

Chapter 98 Guilt

Jane

I've always thought I was a good mother, but right now I feel like absolute garbage. Ethan's words are ringing in my mind like some relentless bell. I can't stop hearing the way he described my efforts to reunite the pups. He was right – about everything. He was right about how thoughtless I was regarding the pups feelings, right about my determination to carry out my plan without ever stopping to consider if it still made sense, and right that I was letting fear rule me.

Of course, the problem with recognizing your fear, is that it doesn't just disappear once you know it's there. It's not like in a dream, where once you realize nothing that's happening is real you can change the course of events or wake yourself up. The fear is only too real, and as badly as I want to cure it, that's not the way humans work. I can't just wish it away.

This is why psychiatrists always blame the parents. I think to myself. Because this is what happens. We impose all our own damage and neuroses onto our pups. We manage to screw them up simply by trying to avoid reliving our own pain. All at once, I miss my own mother

reliving our own pain. All at once, I miss my own mother so powerfully my knees go weak. I wish I could talk to her, to ask her if she ever felt like a terrible mother.

I can imagine she might have, not because it was true, but because I understand the constant pressure and anxiety of being a parent now. I've always been lucky to be able to feed my own pups, while my mother constantly struggled to keep food on the table. I know how guilty I felt when I couldn't give Paisley the care she needed, and I can't imagine coping with that every day. Even so, it wasn't her fault we were poor, just like it wasn't my fault Paisley was born with a heart defect. But this? Dividing my pups, keeping them from Ethan, treating their lives like pieces on a chessboard – that is my fault, pure and simple.

When I get downstairs. I try to figure out where to go. My instinct is to turn to Linda. I know I'd be welcome even though this would be the second night in the row, and I know she'd listen and pat my hand and tell me I'm being too hard on myself. She'd give me some sort of cliched platitude about just trying to survive or make the best with what I had – but that isn't what I want right now.

I don't deserve to be comforted, and I don't want to sweep these feelings under the rug. I need to face this head on, I need to wallow in my guilt for a while, to

accept that good intentions aside, I've been a pretty shitty Mom these past few months – maybe from the very beginning.

Instead of turning right towards Linda's, I turn left, towards the park. It's dark out, but the moon is full and the sidewalks glitter in the ribbon of its light, still damp from the afternoon's rain shower. I follow the path until I reach a bench beneath an old willow tree. I try to wipe the water from the metal seat, but in the end I just decide to get wet. Plopping down onto the bench, I gaze across the great grassy lawn. "What do I do, Mom?" I ask aloud, "how am I supposed to make this right without putting myself at risk again?"

"You're asking the wrong question, pup." A familiar voice sound on my left.

My head jerks around, I could have sworn I was alone a second ago. And I could have sworn that voice belonged to –

"Mom?" I gape, staring in shock at the woman standing next to me. She's wearing one of her favorite dresses from my childhood, and looks years younger than she did when we parted. I have to blink half a dozen times before I accept that I'm actually seeing her – not that this is comforting. "Oh Goddess! First I figure out I'm a horrible parent, and now I'm losing my actual mind? Can this

night get any worse?" I exclaim, throwing my hands up in defeat.

"You're not losing your mind, Jane." My mother says, in her soft, even voice.

"I beg to differ." I bite back, gesturing towards her. "You know, because you're dead."

"Then why were you talking to me?" She asks primly, sitting beside me and folding her hands in her lap.

"I wasn't, I mean I was... but just in a thinking out loud sort of way." I reply. "I didn't think you could actually hear!"

"Well I could." She replied simply, as if that explains everything.

"I don't believe in ghosts." I mutter stubbornly.

"So what, all of the Goddess's other magic is fine, but you draw the line at this?" She chirps in response, "you can turn into a wolf at will, but the soul living on after death is just too much?"

She sounds so much like my mother, that I decide either this is real, or my psychosis is even farther along than I feared. Although, I ponder, if I'm already crazy, I might as well lean into the skid. "I really miss you." I tell her, on the verge of breaking down into sobs. "There are so many things I've wanted to tell you since I had the pups, so much I've wanted to thank you for."

"I know." She smiles, stroking my cheek. Though I can feel a slight tingle as her ghostly fingers connect with my skin, it's not the same as a true touch, and that alone makes me cry harder. I could really use my mother's touch right now.

"You do?" I ask.

"We all go through it." She explains with a little nod. "I felt all the same things you did when I finally understood the true meaning of a parent's love... I felt the fear too, and the guilt."

"But you were a great Mom." I tell her. "It was hard sometimes, but you did everything for me. You struggled every day so my life would be better, and you never taught me to ask for or expect less just because I was an omega. You raised me to be independent and strong so that I could make a future for myself... even if I ended up letting you down."

"Why didn't you tell me how bad it had gotten with Ethan?" She asks, reading my thoughts. She was so sick by the time things went wrong in my marriage that I was able to shield her from what happened to me.

"I didn't want to worry you." I replying, only giving her half the truth.

"And?" She presses, reading me like a book.

"And I think I was ashamed for letting it happen when

you taught me to be so much stronger than that." I confess.

Mom nods. "You figure out a lot about the world after you die." She muses, "And I can tell you this much. You never let me down, Jane. And you didn't "let" anything happen. In fact, I think it's partly my fault that you're in this situation now. I was so afraid that you would end up like other omegas that I warned you every day – from much too young an age – about alphas and pleasure slaves."

"And then I became one." I finish for her.

"And then you thought Ethan was trying to make you one, when he really just wanted to keep you out of jail." She corrects me gently.

"So what, I just imagined it?" I gape, not believing my ears.

"No angel, he handled it horribly." Mom assures me. "He didn't communicate, he believed that horrible woman, let his mother trick him... and more than anything else, he forsook you – reduced a loving marriage to nothing but sex. But he didn't want to enslave you, Jane."

"Does that matter, when I still became one?" I argue.

"That depends," my mother reasons, "did you feel like a slave because of how he treated you, or did you feel like one because it's what you expected? Because you

accepted it when he put you on house arrest and closed in on yourself, instead of fighting, trying to find some other way to prove your innocence when you couldn't defend yourself?"

"I don't know." I remark, trying to go back into my memories and view things from another perspective. Had I trapped myself in a self fulfilling prophecy. Had I failed Ethan as badly as he failed me? Assuming he intended the worst and never actually talking to him about it? "What do you think?"

Shaking her head, she refuses to answer. "What I think doesn't matter. This is about you, whether you can bring yourself to trust Ethan enough to give him another chance, or at least to let him share the pups – even if you don't get involved again."

"He loves those pups." I declare, knowing without a doubt it's true. "I don't believe he'd ever hurt them, even if I can't be sure about his intentions towards me."

"Do you think he's good for them?" Mom inquires next, patiently waiting as I turn her question over in my mind.

"Yes, and I want them to have a father," I share, "I know what it's like to grow up without one and I don't want that for them."

"Then what's the problem?" She presses.

"I think..." I pause, truly coming to terms with just how

many of my decisions about the pups have been driven by my own paranoia. "I think I know that if we share the pups, sooner or later I'll end up mated to Ethan again, and if I have to leave again... then it will be too late." I shrug. "After what happened in our marriage, I've never been able to walk into any situation without an escape plan, but sharing the pups would make that impossible. We'd be tied together for the rest of our lives. I would never be free of him."

"So," She asks, "what are you going to do?"

