

Chapter 18 Hide and Seek

Only afterwards, when I smell how strongly Ethan has rubbed off on the pup, and glance down to see her wearing a dress Riley does not own, do I realize my mistake. It isn't Riley after all; it's Paisley.

Looking around nervously to ensure no one is watching, I lean down and scoop my daughter up. Mark will never know the difference between her and Riley, and as long as Ethan cannot see me, it should be safe for me to steal a moment with the beloved pup.

Excusing myself, I retreat to one of the classrooms down the hall. A few minutes ago I told myself I would turn her away again if we ran into each other, but now that she's in front of me I can't help myself. She looks so pale, so tired. Her final surgery is next week and while there will be a long recovery before we can be reunited, it seems the procedure itself is coming just in time. I can't bear to waste this chance to cuddle her when she's facing such risk.

"Hello little one." I greet Paisley once we're alone.

My little girl doesn't beat around the bush. "Mommy, why've you been hiding from Daddy?"

"Paisley my love, you can't call me Mommy. I'm so sorry." I breathe, hating the horrible words on my tongue.

"Why not?" Her head cocks to the side, "Is it cause of playing hide 'n' seek?"

The gears in my mind slowly turn over, trying to make sense of her words. "What?"

"Daddy says you playing hide 'n' seek with him. Is that why I can't call you Mommy?" She reasons, looking only slightly hurt.

"Yes angel." I agree. "That's also why you can't tell him you saw me, or I'll lose the game."

She thinks about this for a moment, her lovely face scrunching up in thought. "But if you lose the game, will you come home?"

My throat tickles as I shake my head and I fight back tears. "No. I can only be your Mommy if I win."

"But why?" She presses, in the way all young pup do when they don't understand a problem.

"That's just the way it is." I explain softly. "One day I'll tell you everything - when you're older."

"You pwomise?" Paisley inquires, looking at me sternly. For the first time since we met, I'm finally free to speak the truth. "I promise."

Eve

My life just seems to get worse and worse.

After Ethan found Paisley at the open house, wandering towards us with a cookie she snagged from the snack

table and looking far too pleased with herself, we finally left. I can't believe what just happened.

Those pups Linda claimed as her own are undoubtedly Ethan's, and that means that Elise Carrington truly is Jane in disguise. I've got to get Jane and her other brats out of the territory, without undermining my own business interests or letting Ethan know about my plans, and then I've still got to find a way to get rid of Paisley. After a few brief inquiries I obtain the drug I seek, making sure it couldn't be detected in an autopsy before handing over the cash. Now all I have to do is sit back and wait.

The day before Paisley's surgery finally arrives, and I join Ethan at the hospital, keeping the wretched pup company while the Alpha completes her admission paperwork. She's been asleep almost all afternoon, and I'm just starting to lose my patience when she blinks her ugly little eyes open.

"Hello, princess." I croon, adopting the sort of sickly sweet voice I often hear people use with young children.

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm thirsty." She moans, stretching.

"Oh you poor thing!" I exclaim, "let me get you some water." Inside my heart soars, this is exactly what I hoped would happen. Turning my back to the bed, I pour a glass of water from the sink and pull the small vial of clear liquid from my pocket. Dumping the contents into

the glass, I say a quick prayer to the Goddess. My contact assured me that it would take a full twenty four hours to kick in, which means it should kill the little monster towards the end of her procedure. Of course the doctors would try to save her but not knowing poison was causing the crash, they would probably never think of giving her an antidote.

I turn back to Paisley with a big, fake smile. Naturally she's too young to see through my act, and I offer her the glass. "Here you are, honey."

Just then I see movement in my periphery, and to my shock Jane's sons charge into the room, their tiny forms tackling my legs and knocking me to the ground. Screeching in outrage as I crash onto the tiles, the water glass falls from my hands and spills all over the floor.

"You little bastards!" I exclaim, "what do you think you're doing!"
