

## Chapter 111 Confirmation

3rd person

Paisley waited for the pain; she waited for the blackness closing in to become complete, or for the monster approaching her to bite her in half – but neither came. When she started to lose consciousness, her muscles relaxed enough for her foot to be freed from the rocks, but it was already too late. She floated freely now, however her lungs were quickly filling with water, and she no longer had the energy to try and swim.

She'd resigned herself to being some aquatic predator's dinner, but she had to wonder how much longer it would take – the creature swimming towards her had appeared to be only feet away. Surely she should be dead by now? The next thing she knew a massive warm body was swimming beneath her, and then she was being lifted to the surface. When her head broke through the rapids, water spewed from her lips, expelled from her lungs by forceful contractions as she coughed and sputtered.

She clutched the pillowy object beneath her, content to simply close her eyes and rest as it carried her along. Still, after the initial exhaustion and confusion wore off, she remembered her siblings, and lifted her head. She didn't have the first clue what the creature supporting her was – she'd never seen anything like it. It was gray and as round as a balloon, with wide flippers and a large rounded tail. She couldn't see its face, she was sprawled like a starfish over its warm back, and she was too tired and afraid to risk moving.

They were gliding through forests of river grasses, and as Paisley squinted into the distance she could see the other pups up ahead. They'd halted their log ride against some boulders and were standing on the rocks, seemingly caught in the middle of a heated argument. "We have to go back!" Riley was insisting.

"But how!?" Parker cried, "we can't swim stronger than the current!"

"I don't know, but we have to find a way!" Riley insisted.

"She's right!" Ryder agreed, "we can't leave her."

"I don't want to leave her neither!" Parker argued, "I just can't figure out how – Paisley!?"

The other two pups whipped their heads around to follow the direction of his gaze, their voices soon joining their brother's. "Paisley!" They exclaimed, "Thank the Goddess."

"You guys," Paisley gasped, clutching at her living raft for comfort as she tried to stay awake. "I don't think I like swimming."

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"Where do you think they are, right now?" Jane asked, folding her arms around herself protectively. "Do you think they're feeding them? Do you think they're hurt?"

"I don't know, baby." Ethan frowned, reaching over to rest his hand on Jane's thigh as he drove. They were on their way to speak with the police commander and the Alpha's private investigator, with Eric and Linda in the back seat. Still, Jane didn't seem to care that they had an audience, all she could think about was her pups. Eric had been a powerful distraction, but now that he was safely in their corner, her mind was drifting back to the children. "But I know this much, if we're right and they took them abroad out of fear for me, then they're probably too afraid to harm them either."

This didn't seem to comfort Jane. "How did we let this happen?" She questioned, devastated beyond words. "What kind of parents let their pups be taken this way?"

"You can't think like that, Jane." Linda advised, leaning forward to squeeze her friend's shoulder. "I know it's hard, but you can't help them if you're wallowing in depression. It's not that it isn't natural or valid, you just have to push it aside for the time being."

"Spoken like someone who doesn't have pups." Jane snapped back, instantly regretting her words. "I'm sorry, Linda, I didn't mean that. I shouldn't have said it."

"It's okay." Linda promised, though her hand had tensed on Jane's shoulder. "You're under a lot of stress."

"No, it's not okay." Jane argued. "I'm lashing out at you when I should be lashing out at myself. They left the apartment because I threw a tantrum and walked out. It's my fault this is happening."

"It's not your fault." Eric assured her. "It's Eve's fault, the trafficker's fault."

"Don't do that!" Jane begged, "Don't placate me just because you don't want me to feel bad, I should feel bad. Sometimes feeling bad is a sign that you earned your guilt fair and square."

The next thing she knew, the car was pulling over on the side of the road and slowing to a stop. "What are you doing?" She asked Ethan, glaring at his hands on the wheel. "We need to get there, to learn what they've figured out."

"I'm not going to listen to you berate yourself like this." Ethan declared sternly. "We all make mistakes, and you and I have made more than our fair share. But the weasel is right, the only people to blame here are the ones who took them, the ones who are keeping them from us."

Jane fought the urge to roll her eyes. They could all say whatever they wanted, but no one in this car was a child, they knew their situation didn't exist in black and white. It was true that the traffickers were responsible, but good parents protected their children from the realities of the world for precisely this reason, because the dangers were only too real and pups were too innocent to understand that.

"Don't roll your eyes at me, little wolf." Ethan scolded.

"I didn't!" Jane exclaimed in protest.

"You were thinking about it, I can tell." He remarked. "I know your every expression, Janey. Don't you forget it."

"You can't punish me for my thoughts." She informed him coolly.

"Wanna bet?" He asked, a heated look crossing his handsome features.

"I'm serious, Ethan." Jane professed, frowning deeply. "This is my fault, maybe not in total, but in part. We have to get them back, and you stalling and laying down the law or whatever this is, isn't going to help us!"

"Jane, it isn't your fault." Ethan repeated firmly. "And I'm not moving this car until you say so."

"Why do you keep doing this to me?" Jane inquired fiercely. "What is it with you and lectures in the car?"

She remembered only too well the way he'd stopped on the way to the hospital when Paisley was in surgery, and felt horribly as though they were repeating history.

"I'm responding to you," He shrugged. "I don't believe in waiting to address problems after the fact. If you say things like this to me, I'm going to stop whatever we're doing to deal with it. If you want to stop getting lectures in cars, stop berating yourself in cars."

"So you're saying it's not my fault the pups were taken, but it is my fault you've gone into bossy Alpha mode?" Jane clarified skeptically.

"I suppose so." Ethan chuckled, a soft, bittersweet sound. "But did you expect anything different?"

"No." To her surprise, Jane laughed then too, but almost as soon as the silky sound began, it broke. Laughter became sobbing with the flip of a switch, and Ethan could only tsk and pull Jane into his arms. In the back seat, Linda and Eric exchanged confused glances, feeling like intruders on a deeply intimate moment. They weren't wrong, Ethan and Jane had almost entirely forgotten that the others were present, taking comfort in each other as the world fell apart around them.

Eric couldn't help but grimace as he watched, and Linda reached over and covered his hand in solidarity. She was only too familiar with watching the person she loved pursue another, and despite everything she had done wrong in the last few years, she was far too besotted to hold it against him. Eric smiles appreciatively and squeezed her hand in return, offering her an appreciative nod as Jane continued to cry. He didn't really want to watch Ethan embrace her either, and the more time that passed, the more apparent it became that he didn't stand a chance with her.

In fact, Eric was finally beginning to see that he'd never stood a chance with Jane. Her heart had always belonged more than ever – whether she acknowledged it or not – and it always would. They were a team now longed to, permanently bonded by their children and growing closer every day. It didn't hurt as much as he thought it would to lose Jane. Strangely enough, he felt far more at ease with Linda's comforting touch. He was even able to forget why he was so preoccupied with Jane, when a beautiful, intelligent she wolf with stars in her eyes was sitting next to him.

Before Eric could ponder any further, Ethan and Jane parted at last. Jane untangled herself from a reluctant Ethan's arms, and wiped the tears from her cheeks. "Okay, let's go."

"Are you sure?" Ethan pressed, looking as if he'd like to cuddle her longer.

"I'm sure." Jane smiled. "I need to know what they've discovered. I need to know where the pups are."

"They might not have anything new to share." Ethan cautioned, clearly trying to manage her expectations.

"Then why did they call?" Jane countered shrewdly. "No – there's news, and it's big enough that they didn't want to tell us over the phone. Let's go."