

Chapter 52 - Bargaining

Ethan

I don't care what Jane says, I know the pups are mine. She can lie until she's blue in the face, but she won't convince me that she cheated on me with Eric. I know my ex-wife better than anyone else in the world and no matter how miserable she may have been, she wouldn't have broken her vows.

"Fine." Jane snaps, not even pausing to think about my request. Shocked, I narrow my eyes at her. She sounds completely confident and unconcerned at the prospect of having a paternity test conducted. In fact, she seems actually eager to get it done. "When do you want to do it?"

For the first time, a seed of doubt settles in my stomach, making my insides churn and roil with unease. "You'll do it?" I ask dumbly.

"Yes." Jane confirms simply. "I'll gladly give you a paternity test and when it comes back negative, I'm taking my daughter."

Two things occur to me at once, first that she's already forged one DNA test, so she might simply be bluffing and assuming she can pull the same trick here. However the second is that if she really is telling the truth, or if she

somehow succeeds in faking a second test, she really will take Paisley from me. The idea of losing my daughter doesn't just make me feel nauseous, it stills the breath right out of my lungs.

Whether or not she's my blood, I've raised her from the day she was born. She is my daughter in every way that matters, and she's Jane's own creation, a living embodiment of the woman I love. Biology aside, Paisley is my everything.

"You can't take Paisley." I say in a voice like gravel. "I'm the only parent she's ever known and she is the only reason I survived losing you."

"You lost me long before I faked my death, Ethan." Jane professes somberly, "you lost me the day you chose Eve over me."

"I did no such thing!" I object ferociously.

"Of course you did!" She exclaims, "You believed her lies, you let her schemes convince you I was a monster!"

I can't stop myself from reaching out and taking hold of Jane's shoulders. This is the first time I've heard her suggest things might have happened differently than I've always been told. Until I heard her say this, I never realized how badly I wanted another explanation. I never wanted to believe Jane had done what Mom and Eve said, but she never gave me any other choice. "Are you saying

you didn't attack her?"

She sort of deflates, staring at the ground even as I duck my head to try and hold her gaze. "No." Jane murmurs after a moment. "I did. It happened exactly the way she always said."

"Then how was it a scheme, baby?" I prompt, "what did you mean when you said that?"

Jane looks back up at me with wide eyes, exactly the same way she'd looked at me that horrible day when I ordered her to tell me why she'd wanted to hurt Mom and Eve. It had been nearly impossible to hold onto my anger then, and now her helplessness tugs at my heartstrings more than ever. "I can't!" She finally bursts out, "I can't talk about it."

"Why not?" I urge.

"I just can't." She sighs, burying her face in her hands, "It's like I'm wearing an invisible gag tying my tongue into knots every time I try to explain. I never defended myself because I couldn't."

"Okay," I murmur, pulling her into my arms and feeling shocked when she actually lets me, "It's okay." Rubbing her back, I explain. "I never understood that attack - not why the rogues went after Mom but not you and Eve, or why you tried to stop Eve from helping her. Now that we know what Eve is capable of... it seems much likelier

that she planned the whole thing to break us up. Do you think she found some way to spellbind you?"

Jane nods softly, melting further into my embrace and sending a tidal wave of guilt washing over me. The realization that I punished Jane so ruthlessly for a crime she didn't commit slams into me like a speeding train, and suddenly I can't really blame her for hating me so much.

Jane mutters something against my chest, and when I pull away there are tears in her eyes. "Whether or not I could speak, I deserved the benefit of the doubt, Ethan. I was your wife. You betrayed me, you betrayed our vows by believing I was capable of such a thing."

"I'm sorry." I tell her honestly. "Truly, Jane – but please, don't punish me by taking Paisley."

"It's not a punishment." She responds, swiping at her cheeks. "It's simply the way things are meant to be. She isn't yours, and while I appreciate everything you've done for her, I meant what I said. I won't have her be raised by someone who thought enslaving her mother was an appropriate punishment. Even if I was guilty, what you did was unforgivable."

"Jane, I made a mistake!" I begin, knowing my actions were indefensible but unable to take them back.

"No, you made a million mistakes!" Jane responds, "You

didn't just do it once, you made the decision to treat me that way every single day for more than a year, and you never even seemed to notice what it was doing to me! You were actually surprised when I finally left you."

"I thought you had accepted the punishment because you felt guilty for your actions!" I share, feeling my leash on my temper slip away a little more with every word. "If you were that unhappy, why did you stay as long as you did?"

"I didn't know I could leave!" Jane hisses, "I didn't know it was legal for an omega to request a divorce until Linda was in law school and found the law in one of her textbooks."

Breathing heavily, I rack my brain for some way to convince Jane not to do this. If there really is a chance that Paisley isn't mine, it's becoming painfully obvious that Jane won't hesitate to take her away. When this conversation began, I thought she was angry with me. Certainly she was furious about what happened between Paisley and Eve, but I assumed the same emotion was motivating everything. I assumed she was angry about the past and taking it out on me. Now I'm beginning to suspect a very different feeling is actually driving her.

"You're afraid of me." I say, speaking the words even as I realize the truth.

"Of course I'm afraid of you, Ethan!" Jane replies, staring at me as if I'm the biggest fool on the planet. "You broke my heart, you stole my freedom!"

As strange as it seems, hearing her confirm this actually gives me a fraction of hope. After all, she wouldn't be so afraid unless I still had the power to hurt her. A few minutes ago she was coming to pieces in my arms, and if I hadn't stopped kissing her to ask why she left, we'd probably be in bed right now. This wasn't even the first time she slipped up.

Jane is clearly still attracted to me, even though she's engaged to another man. In fact, the more time we spend together, the more she softens. When we first ran into each other she wasn't even willing to let Paisley get near her, but in a matter of weeks she's come full circle and admitted she's her mother.

Just as I'm thinking it may have been a mistake to trade working with her for a few dates, a new idea strikes me, one that would give me plenty of chances to break down the walls Jane has built around herself. Maybe the solution to our custody problem isn't a paternity test or any legal battle, but simply more time.

"I'm sorry, Jane. That's never what I wanted but I know that doesn't make it okay. I can see how wrong I've been, so I'll make you another deal." I offer, taking her hand

and trying to look contrite. "I'll let you take Paisley with you when you leave after the fragrance launch." Her eyes widen almost imperceptibly, and I can feel her pulse racing beneath my fingertips. "But I think we need to give Paisley time to adjust before we turn her life completely upside down."

"Okay?" She says, nervously licking her lips.

"Move in with me, you and the other pups." I suggest. "Live here with us so Paisley can get used to her new way of life. Let her get to know her siblings and come to terms with the idea of leaving, so there can be a smooth transition – for all of us."

Jane stares at me, her lips still swollen from our kisses and parted in surprise. Of course, I have no intention of letting Paisley go at the end of the agreement. If a few stolen moments are enough to get Jane to forget herself enough to nearly sleep with me, a few months should be plenty of time to win her back. "Well, what do you say?"

