

The Luna and her Quadruplet Pups by Jane Above Story

Chapter 196

Jane

My dreams are deep and hazy. When I wake, I can't remember any of them. They slip through my fingers like water, and I'm left wondering how I fell asleep in the first place. The last thing I remember, I called Ethan to tell him Paisley was missing.

Paisley! I j3rk up, rising to a sitting position on the rest stop couch where I've apparently been napping. I frantically look around the room, searching for my pups, but especially my youngest. When I don't see them, I push myself to my feet, stumbling out into the brisk daylight. As soon as I walk outside, I see Devon and Ethan standing over a puppy pile. Parker, Riley, and Ryder are on the ground, curled up around their sister – giggling and wrestling.

As soon as I see Paisley, I'm crying. Why do I feel like I've been crying a lot today? I don't even remember most of the morning.

"Paisley!" I exclaim, rushing to join the pile. I drop to my knees in front of them, untangling Paisley from her siblings and dragging her into my arms, before welcoming the others to join us.

"Mommy!" The sweet pup cries, wrapping her plump arms around my neck. I rock back and forth, weeping into her neck and kissing every inch of skin I can reach. Only once she's been thoroughly smothered, do I offer my other babies the same affection, squeezing them all so tightly they begin to complain. "You scared me half to death!" I tell Paisley, ignoring Parker and Riley's attempts to wriggle free from our hug ball.

"I'm sorry, Mommy." She professes, tears swimming in her beautiful eyes. "I didn' wanna scare you. I just wanted Daddy so bad."

"I know, angel." I murmur, hating to know how badly she's hurting. "I know you're having a hard time right now. I am too, but you can't run away from me. You can't put yourself in danger that way."

"Jane." I look up to see Ethan looking down at us, a pained grimace on his face. "We need to talk."

Oh Goddess, not another scolding. He was helpful earlier when I called him, and he clearly found Paisley like he promised, but now she's safe I'm almost certain I've got an earful coming my way.

I'm not ready to hear what a terrible mother I am again, I don't need to be reminded.

"Do we have to?" I inquire softly, still cuddling my babies.

"Yes." He answers gently, glancing at Devon.

Devon can watch the pups in the meantime."

My arms tighten around the children reflexively.

There's no way in hell I'm letting them go after everything that's happened today. In fact, I don't think I'm ever going to let them out of my sight.

My wolf growls in agreement. Forget school and play dates... who really needs education or socialization? I'll keep my pups safe at home until they're grown. They'll never be without my protection again, and even after they're grown...

"They'll be okay, Jane." Ethan assures me, keeping his voice low and even as he interrupts my thoughts. "No one is ever going to run away, ever again – right?" He adds, directing his words to the pups.

They all nod their heads in agreement, staring up at me solemnly. "We promise."

"I don't know." I argue, still clutching them. "Can't we talk here?"

Seeming to realize my wolf won't let me budge, Ethan gently overpowers me, pulling the pups from my stranglehold and lifting me onto my feet.

Come on Mama bear, it'll be okay."

I keep glancing back over my shoulder to the spot where my children remain with Devon, unable to calm my inner animal. The sun is setting at their backs, and I realize how much time has passed since I realized Paisley was gone this morning. I must have slept all afternoon. "I– what happened?" I ask anxiously. "The last thing I remember, I was on the phone with you."

Ethan goes very still, "Which time?"

I blink, unable to make any sense of this. "Did we speak more than once?"

He relaxes slightly. "After you called to tell me about Paisley, you had an episode."

"An episode?" I repeat, stunned and wracking my brains for any memory of this. "What, like a seizure?"

"No, like PTSD." Ethan corrects me softly. "You thought we were back in the city when the traffickers first took the pups. You didn't know where you were or what was happening."

It takes a moment for my brain to process these facts. My thoughts immediately jump to Riley, Ryder and Parker. "But the pups were with me."

"They were, and they were very distressed to see you so upset." He confirms, sending a stab of guilt straight through me. I'm trying to picture the scene we must have made – me having a mental breakdown in front of my four year olds. But I can't remember any of it, how can I not remember?

"They must have been terrified, I have to talk to them, I have to explain!" I'm already turning back, but Ethan catches me.

"I already explained, Jane. And Devon was there.

He tried to help you through it but eventually he called me and I convinced you to take a sleeping pill." He shares, looking very grave indeed.

I'm shaking my hand, my palm clamped over my mouth. I can't believe I fell to pieces that way – at a time when my daughter was missing and my other pups needed me to be strong, I was a blubbering mess. Shame and guilt battle for dominance over my senses, and I feel my body crumpling. I'm bending at the waist, trying to remember how to breathe and praying that Devon is distracting the pups from seeing me this way.

Seeming to read my thoughts, Ethan comes around to my side, sliding an arm around my waist and supporting me before I can collapse. "How has it come to this?" I gasp, "This isn't me! I'm not this weak woman who falls to pieces at the first sign of adversity!"

"You've been through a lot." Ethan reminds me – as if I could forget. "And you're pregnant. You're even more vulnerable than usual. Besides, it isn't weak to bear scars from your traumas – if anything it shows you've survived against all the odds." He guides me around a corner, out of sight from Devon and our pups."You need to cut yourself some slack."

What? I think, truly baffled now. Is this the same man who's been telling me I'm not fit to be a mother and I need to blame myself for everything that's gone wrong lately? Has he actually lost his mind, or is there something else going on here, some reason he's trying to butter me up?

I weave in a shaking breath, suspicion welling up inside me. "Why are you being nice to me?" I inquire, narrowing my eyes at him. "What else has happened, what aren't you telling me?"

"I'm not trying to appease you, I'm just being honest." Ethan grits out, though there's something oddly severe about his features, something that tells me I'm not far off base.

"Where did you find Paisley, what happened afterwards?" I demand, needing to know whether or not the details I'm missing are to do with some new horror my daughter survived.

"She was sound asleep in the back of a tourist's car"

Ethan shares. "I found her at the border, and scolded her soundly for running away."

"Is that all?" I press.

"No." He sighs. "We talked, but she was far from repentant. In fact, she dug in her little heels and told me point blank she wasn't giving up. The bottom line is that Paisley is determined to stay with me, and she's insisting that she'll keep running away until we let her."

"She's only four," I m0an, hating every second of this. "She just needs time."

"I'm not so sure about that." Ethan argues. "And I'm not sure we can risk being wrong. She was okay this time, but she might not be so lucky next time.

She's a stubborn little thing, and if she keeps trying to come back to me, we could lose her for good."

"Well short of locking her up and praying that time will heal her, I don't know what to do about it." I confess, on the verge of tears just thinking about this.

"I don't want to lock her up." Ethan remarks, all but snarling.

"Then tell me, Ethan." I snipe, letting all my bitterness seep into my tone. "What am I supposed to do? You're the one who put us in this situation, so tell me – how am I supposed to make this better when you're the only one who can?"

"What if I changed my mind?" Ethan asks, looking uncertain. "What if I agreed to keep her?"

I blink, "What are you saying?"

Ethan gazes down at me, all imposing power and Alpha authority."I'm saying, I think we should go back to the way things were before. You keep Ryder, Parker and Riley, and I'll keep Paisley."

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