

Chapter 76 - Wine Tasting

Jane

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The press conference he gave yesterday finally put my tormented heart at ease, proving once and for all that he doesn't intend to let me take the fall for Petra's murder. I suppose Eric would say it's another trick, another example of the Alpha trying to prove he's on my side so that I won't blame him when things go wrong, but this occasion is so unlike the first time.

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involved somehow. After all, Eric wasn't there last time and I was – I know how it felt and I know how different things are this time around.

One of the vineyard employees appears by our side then, exchanging our empty glasses for fresh ones. She pours the decadent burgundy liquid into graceful crystal glasses while describing the vintage in more detail than I honestly needed, but I don't complain. This vineyard's tasting portions are more like full-sized servings in a restaurant than true samples.

Sipping the new sample once she departs, I sigh contentedly as I savor the taste. Then, feeling the fine hairs on the back of my neck rise to stand on end, I glance to my left and catch Ethan watching me with a tender smile. "I think we might need to get some food into you." He teases, "you're going to be completely sloshed."

"Hey, I'm no light weight." I reply haughtily, turning my nose up at the presumptuous statement.

"Except in the literal sense of the word." Ethan chuckles, raking his eyes over my body, "you forget that I know you better than I know myself, Janey."

"Maybe you used to." I reply, slipping out of his hold and sauntering towards the villa's tasting room, "but it's been a long time. Wrangling three pups builds up your

tolerance like nothing else.”

“Uh-huh.” He indulges me, following at a close distance, “is that why you can’t walk in a straight line?”

Straightening up indignantly, I grouse, “hey, you wanted us to relax and have fun, not me. You don’t get to backtrack because your idea worked too well.”

“I’m not backtracking.” Ethan grins, “I simply think we can avoid a nasty hangover if we have some lunch with our drinks.”

Pursing my lips, I ponder the vineyard’s offerings, suddenly realizing how good a charcuterie board sounds.

“Can we keep sampling while we eat?” I inquire hopefully, “I wouldn’t want to waste the pairings.”

“We can do whatever you want, gorgeous.” Ethan agrees, tucking me under his arm as we return to the main building.

A little while later I’m salivating over a curated spread of rustic bread, fruit, cheese and meat, and Ethan is eyeing me as if I’m the meal, rather than the food on the table between us. I know I’m entering dangerous territory here, because I’m painfully conscious of his attention, yet I have no intention of discouraging it at all. Clearly I didn’t realize how heavily Ethan’s potential betrayal had been weighing on me, because despite my situation being every bit as dire as it had been a few days ago, I suddenly

feel light as a feather.

"Are you going to have some of this," I ask him saucily, "or are you just going to keep staring at me?"

"Can you blame me?" He remarks, arching a brow. "You have to admit it's an incredible view."

"I dunno." I flirt, throwing caution to the wind. "Mine's not so bad either."

Ethan shakes his head and laughs, "You're trouble, you know that?"

"Where do you think the pups got it?" I counter, unable to contain my beam. I know some of my good spirits are purely from the wine, but if I'm being honest I know I'm just using the wine as an excuse to release some of the pent up sexual tension between us. It's been building for so long, and it's taken all my strength to resist Ethan. It feels nice to indulge it, knowing I can always deflect him by blaming the booze.

"It's so good to see you smiling." Ethan tells me, leaning forward to brush a lock of hair from my eyes. "You really needed this."

I lean into his warmth, preening shamelessly as he pets and admires me. "Well it helps that I know you're not sabotaging me now."

I know the words are a mistake before they've even left my mouth, but the wine has loosened my tongue, and I

can't take them back no matter how much I might want to. Pressing my fingers to my lips, I glance at Ethan, hoping he didn't catch my meaning.

Unfortunately for me, Ethan is twice my size and not nearly as affected by the alcohol. His muscles tense dangerously, and I have the sudden urge to flee. "What do you mean?"

"I..." Flushing deeply, I try to walk back my statement. "I'm sorry, I'm talking total nonsense. Too much wine I suppose."

Ethan's sharp eyes remain locked on my own, and I can't help but lower my gaze in submission.

"Jane, look at me." He orders, his deep voice raking over my skin like velvet wrapped steel. He waits until I hesitantly lift my gaze to his, his dark brow deeply furrowed. "Did you think I had something to do with all this? With the investigators focusing on you as a suspect?"

"No, honestly, I'm just tipsy. Don't even listen to me." I deflect, rising from my chair.

Ethan stands too, following me as I try to retreat towards the vineyard. "Tell me the truth, little wolf." He commands, catching my arm and channeling all his Alpha authority into his voice.

I try to pull out of his grasp, but he doesn't give me an inch. Instead I just end up restlessly squirming and



probably making myself look even guiltier than before.

"It wasn't like that..." I sigh, "I never even would have considered it, then Eric got all in my head and I just, I don't know, I freaked out Ethan."

"What are you saying?" He demands, his dark eyes narrowed to slits as he towers over me.

"For a hot second there, I thought you might be framing me so you could keep me and the pups... if I was found guilty you could take custody and use your power to get me sentenced to house arrest... you could make me your slave again." I whisper, ashamed of myself for ever buying into Eric's suspicions. "I'm sorry, I know it was a crazy idea, I was just so afraid and every time the police came up with something new it sort of seemed like it might be real."

To my surprise, Ethan releases me abruptly, all his warmth leaving my body at once and making me feel as though I've been dunked in an ice bath. When I peek up at him, I can see he's shaking with barely contained rage. "You thought I killed my mother so that I could make you my personal prisoner?" He repeats, his jaw ticking dangerously.

"I'm sorry!" I repeat desperately, "I never really believed you would harm Petra, things just kept going wrong and I kept hearing Eric's voice in my head making me

paranoid!"

"So you didn't believe I would hurt my own mother, but you had no problem buying into the idea that I would enslave you – after everything we've been through, after how far we've come!" Ethan thunders, clenching and unclenching his fists so fiercely his knuckles went white.

"I mean..." I squeak, wringing my hands and backing away from him, "it's not that crazy, is it? You did it once before."

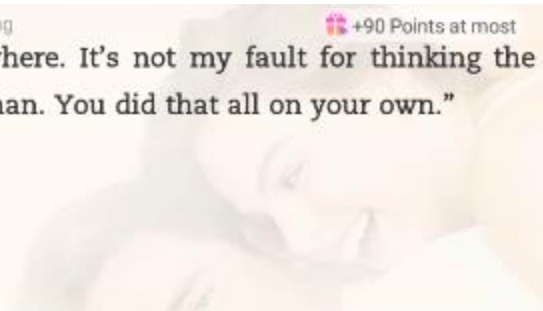
Ethan prowls towards me, every bit of humanity erased from his visage. He's pure animal now, and my heart begins pounding fearfully in my chest. "You need to walk away, Janey." He growls, "before it's too late."

Despite my racing pulse and hammering heart, I also feel butterflies explode in my belly – triggered by the predator bearing down on me. "Why? What will happen if I don't?" I whisper.

"Walk away, before I lose control." He orders, his wolf glowing behind his eyes and making his usually inky irises appear amber.

I'm not sure whether Ethan wants to kill me or kiss me, but I'm sure it's one of the two. We're still standing in the middle of a public place, and the little devil seated on my shoulder is urging me to push him, just to see what he'll do. "No." I decide, tilting my chin up stubbornly, "I'm

not going anywhere. It's not my fault for thinking the worst of you Ethan. You did that all on your own."



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