

## Chapter 47 - Missing

Jane

It takes a moment for Ethan's words to sink in, especially with him holding me so tenderly. I want to surrender to the comforting warmth, however when his announcement does sink in, I quickly untangle myself from his embrace and look up at him in horror.

"Missing? But you said..." I stutter helplessly, searching for any kind of logic in this madness. "You said Frank wouldn't take his eyes off her."

Ethan frowns deeply, gesturing for the guard in question to remove Eve from the room. As the mewling woman is dragged out, my ex explains, "He was making her lunch - the cameras in the lobby show her running out on her own."

The room is positively spinning. I can't even begin to process this after everything we've already been through lately. My mind whirrs, trying to sort out a plan of action. I need to find Paisley as soon as possible, I need to make sure she's safe, but my anger is getting the better of me. More than all my fear and despair, I'm completely outraged that this happened right under Ethan's nose. "How could you! She was supposed to be safe with you!"

He reaches for me again, looking as if he thinks I can simply be cuddled into submission. "Janey, please –"

"No! Don't touch me!" I snap, jerking away from him.

"Don't talk to me – just leave me alone."

Pushing him away, I spin for the door and storm out, deciding to search for my pup without the Alpha's help. What Eve did was unforgivable, but as usual Ethan seems to have a blind spot where she's concerned. The idea that he could suspect her of attempting to murder our child, but chose to allow her to roam free while law enforcement built a case, rather than simply locking her up before she could hurt anyone else is preposterous. Sure, it might not be legal per se, but I'd rather keep Paisley safe and have that bitch cash in some of her bad karma than risk something like this happening.

Steam billows from my ears as I wait for the penthouse elevator, but unfortunately it's too slow. Ethan catches up to me before the silver car arrives, then halts me before I can make a break for the staircase. "Hold on a second." He growls, catching my arm. "Don't you dare stand there and I act like I'm not devastated by this. Paisley has been my entire world for the last four years." His ferocious tone draws my gaze up, and the pain on his countenance staggers me. "I'm the one who's been there every day, watching her grow. I'm the one who's rocked her to sleep

and kissed her boo-boos and agonized through every last medical procedure.”

As if I haven't been suffering wishing I was there to do all those things, I think bitterly. As if I haven't sacrificed. If it wasn't for Ethan, I wouldn't have been forced to separate my family. I wouldn't have missed my daughter's first words, first steps and everything that came before and after. His pain may be real, but so is mine. “And you're the one who left her with that psychopath and a clearly negligent bodyguard!” I accuse fiercely. “Has it occurred to you that the recording we heard is one soundbite from what has probably been years of abuse?” Hot tears flood my eyes. “That has been happening right under your nose, Ethan. The responsibility is sure as hell on Eve's shoulders - but it's also on yours.”

“You think I don't know that?!” Ethan explodes, his voice breaking. “Do you think I will ever - ever - forgive myself for not seeing it?”

“Good.” I nod coldly, stepping into the elevator when it finally arrives, “Because you deserve to carry that with you, Ethan. That and everything else you've done or let happen because of that snake. For your sake and Paisley's, I only hope she's too young for this to have done too much damage.”

The doors close before Ethan can answer, but I don't think I'll even forget the anguished expression on his face. He looked as if he'd been kicked in the stomach at least a dozen times: breathless, ill and aching all at once. I don't regret a word.

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All of my instincts are urging me to begin searching for Paisley immediately, but some unknown force tells me to stop at home first. My apartment is so close by that it won't cost me any time, and I think it will help me to see my other pups. I've become so paranoid with all the attempts against Paisley that even though I have no reason to fear for her siblings, the mother in me simply can't help it.

I pause outside the door to try and get myself under control, but all hope for composure disappears when I hear four little voices inside instead of three. I rush into the apartment, surprised and confused when I see all four of my children together.

My babysitter is standing in the kitchen looking very confused, and before the kids realize I'm there, I sidle over to her. All the rage and fear that had been pulsing through my veins a moment ago has disappeared completely, leaving me feeling somewhat dizzy. "Sadie, what on earth is going on?" I ask the college-aged nanny.

"Well, about a half hour ago Riley turned up at the front door, saying that she was sorry she'd left but she was back now." Sadie answers shakily, "at the time the boys were in their room, so I assumed she snuck out. But then I went to take them a snack and..." She gestures helplessly at the kids, as if the sight of them was explanation enough.

"Riley turned up?" I clarify, "or Paisley?"

"No, it was definitely Riley." Sadie confirms, taking a deep breath. "Jane, I think they switched places."

Suddenly I realize that Riley had seemed awfully tame the last couple of days, not so altered that I would have suspected she was her sister instead, but certainly more mellow than usual.

Stumbling into the living room where my pups are playfully wrestling, making the most adorable little growling noises as they roll around together, I say, "Kids?" Four little heads pop up in surprise, followed quickly by four sets of feet pitter patter across the floor. "Mommy!" Ryder, Parker and Riley fall into my arms in their usual pattern, my little girl sandwiched between her brothers. Only Paisley hangs back, looking unsure of herself. Before I can invite her into the embrace, Riley reaches blindly behind herself, latching onto her sister's arm and dragging her in.

Kissing them each in turn, I study their guilty faces.

"Okay, who wants to tell me what's going on?"

Ryder and Parker start to back away as if they plan on letting their sisters explain their scheme, but I stop them with a single stern look. "Uh-uh, you two stay."

Though Riley and the boys look abashed but unafraid, sweet Paisley is glancing up at me with wide eyes, clearly unsure what to expect on her first occasion getting in trouble with me. "Are you mad?"

"I'm extremely glad you're all right." I tell her, offering an extra snuggle, "But you all scared the Alpha and I half to death, and I expect you to be honest with me about what's happened here over the last few days."

"Paisley an' I switched places at da arcade." Riley tells me, tucking her proverbial tail between her legs and staring at the floor. "We were 'fraid Eve would try to do someting to her."

"You mean to tell me it's you on that recording, Riley?" I ask, horrified that my children considered switching one child for another as being somehow safer, especially when Riley's more outgoing personality might have provoked Eve into doing something rash.

She nods, confessing, "we knew she was bad."

"But sneaky." Ryder adds, "we had to catch her."

"Okay," I breathe, trying to wrap my brain around this

dilemma. "This is what's going to happen. We are all going to take Paisley home to her father, and we're going to do it together because we need to have a little chat about safety, honesty, and communication."

"I have to go back to live with Eve?" Paisley asks me sadly.

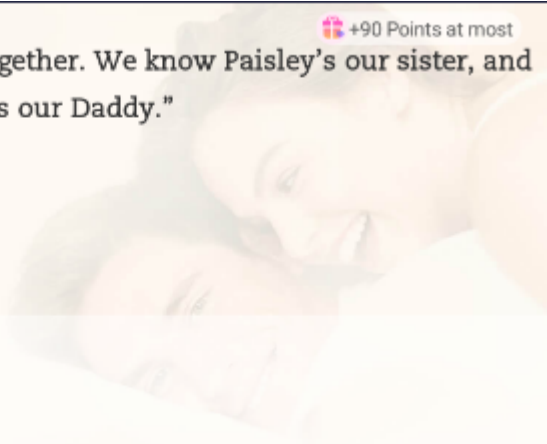
"No angel," I promise, petting her soft cheek. "Trust me, Even isn't going to be living there any more after today. The way she treated you was absolutely unacceptable, and no one ever deserves to be bullied like that. It is absolutely not your fault and it never should have happened. I need all of you to promise me that if anyone ever talks to you that way or tries to hurt you, you will tell me or another grown up you trust. If you're worried you're in danger, you have to tell an adult, please, please don't try to handle it on your own."


I think some of my words sink in, and I'm sure after Ethan and I drill them into their little heads half a dozen more times, they'll stick. However at the moment, the pups are exchanging meaningful glances and making zero effort to move towards the door.

"What?" I ask, "Is there something else you need to tell me?"

The quadruplets seem to silently nominate Parker, who looks me dead in the eye and announces, "Mommy, we

should all live t'gether. We know Paisley's our sister, and we know Ethan's our Daddy."



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