

Chapter 38 - Family Picnic

Ethan

"Paisley, slow down!" I call, my hands itching to scoop her up off the ground. We're already at the park, and she's running ahead of me as usual. The only problem is that today isn't like any other, she's just been released from the hospital after major surgery, and someone clearly wants to harm her. I don't like letting her out of arm's length, let alone out of my sight.

She pauses only long enough to turn around and exclaim, "But Daddy I'm excited!"

"You just got out of the hospital little one, don't push yourself." I caution. Shifters might heal fast, but matters of the heart are always treated very seriously. The doctor said she could be up and about and play for short periods of time, but at this rate she's going to tire herself out before we ever get to playing.

"But Daddy!" She argues, pouting hard.

"Paisley slow down or I'll carry you the whole way like a baby." I threaten. Most of the time Paisley actually loves being carried, but she's been cooped up in the hospital for so long that she's completely stir-crazy, not to mention she doesn't want to look silly in front of the

other kids.

She throws back her head with a dramatic huff but continues forward at a slower pace, stomping her little feet every step of the way. Catching up to her, I cup her soft head in my palm, "that's my girl." I praise, earning a toothy smile from my daughter despite her sulky mood.

Suddenly in the distance I can hear Jane's voice calling remarkably similar instructions to her "triplets", "Slow down kids. You know the rules about staying where I can see you.

"Mommy hurry up!" One of the boys replies. At this age their scents are so similar it's impossible to tell the two apart. Standing side by side they'd be identical, if not for their clothing. It was a blessing Jane didn't follow so many parents' example and dress them to match.

Paisley jumps up and down, "That's Mommy!" Before I can say another word she's darting forward again. I catch sight of Jane and the pups just as Paisley rounds the bend and flies into Jane's open arms.

The sight takes my breath away. Jane already looked so beautiful my heart skipped a beat. She was wearing a silky sundress in the same shade of green as her eyes, and smiling so widely she lit up the entire path. The other pups stood on either side of her, looking up at her hugging Paisley with expressions of happy curiosity. If I'd



had the sense to pull out my phone I would have taken a picture of them in that pose, but I can't look away - I'm completely spellbound just watching them.

When Jane sets Paisley's feet back on the ground, the other pups huddle around her excitedly, their little voices floating over to me.

"Hiii!" Paisley greets them cheerily.

"Hi Paisley!" Ryder, Riley and Parker cry. They greet each other almost as if they're old friends, and immediately run off to play. I call after Paisley, reminding her to be careful, but I doubt she heard me.

As I close the final distance to Jane, the corners of my mouth quirk with amusement as she raises a pair of sunglasses to her eyes, clearly hiding from me.

"Hello Gorgeous." I smile warmly.

"Ethan." She utters, as if she couldn't care less to be seeing me.

"Shall we find a spot to lay out the picnic?" I press, earning only a noncommittal shrug in reply. Nonetheless, she follows me into the grassy meadow alongside the playground, and helps me lay out the blanket and food. Unpacking the basket one item at a time, she asks, "Did your chef prepare this?"

"No, I did." I correct her lightly, not that there was truly cooking involved: wine, bread, cheese, sliced meat and

fruit for Jane and I, plus sandwiches and juice boxes for the kids. Simple though it may be, I can see Jane eyeing the spread with obvious hunger, and promptly pour her a plastic cup of cabernet.

"Alright, let me have it." She invites, taking a sip of her drink.

Taken aback, I ask, "What do you mean?"

"I mean let me have it." She repeats. "Lay it on me, try whatever moves you've got hidden up your sleeve so we can get it over with."

"No moves, Janey." I assure her. "Today is just about getting to know each other."

"I already know everything I wish to know about you." She snarks.

"Well with that attitude these are going to be some very boring dates." I complain.

Jane smothers a grin, and I can't help but feel delighted by her obvious pleasure at the idea of thwarting me. She really is too cute sometimes. Watching Jane carefully, I ask, "So where do you live most of the time?"

"The Dark Moon territory," Of course I already know the answer to this question. I ran extensive background checks on Elise Carrington when we first ran into each other, but I am pleased to find she actually told me the truth.

"You like it there?" I press, "Better than Cité de la Nuit?"

"N-" Jane stops herself just in time. "Of course, I wouldn't live there otherwise."

I open my mouth to call her on her obvious lie when I hear the unmistakable sound of children taunting one another on the playground. Alongside a chorus of sing-song mocking and cruel laughs, one voice rises above the rest, "The Alpha can't be your father. You're too scrawny, do you even have a wolf?" The snide child wonders aloud. "Of course I have a wolf!" Paisley defends, "Everyone does."

"I dunno, a runt like you probably won't even be able to transform." The same child replies.

"Yer one to talk." One of the boys steps up in defense of Paisley, "You look more like a dirty mutt than a wolf. I bet you even have fleas."

Of a sudden, a new chorus begins with the triplet chanting "flea-boy" over and over again, the same way the others had been repeatedly calling my sweet Paisley a runt moments before.

"I do not have fleas!" The offended child shouts in protest. "Take it back!"

"Take back what you said about Paisley." Riley demands.

"Or what?" One of the little bully's friends challenges.

Jane's pups exchange knowing glances, and all at once they lunge for Paisley's tormentors, rolling around on the ground in a tangle of limbs, growling, clawing and biting. Jane is halfway on her feet, but I move faster. Plucking the pups up by the scruffs of their necks, two in one hand and one in the other. Looking down at their foes, I find a quartet of six-year-olds curled up into frightened little balls on the ground. Feeling a rush of pride the youngsters took on the group of older pups, outnumbered and all, I quickly remind myself that I can't show them how pleased I am by their strength and bravery.

Glancing behind me, I see Paisley climbing into Jane's loving arms, her face red and shining with tears. The sight makes it infinitely harder to scold the triplets, because I myself want to trounce the little mongrels that put that look on my daughter's face. Still, as Jane kisses away Paisley's tears and gently rocks her, I turn to Parkey, Ryder and Riley, and do what I must.

Jane

"Would one of you like to tell me what happened?" Ethan questions sternly, holding my pups as if they're a bundle of ragdolls. His strength never ceases to impress me. Occasionally I manage to carry two of the kids at once, but it gets harder and harder with every inch they grow, and I certainly couldn't juggle them as effortlessly as he

does now.

"They started it!" All three pups cry at once.

"That isn't what I asked." Ethan states calmly.

"They were calling Paisley names." Ryder pipes up.

"And making fun 'f her for being small." Riley adds indignantly.

"And do you think attacking them made things better?" Ethan presses gently.

"It shut them up." Riley counters slyly.

"Riley." Ethan scolds, making the sassy little girl tuck her tail between her legs.

Even so, she mutinously mutters, "They d'served it."

"We don't solve our problems with violence young lady."

Ethan lectures evenly, not showing any of the humor I know he must feel at the pup's stubborn defiance.

"But Alphas fight." Parker argues, leaping to his sister's defense.

"Alphas only fight when there's no other choice." Ethan corrects him. "I've been Alpha for years and I solve hundreds more problems talking to people and listening than I do fighting. Fighting makes enemies, talking makes allies, and we all need as many allies as we can get in this life." He sets them on the ground and nudges them towards their cowering opponents, "Now help them

up and say you're sorry."

Who is this man, and what did he do with the monster I married? I think in shock. Yet even as the words are echoing in my head, I know they aren't entirely fair. Ethan wasn't a monster in the beginning, or even the middle. It was only after I "betrayed" him. Remembering the way he handled our own conflicts darkens the cloud hovering over my head considerably. It's all good and well for him to lecture toddlers on conflict resolution, but when push comes to shove, he's no role model.

Instead of talking and listening to me after Eve's scheming, I got five minutes of distraught questioning to explain, and when I couldn't I was written off and had my freedom taken as punishment. The more I think about it the angrier I get, so it's perfect timing when I see a familiar face in the distance.

A tall, handsome wolf is crossing the meadow, heading straight towards us. His blue eyes glint even at this distance, and his dark hair looks more blue than black in the sunlight. I'd recognize him anywhere: Eric.

