

Chapter 7 Dad and Mom playing hide-and-seek

Ethan

All the air in my lungs leaves in a great whoosh. "What did you say?"

Paisley looks up at me with wide, green eyes the exact shade of her mother's. My daughter inherited my bronze skin and dark hair, but she's Jane's perfect miniature in every other way. Sometimes the resemblance is so great it actually hurts to look at her. Maybe that's why I imagined she said she was with her Mommy. I was thinking about Jane, so I conjured the words in my head.

Except when Paisley answers me, she repeats the same impossible phrase. "I met Mommy today. She found me and bought me pancakes. She shrugs innocently. "And then she gave me to Ms Linda to bring home."

Linda. I think, the name ringing a bell in the back of my mind. Wasn't that the name of Jane's maid of honor at our wedding?

When I don't answer, Paisley slides her hand into my pocket, retrieving my wallet. She flips the leather pouch open, pointing to the picture in the main photo slot.

Jane's beautiful face smiles up at us from the glossy print, her lush silhouette bathed in a golden halo of sunlight. I didn't even realize Paisley knew the picture existed. I've kept all my surviving photos of Jane hidden since Paisley was a baby, terrified that if she saw them I'd be forced to tell her about her mother's tragic fate.

"This is my Mommy, isn't it?" Paisley asks, pointing at the picture.

"Yes, angel." I confirm softly. "That's your Mommy. But it isn't possible that you met her today." I broach carefully, knowing the moment has finally come where I have to tell my pup the terrible truth.

"But I did!" Paisley insists. "This is the lady I met. She was pretty and kind, and she smelled so nice! Like sunshine!"

Freezing in place, I stare down at my pup in shock. It's not possible... but if she's seen the photo... if she knows what Jane looks like... And then Linda... Abruptly burying my nose in Paisley's neck, I inhale deeply, trying to scent every last shifter who's touched her since we parted. I can smell Linda and Frank, but stronger than either of their aromas is one I do not recognize. At least, I don't recognize all of it.

Another she-wolf was with my daughter today, and from the smell of it she was quite affectionate with the pup.

Moonflowers, jasmine, and there, lingering around the edges - sunshine. Jane always did smell like the bright afternoon sun to me. Is it possible her scent could have changed this much? Is it really possible she's alive? I never did see her body.

"Sweetheart, where did you meet her?" My wolf is clawing at the surface of my skin, begging to be let out so that he might track down our chosen mate.

"Near auntie Eve's store." She sniffs, "She called me her love and carried me 'round so I didn' have to walk. And even though she said you couldn't buy her for me, I can tell she wanted to say yes."

Choking back a laugh, I stare into Paisley's sweet little face, "You offered to have me buy her?"

"She said that wasn't allowed." Paisley pouts, "But I don't know why." My pup looks up at me in confusion, begging me to help her understand. "Daddy, why haven' I met her 'till now?"

I don't know how to explain this to her. The more Paisley has shared the more convinced I've become that she's right. I can't explain the strange electrical current weaving through my body, insisting that Jane isn't dead after all. Still, that possibility lends more questions than answers. Besides, what if I'm wrong? After all, it's not like I'm impartial. I want Jane to be alive more than I

want to breathe.

"Mommy and I got separated a few years ago." I finally answer, deciding this is the safest answer.

"Is Mommy playing hide 'n' seek with you?" Paisley asks, "Like how you and me play?"

I smile, cupping my pup's small head in my palm. "Yes, little one. That's exactly right." This is one statement I have no problem agreeing with: If Jane is out there somewhere she has absolutely been hiding from me.

"Are you going to find her?" Paisley inquires, looking hopeful.

"You have my word, Paisley." I vow, "If Mommy is out there, nothing in this world will stop me from finding her."

Paisley and I start our search outside Eve's atelier. I'm still not certain the woman she met was Jane, but I can't risk assuming she's wrong. I would never forgive myself if Paisley's mother was out there and I didn't do everything in my power to reunite our family.

The same scent I caught on my pup flutters around the boutique's entrance, and when we step inside it grows stronger still. Belatedly I realize that if Jane was in Eve's shop, then my old friend would probably have seen her.

Striding up to the counter, I greet the receptionist warmly.

“Good morning, is Eve in her office?”

The she-wolf fawns and blushes, “Of course, Alpha. I’ll let her know you’re on your way up.”

Eve

When my receptionist informs me that Ethan is headed for my office, excitement washes over me. He’s been paying more attention to me lately, so much so that I’m sure I’m finally winning him over. It’s taken far too long for him to get over Jane, and this visit is surely a leap forward. He’s actually taken time out of all his important business to come see me!

Unfortunately I smell the brat the moment the elevator dings outside my office, and then I hear her infuriating little voice as the Alpha approaches my door. Why in the Goddess’s name did he bring her? I’ve never understood why he likes the runt in the first place, she’s weak and useless like her mother.

Still, I plaster a smile on my face when they enter, greeting them warmly. “Ethan!” I exclaim, kissing him on both cheeks, I was just about to call you. I’m going shopping to decide on our new signature perfume line this afternoon - you have to come with me!”

“I’m sorry Eve, I’m a bit busy at the moment.” He brushes

me off easily. "I wanted to ask you about the clients you saw yesterday. Was there anyone who reminded you of Jane?"

Ice freezes in my veins, how does he know? "I'm sure I would know," I lie, "I've been so busy trying to launch the campaign that I've scarcely been in the shop." Stroking my hand down his chest, I try again. "I could really use your opinion today, Ethan."

"I can't, Eve." Ethan says again. "I have more important things on my mind."

"We're looking for my Mommy." Paisley pipes up. I swear the pup is the bane of my existence. If Jane was going to die she could at least have had the decency to take the brat with her.

"Your mommy?" I repeat, incredulous. "Who looks for someone they're never going to find?"

Rage flashes across the Alpha's face, and I realize my mistake. "What did you just say?" He snarls.

"I'm sorry, Ethan." I breathe, lowering my eyes submissively. Of course, when I drop my gaze it lands squarely on the pup, who looks so smug I could vomit. Then and there I realize I'll never win Ethan so long as the brat is in the picture. One way or another - I'm going to have to get rid of her, and soon.