

Chapter 35 - Jane Pulls a Vanishing Act

Jane

Spinning to face Paisley, I find her sitting up in bed, her green eyes wide but still glazed with the remnants of sleep. This is the first time since the surgery that she's seemed truly lucid, and I have to fight every protective instinct in my body to immediately begin interrogating her about who visited her before she went under.

"Hello my love." I greet her, crossing the room to sit at the edge of her bed. "How are you feeling?"

"Funny." Paisley answers with a yawn. "Why were you swearing, Mommy?"

Brushing her hair back from her face, I offer her a lopsided smile. "I was just feeling a little out of sorts." I confess, "But I shouldn't have said those things."

Paisley leans forward, raising her hand to her mouth and secretively whispering "I's heard Daddy say some of dose words too sometimes." She grins sheepishly, "but he says dey're bad words and only bad Daddies say dem in front of pups."

"And what do you think?" I ask her, overjoyed that she's

up and talking,

She thinks for a moment before deciding, "I tink he's a good Daddy."

"I think so too." I share, unable to stop myself from kissing her little hands. "And I'm so glad you're alright Paisley, you really scared me for a while there."

"How'd I do that?" She asks, looking worried.

"It's not anything you did, little one." I assure her, "I just get nervous about surgeries. You're such a brave girl."

"It's my last one, you know?" Paisley tells me with excitement. "I never have to have 'nother."

"I know." I beam, "and you know, that means my game of hide and seek with Daddy can end soon too."

"Really?" She exclaims, "you mean you can be my Mommy?"

"Shh." I remind her gently, holding a finger to my lips.

"It's not over yet, so we have to keep it secret."

"I pwomise." Paisley agrees, looking unusually somber for such a young pup.


"Now tell me, what's the first thing you want to do when you get out of the hospital?" I ask, changing the subject before she can think about it too hard. I've long past given up on keeping her completely in the dark, but I can't tell her too much either. She still has weeks of

physical therapy to get through before she'll be well enough to consider moving, and that's a very long time for a little girl to keep a secret.

"Hmm," Paisley ponders, racking her brain. I know the moment she's decided on an answer, because her precious little face lights up like the sun itself, "get some ice cream!"

"Well why wait?" I exclaim, "We can get you ice cream right here!"

"Really?" She inquires eagerly, bouncing up and down in her bed.

"Really." I grin, "let's you and I take a field trip." 

Ethan

My mother is waiting in my room when I emerge from a long, hot shower. I feel only marginally better than I did when I got home, the steaming spray worked wonders on my tense muscles, but all my stress remains. I'm still overwhelmed by everything that happened at the hospital. I'm so relieved Paisley's surgery went well, but horrified about the murder attempt, confused beyond belief by Jane, and furious at Eve.

In fact, the more I think about it, no one in the pack has caused more problems for me than the she-wolf dwelling under my own roof. Jane's words from earlier ring in my

head: whoever poisoned Paisley is someone you know, someone with the motive to hurt you or get Paisley out of the way. Get Paisley out of the way.

That thought had never occurred to me before, after all, Paisley isn't my heir. She'll never be Alpha, so the only reason someone could want her out of the way, is if Paisley was somehow keeping us apart. Eve obviously wants to marry me, and Paisley despises her. If she's willing to torpedo her own business to get Jane out of the way, what would she do to neutralize the greatest obstacle dividing us?

Ruffling my sodden hair with a fluffy towel, I watch my mother's reflection in the mirror, "I suppose you've come to tell me what an ogre I'm being?"

"No." She denies simply, "I came to see if you're okay."

"I'm not." I admit bleakly, "things are pretty bad, Mom."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart." She consoles, raising her voice so I can hear her as I retreat into my closet to get changed.

"You know it might be easier to carry the weight of your responsibilities if you had someone to help you bear the load."

"Mother, if you're going to suggest I marry Eve again-" I begin, only to get cut off.

"Well why not!" She exclaims, "She's been like family to us for years now. She's lived here, helped raise Paisley

and she adores you. She would give anything to be your wife.”

Her words only reinforce my concerns. If she’s willing to give anything, she might be willing to do anything too, including kill. “I don’t love her.” I remind my mother, “And I know how much you care about her, but I don’t trust her.”

“How can you say that?!” Mom cries, “she saved my life, Ethan. She only wants the best for us.”

Part of me wants to tell my mother everything that Eve has done, but I don’t want to take that step unless it’s absolutely necessary. At this point Eve is Mom’s only friend, and if she knew what I’m beginning to suspect... well, let’s just say it would crush her. Mom isn’t as young as she used to be, and she barely survived losing my father. Her only joys left in life are me, Paisley, and Eve. I won’t destroy a third of her happiness unless I don’t have any other choice.

“If you love Eve you should want the best for her.” I remind Mom. “We know I’m not her mate. It would be better for everyone if she tried to find him instead of pining after someone who can never love her.”

“Jane wasn’t your fated mate either.” Mom argues, a bitter note entering her voice. “You certainly loved her deeply enough.”

My mother almost never mentions Jane. She never got over my chosen mate's betrayal, and she never forgave me for not leaving her afterwards. In fact, it's so rare for her to bring up my former wife that I realize she must know what Paisley and I suspect. "You know, don't you?" "About Elise?" She clarifies, studying her fingernails as if they're absolutely fascinating.

"Who told you?" I ask, wondering if Eve has figured out the truth as well.

"They didn't have to." She admits, meeting my gaze. "I met her when she came here after you were injured."

"And?" I prompt.

"She's a dead ringer for Jane." Mom concedes, "no pun intended."

Exhaling heavily, I level her with my gaze, "I won't ask you to understand for my sake." I begin carefully, "but I would ask you to consider what's best for Paisley. You haven't seen them together..." Even as I say the words, the image of mother and pup curled in my lap flash into my mind's eye. "If there's even a tiny chance I can give Paisley her mother back, I have to try."

My mother is on her feet now, her hands clenched into fists at her sides, "Is there really nothing that woman can do wrong in your eyes? It wasn't enough to let me be attacked, or to attack Eve when she tried to help me, now

you're saying there's a chance she faked her death to get away from you, and still you'll take her back? How do you even know those pups are yours!"

I understand her outrage, but I also know she's biased. Her past with Jane makes her incapable of seeing any good in my chosen mate, and I know Eve doesn't help things. Pulling out my phone, I select my photo app and swipe to a shot of Ryder and Parker at the amusement park. Offering the device to my mother, I say, "because unless you've been hiding a twin brother from me, they are mine."

Her eyes go wide as saucers as she takes in the photo. "My goddess!" Her eyes crinkle with her smile, "They look exactly like you."

"I know." I acknowledge, smothering my own grin. "Now do you see why I have to do this?"

"No." Mom answers stubbornly, softening as she hands the phone back, "but I understand why you feel that way."

"Thank you." I sigh. "Now can you please put the idea of me marrying Eve to rest?"

She nods, "For now."

Relieved to have the matter settled for the time being, I take a quick cat nap and inhale a sandwich on my way back out the door. I've only been gone an hour, but even that short time makes me anxious. When I get back, I

realize it was for good reason. Paisley's room is empty.

I search the entire floor, thinking they might have gone for a walk or taken Paisley for some tests, but I cannot find hide nor hair of them. Next I ask the nurses and security guards where Paisley and Jane went, but they're as clueless as I am.

Undiluted fear pulses through my veins as the reality sets in: They're gone.



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