

Chapter 54 - Date Night

Jane

I don't know what I'm going to do about Ethan. The idea of finally having my family together is incredible, but the idea of living with him again is only too daunting. Eric is completely against the idea, and spent most of the night trying to talk me out of it, however Linda seemed unusually supportive of the scheme.

Of course there are three opinions I don't need to bother asking. I know my pups would be beyond thrilled to live as one big family with Paisley and Ethan. That's actually what worries me most – I can easily see the logic in helping Paisley adjust to the change in circumstances, but what happens when my other pups become attached to Ethan? How are they going to handle losing their father after only just finding him?

I don't even know if his offer is real. I want to believe he really feels guilty for the terrible wrongs he committed in the past, but would that remorse be enough to make him let go of his only daughter? What if he's having a paternity test conducted at this very moment? My friend at the lab is on the look out for any samples from Ethan and Paisley, but that's no guarantee. All my lies are

coming back to haunt me, and I'm beginning to worry I won't be able to keep up much longer.

When my phone rings the morning after Ethan and I had our reckoning, I'm not surprised to see his name flashing across the screen. I answer with slight hesitation, "Hello?" "Good morning Janey." His warm voice sends a shiver down my spine as I remember the way he touched me last night, at how easily I unraveled in his arms.

"Hello Ethan." I greet him, making my voice as even as possible. Assuming he's reaching out about his proposal, I offer, "I haven't made a decision about moving in yet - I need more time."

"That's not why I'm calling." Ethan answers, surprising me. "I wanted to touch base about our next date."

"What?" I reply blankly, not processing his words.

"Our next date - are you free tonight?" He presses.

"That's still happening?" I utter in surprise.

"You didn't think our deal would change just because you came clean did you, little wolf?" He purrs, sounding every bit the predator.

"I... I guess I didn't think about it." I answer honestly.

"Well, the deal is still on sweetheart." He informs me, "So are you free?"

"I - yes." I admit, too taken aback to come up with an

excuse at the moment. "But I don't have a sitter lined up."

"I do, why don't you bring the kids here and leave them with my sitter. It seems silly for us to have two anyway and this way Paisley can start getting to know her siblings better." Ethan proposes.

"O-okay." I agree, once again finding myself tongue-tied.

"Great, come round about five o'clock, and then we'll be off." He instructs, sounding much too pleased with himself.

When we hang up, I lower my face into my hands and try to figure out what on earth is happening in my brain. No sooner have I emitted a drawn out moan of frustration, that a small voice sounds near my hip. "Mommy what's wrong?"

Raising myself off the counter, I look down to find Ryder standing beside me looking concerned. Kneeling down to his level, I pull the sweet pup into my arms and squeeze him tightly. "Nothing a hug from my Ryder can't solve." I tell him honestly. Having the little bundle of love in my arms makes all my stress fade away – for the moment at least.

"Mommy, are you being honest?" He asks in the same tone I often use on my mischievous pack, when I'm certain they've been up to something naughty.

"Yes my darling." I laugh softly, "where are Parker and

Riley.”

“Still napping.” He answers with a yawn, cuddling closer. Lifting him into my arms, I emit a dramatic groan, “Oh my goodness, you’re getting too big for this.” Settling on the couch, we wait until the others are awake, enjoying some rare one on one time together. When his siblings finally emerge, bleary eyed and stretching their limbs, they happily clamber onto the sofa with us. I’ve always felt a slight pang sharing affection with them when Paisley is so far away, but for the first time in a long time that pang is smaller and less severe. Maybe because the day when our family will finally be whole again is in sight at last.

“Guess what you three, you get to see Paisley tonight.” I tell them, chuckling when they all cheer. “The Alpha is taking me out, so you four will get to hang out with a babysitter.”

Their excitement is temporarily put on hold as curiosity takes over. “Where’s he taking you, Mommy?” Riley asks. Sighing nervously, I admit. “I have no idea.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” I gripe, climbing out of the back of Ethan’s chauffeured town car.

He closes the door behind me, guiding me forward with an arm around my waist, “What do you think?”

"I... is it safe?" I ask, eyeing the huge red aircraft in front of us. In truth I'm excited beyond belief, I've always dreamed of going on a hot air balloon, but it's also much too romantic for me to feel comfortable being alone with Ethan. The oversized wicker basket was already stocked with a bottle of champagne and picnic basket full of goodies, and the inflated nylon envelope looked ready to take off at any moment.

"Of course," He grins, "I checked the weather three times, we've got clear skies ahead and all signs point to a beautiful sunset."

"A sunset hot air balloon ride." I whisper softly. "If I didn't know any better I'd think you were trying to seduce me, Alpha." The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them – far more flirtatious than I intended them to sound.

He chuckles darkly, "Then it's a good thing you know better." He teases, pulling me forward. "After all it would be much harder to succeed if you saw it coming."

"Ha ha." I jibe, letting him lift me into the basket, "I'll remind you one of our rules about these dates was 'no funny business'."

Ethan vaults into the basket behind me, sidling up and offering me a glass of Champagne. As he cuts away the heavy ballast and the basket begins to leave the ground,

he moves so close that my shoulder blades brush against the muscular contours of his chest, making me feel grounded even as the earth grows farther and farther away below us. Giving in to the urge to lean back against him, his arms come around my body, and his lips brush the shell of my ear, "I always did love breaking rules."

Heat pools low in my belly, and I take a sip of wine, needing to fortify myself. The sun is just beginning to set over the mountains in the distance, painting a tapestry of pink and orange light across the sky. We're far from the city now, and being out in the fresh air like this makes me want to shift into my wolf and run through the forest. I haven't gone for a run in ages, I've let my busy life get the better of me, too caught up with work and kids to do anything for myself – even something as simple as letting my wolf out to play.

"Do you think..." I begin, trailing off when I realize my question might encourage Ethan.

"What is it sweetheart?" He prompts, trailing his fingers across my waist and making a kaleidoscope of butterflies burst to life in my belly.

"Do you think we could go for a night run next time?" I ask, throwing caution to the wind. "For our next date, I mean."

His lips graze my throat, mere inches from his mark, "We

can do anything you like, Janey.”

“It doesn’t mean anything.” I tell him coolly, straightening up and leaning away from the flaming heat of his mouth. “It’s just that I’d rather do something I enjoy if I’m already going to be losing the time.”

“Don’t worry, little wolf.” He teases, “I’m not going to go and start thinking you actually enjoy my company.” Reaching up, he adds a bit more propane to the balloon, carrying us higher into the stratosphere. Extending my hand, my fingers whisk through a fluffy white cloud on our right. Ethan’s grip on my waist tightens protectively, but he doesn’t try to stop me.

Soon I’m beaming like a pup in a candy shop. “This is incredible.” I revel, not wanting to praise Ethan, but unable to contain my amazement either.

“Do you recognize that?” Ethan murmurs in reply, nodding towards a nearby ridge. Following the direction of his gaze, my eyes soon land on a gleaming stone circle overlooking the valley below. It’s the only corner of the mountain not totally covered by dense alpine forest, and it’s a place I remember only too well.

“Of course I do.” I whisper, feeling suddenly as though I’m falling, rather than flying. “It’s the temple where we got married.”