

Chapter 37 - Jane Calls a Lifeline

Jane

I can't recall ever wanting to strangle anyone as much as I want to strangle Ethan right now.

The truth is that I'm not sure I can make it three months working alongside him every day, but I'm equally afraid of the romantic schemes he might try to pull if I agree to date him. Three dates a week is simply too many, and the word date is a minefield all on its own.

Yet when he calls me that damned fake name and basically accuses me of being a chicken, I can't help but rise to the challenge. "Define date?" I huff.

"You and I, spending quality time together in the evening or on weekends." He shrugs, eyes twinkling with mirth. "Surely you've been on a date before?"

Rolling my eyes heavenward, I waver back and forth. Five boring days a week for three months, or a few heated hours? In the end I feel much more confident in my ability to rebuff him for a short period than day in and day out, and I know the sly wolf will take every advantage he can, working or not. Finally I suggest, "Two dates a week, no more than two hours long - and no funny business." 🗨️

His white teeth flash against his bronze skin, "Don't worry little wolf, I won't lay a hand on you until you ask me to."

"That is never going to happen." I grind out, giving him my best scowl.

"Then you have nothing to worry about." He informs me huskily, his lips mere centimeters from my own, "do you?"

"No." I insist, stubbornly tilting my chin up. "I don't."

"Then we have a deal." Ethan offers me a predatory grin, and the triumph in his eyes makes me wonder if I haven't made a terrible mistake. "Seal it with a kiss?" He suggests.

"You're unbelievable." I remark dryly, slipping out of his hold.

"Tomorrow then?" He says to my back, "Around noon? I'll pick you and the pups up from Linda's."

"The pups?" I repeat in surprise. "Why should they come?"

"I thought we could take them on a picnic." Ethan explains, as if it's the most obvious thing in the world.

"But a date implies..." I struggle to find the right words.

"I thought it would be just us?"

"Oh, I'm sorry." I've never seen anyone who looks less sorry than my ex-husband in this moment. "Would you prefer a more romantic outing?"

"No." I mumble sulkily, "I wouldn't."

"Then it's settled, our first date will be a family picnic." Ethan proclaims. "That way Paisley and your pups can finally meet."

As I stalk away down the hall, I have to amend my earlier thinking. If I wanted to strangle Ethan before, it's nothing compared to how I'm feeling now.

When I get home, my pups are clamoring at the door to greet me, "Mommy, Mommy, Mommy!"

"Hello my babies!" I greet them enthusiastically, dropping kisses to their upturned faces and cuddling them each in turn. It always amazes me how much I miss the little darlings after only a few hours apart, it makes being separated from Paisley for so long seem nearly unfathomable. "I missed you so much, what have you been up to?"

"We made a fort!" They announce in unison, "come see!"

Three miniature paws guide me to our temporary room, and I'm delighted to find every last surface covered in blankets and pillows. We crawl inside together and lie down beneath the arched cotton ceiling, the boys cuddling up against my right side, and Riley on my left.

"Where have you been, Mommy?" Parker asks curiously.

"Actually I've been with the Alpha." I answer honestly.

"His little girl just had surgery."

"Paisley?" Ryder asks.

"How did you know her name?" I question, struck nearly dumb by the sound of her name on her brother's lips.

"He told us!" Riley shares quickly, though it doesn't escape me that Parker is currently elbowing his brother's side, as if in scolding. "Is she okay?"

"She's going to be just fine." I tell them, smiling when they all sigh with relief. It's just like my pups, to care so much about a stranger's wellbeing. They might have gotten Ethan's knack for mischief, but I like to think they also got my heart. "In fact," I continue, taking a deep breath, "you might get to meet her very soon. Ethan wants to take us on a picnic tomorrow."

"Really?" My pups exclaim, "Can we go? Can we go?"

"If you want to." I agree hesitantly. As much as I want to see all four of my pups together, the last thing I need is for Ethan to be there witnessing it. I'm going to have to do a better job of keeping him at bay moving forward. He's outsmarted me more than once today, and simply because I've been thrown so off balance by everything going wrong in our lives.

"We want to!" They all chime.

"Alright, alright!" I laugh, cuddling their small, warm bodies close. "We'll all go."

A little while later, when the pups are in bed and Linda and I are sharing a bottle of wine, I'm finally free to share all my chaotic feelings. "I think I'm in over my head, Linda." I admit. "He knows it's me."

"No." Linda reminds me, "He thinks he knows. He doesn't have any proof."

"But he's going to find it." I whisper nervously. "I know that's why he's suggested this deal. He's going to try to expose me. He thinks he can romance me into admitting the truth."

"So don't let him!" My friend encourages. "The day you left you stopped letting Ethan control you. Don't change that now. Don't move backwards. Show him that you aren't the same weak omega he took for granted. Show him he can't win that easily."

"How?" I ask her, feeling truly defeated, "the pups want to be with him. Paisley adores him. How am I ever supposed to compete?"

"The pups might want to be with him, but they'd rather have you any day. I'm sure of it." Linda states firmly. "Pups can survive without a father, but children need a mother."

"I don't know." I admit. "Seeing him with them these last few days... they all need a male role model. I don't think I'm ever going to be enough for them on my own."

"Stop thinking that way right now, Jane." Linda orders.

"You're a wonderful mother."

"Thank you." I sigh, "but knowing that isn't going to save me from Ethan."

"So what will?" She asks.

"I've got to find a way to keep him at a distance." I express. "If he gets too close, I'll give in - and he knows it."

"What about that Dark Moon wolf that's been sniffing around you lately?" She asks, referring to my friend Eric. I moved to the Dark Moon territory after leaving Ethan, and shortly after we arrived I befriended Eric, an Alpha who never once judged or questioned me despite being a single mother.

"He'd probably help if I asked, but I don't want to lead him on either." I confess. It's clear Eric isn't only interested in being my friend, and I've worked very hard to set boundaries between us.

"I'm not saying you should." Linda reasons, "Be up front with him, tell him what's happening with Ethan and let him decide, but if he's willing to help, that's his call."

"Linda, we both know it's not that simple." I exclaim.

"What's more important, Jane?" Linda asks sharply, "Protecting yourself and the pups for Ethan, or coddling this man's feelings?"



"Well, when you put it that way." I reluctantly acknowledge, pulling out my phone and dialing Eric's number. The sharp dial tone rings in my ear, and before long the line clicks open, "Eric?" I greet my friend, "It's Elise."

"Elise, my love, how are you?" My friend's deep voice sounds in my ear.

"Not so great." I admit, "I'm in a little bit of trouble."

I can practically feel Eric rising to my defense. He's everything I could ever ask for in a mate: handsome, strong, intelligent and full of integrity. Yet for whatever reason, he's never affected me the way Ethan has. I don't lose my head when I'm around him, I don't forget my own name and lose track of my surroundings, but the more time that passes, the more I'm convinced this is a good thing. "Tell me." He orders, already jumping to my rescue.

"It's the pups' father." I share despondently. "I'm back in the NightFang territory because my youngest was having surgery, but everything's falling apart." I admit. "Now Ethan's trying to win me over, and I don't think I can resist him much longer, Eric."

"Where are you?" Eric asks, urgency filling his voice.

"The Cité De La Nuit." I answer, naming the nightfang pack's capital.

If I had any doubts about who my true friends are, they're put to bed in that moment. Eric answers without hesitation, instantly promising to come to my aid. "I'm on my way."



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