ask my children, surprised they would turn down the temptation.

"We wanna go back to Auntie Linda's." Parker insists.

"We like it there." Ryder adds.

"Sides Mommy, I'm too tired to play." Riley contributes with a pout.

Groaning internally, I cave.

"Alright," I sigh in resignation, shifting my cell back into position. "Linda, we're coming home."

Ethan

It's dark when I wake, and I don't recognize my surroundings. I'm in a small bedroom with drawn curtains, in a house that smells strange yet familiar. I rack my memory for details, but the last thing I remember is being at the bar after receiving the unfortunate DNA results. Getting slowly to my feet, I rub my eyes, and a few fuzzy images flash through my consciousness.

Jane. Or is it, Elise?

Suddenly I know why the house smells familiar. Linda's scent is strongest, but Elise Carrington's perfume and Jane's sunshine are blended around the edges. I must be in Linda's house. I do smell pups as well, but their scents are weaker like... Goddess what do I even call this woman? I'm so confused about Elise and Jane that I feel absolutely beside myself - and that isn't a sensation I'm used to at all.

One thing is clear though, at some point last night I must have sought out the she-wolf responsible for my mixed-up emotions, and when I got here... The same images burst into my mind, of the beautiful blonde wrapped up in my arms, our mouths locked together in a passionate kiss. But what happened then? I can't think straight, and it doesn't help that my head is throbbing with pain.

Raising my hand to the back of my head, I find a huge knot that stings like the devil when I press my fingers to it. The sound of shattering pottery sounds in my ear, and I vaguely remember a vase in Elise's hand. My wolf growls as understanding sinks in. Whether she is my Jane or not, Elise Carrington is in big trouble.

She's in the kitchen when I emerge, the rest of the house quiet as a mouse. A glance at the clock on the mantel tells me it's past 11PM, which probably means everyone else is in bed. Perfect.

"Hello Ms. Carrington." I state gruffly, taking immense pleasure when she leaps into the air in surprise.

"Alpha." She gasps in shock, pressing her hand to her heart, "You startled me."

"I can see that." I proclaim, prowling forward.

Her eyes warily follow my movement, "How are you feeling?"

"Confused." I admit, rubbing my jaw in thought, "You see, the last thing I remember was a few hours ago. I was at the bar, but now I've woken up here."

"It wasn't a few hours ago." She corrects, her little pink tongue darting out to lick her lips and completely distracting me. "It was last night, you fell and hit your head."

"I fell?" I repeat, feigning ignorance. The lie gave me the perfect excuse to zone in on my target, so it takes me a moment to process her first words. "Wait a minute - last night?" I glance at the clock again. "Paisley!"

"Don't worry," Elise interrupts my panic, "Her surgery was postponed, until you could be there with her."

Relief courses through me, "Thank you. I would never have forgiven myself if she had to go through it alone."

"She wouldn't have." Elise answers quickly, clearly not thinking it through first. My head jerks up at the protective note in her voice, and realizing what she said, the blonde improvises, "someone would have been there for her, I mean. Your mother, or Eve."

I fight the urge to snort, I can just imagine the kind of care Eve would provide my daughter. Childcare is not exactly her strength. Still, Elise's slip up makes me wonder. Why was her response about my pup so defensive? Just then the little girl I met in the restaurant comes into the kitchen, rubbing her eyes and wearing the same expression Paisley does when she's not truly awake. "Mommy, I can't sleep."

