

Chapter 51 - Custody

Jane

"I agree." Ethan answers promptly, completely stunning me. "She does belong with you and you should have custody."

"What?" I ask uncertainly, not believing my ears.

"I will gladly give you custody." Ethan vows, prowling closer. "If you come home where you belong."

Realizing he wants me to come back and live with him again, I ball my hands into fists, "I don't belong with you."

"You do." He proclaims, "You and the other pups. I don't want our family to be divided."

"No." I counter instantly. "I want Paisley, I want to take her back to the Dark Moon pack so I can finally move forward with my life. It's been on hold for too long as it is."

"You want to take her from me?" Ethan demands, understanding clicking in his mind. "From the only home she's ever known?"

"My life is in the Dark Moon territory." I answer with a shrug.

Watching me closely, his dark eyes widen. "This was

your plan from the beginning wasn't it?"

"You didn't really think I'd give her up for good did you?"

I scoff, glaring at the horrified wolf. "Leaving her with you was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life – ten times harder than actually birthing her."

"Why did you leave her that way?" He questions, "If it was that difficult, if you're so determined for her to be with you, why did you walk away?"

"Because she would have died without your money and influence, Ethan!" I snarl, "I didn't have a choice."

"You had a choice!" He bites back, "You could have stayed – you didn't have to leave her without a mother when she needed one most."

"Yes I did!" I exclaim, feeling tears burn in my eyes, "I couldn't become your slave again Ethan, and that's exactly what would have happened. I couldn't be a mother to any of them if I was locked away in your bedroom, servicing you like you're the bloody king of the hill!"

"How can you think that? I would never do such a thing to the mother of my children!" Ethan claims, making me want to positively scream. He still doesn't seem to think there's anything wrong with what he did to me, as if becoming a slave was somehow better than going to jail. He still doesn't seem to understand how deeply he hurt

me, and in this moment, I want nothing more than to make him feel even a fraction of the pain he caused me.

"You're wrong about two things." I announce coldly, "first you would have, because if you can do it once you can do it again. And second, they aren't your children."

He blinks, "What are you talking about."

"The pups aren't yours." I declare, rolling with my lie now that it's out there.

His face twists up in utter disbelief. "Jane, the boys look exactly like me."

"You're seeing what you want to - sure they have your coloring, but so do a lot of people." My mind scrambles, trying to keep up with my mouth and come up with a rational explanation for how the kids could belong to anyone else.

"You gave birth only seven months after we divorced." Ethan presses, clearly not believing me.

"Multiples are never carried to term." I state simply, "that's why Paisley was so small."

Ethan crosses his arms over his chest. "Alright, let's say that I believe you." He suggests skeptically. "If they're not mine then whose are they?"

"Eric's." I throw out, hoping that I can convince my friend to go along with the story. Luckily the two men do have

the same general coloring. In fact, other than Eric's blue eyes, he really could pass as the pups' father. He's even been mistaken as their father a few times in the Dark Moon territory.

"You didn't even meet Eric until after you moved away!" Ethan reminds me.

"That's where you're wrong." I argue, feeling a bit dizzy now. The more lies I spin the more I feel as though I'm unraveling. One or two untruths are manageable, but if I continue this way I'm quickly going to weave a web too complex to ever keep up with. "He does business here occasionally. We met towards the end of our marriage and... it just happened. I believed you were having an affair, so I had one too." 📍

"The kids call him uncle." Ethan rumbles, making my frustration grow. This would be a lot easier if he wasn't so quick-witted.

"It was only a one night stand at the time." I state, wrapping my arms around myself protectively as Ethan moves closer still. "I called him when I found out I was pregnant, but he agreed he'd only be as involved as I wanted. I refused to tie myself to another man ever again, so we decided together that I would have sole custody. We didn't reconnect until after they were born."

"I would have known if you cheated on me, Jane." Ethan

informs me gruffly. "Whether you believe me or not, and regardless of the mistakes I may have made, you were the most important thing in the world to me. I would have known you'd been with someone else."

"It was one time." I repeat, digging in my heels. "You might think you're too smart or attentive to notice, but you also thought I wasn't fucking miserable being your slave. You're not infallible - no matter how highly you think of yourself."

"That's not the only reason why your story doesn't hold up, little wolf." He reasons, pacing back and forth in front of me. Despite his words, my story is clearly getting to him. "No alpha would agree to give up his children that easily, let alone allow one to be raised by another man."

"Not every alpha is as controlling as you are!" I accuse, and at least this much is true. Eric might be dominant and bossy like most alpha wolves, but he doesn't hold a candle to Ethan. Of course, he doesn't have a pack to lead either. "Some men are capable of actually respecting a woman's wishes. He didn't need to claim me or the pups to feel powerful, he was happy to simply be in our lives at all."

"And Paisley?" Ethan presses, "He wasn't bothered to let me keep her?"

"He didn't have any more choice in the matter than I did."

I explain, "he wasn't as wealthy then as he is now, and he still doesn't have your connections.

"If you don't want to tie yourself to anyone again, why are you marrying him?" Ethan questions then, towering over me. Shivering reflexively, I try to catch up with his train of thought. Does this mean he believes me about the pups? Is he just trying to throw me off? Studying him closely, I realize it's neither, the possessive jerk just doesn't like knowing I'm with anyone else. He still thinks of me as his property, even after all this time.

"That's how I felt at the time." I amend, "not anymore. It has taken the better part of four years to build enough trust between us to reach this place. It wasn't easy for him to undo the damage you did, but over time I've come to feel safe enough with him to take this step." Of all the lies I've told this evening, this one is the biggest. The damage Ethan inflicted on my heart is still very much in place, and I don't think it will ever be repaired.

"No, I don't believe you." Ethan shakes his head, "I don't believe they're his."

"That's your problem." I insist stubbornly. "It's the truth and I'm not going to stay here and keep arguing about it. You need to accept the fact that you don't have any claim on Paisley or the others." As reckless as it had been to

tell Ethan any of this, suddenly I'm realizing it might be the one way to keep us out of court. If I can make him believe he doesn't have a legal claim on the kids, he might agree to keep everything between us.

Ethan is staring at me as if he doesn't recognize me, and I try my best to remain calm under his scrutiny. My heart is pounding so hard in my chest I feel certain he can hear it. After weeks of stress, it feels like everything that's happened since I returned to this damned city has come down to this moment. Despite my worst fears, I survived Ethan finding out I'm alive. I survived him learning about the other pups and we got Paisley through her surgery. The only thing between me and the future I've been dreaming about since I first learned I was pregnant is the man in front of me, and I can barely breathe waiting to find out if I've convinced him.

After a few long moments of contemplation, his deep voice lands like a hammer, and my heart stops completely. "I want a paternity test."

