

## Chapter 66 – Just this once

Jane

A week later I still haven't been able to bring myself to tell Ethan about the police suspecting me for his Mother's murder. I keep telling myself that it's simply too much stress for him at an already difficult time, but I think there's also a small part of me that's afraid he won't believe me. The detective's words have been playing on loop in my mind, and I have to admit his story sounds compelling.

We're finally returning to the apartment today, assured by the crime scene cleanup team that it's now spotless and we would never know such a horrible thing happened there. Still, I don't think I'll ever be able to erase the image from my mind, nor do I think Ethan will. The kids are the least bothered by all of this, but then again they don't know Petra was murdered, they simply know she's gone.

So when we return to the Penthouse, the kids run in almost instantly, rushing off to their rooms while Ethan and I stand frozen in the doorway, haunted by the last occasion we stood in this place. To their credit, the crime scene team had been true to their word. There's not even

the slightest hint that anything happened, no lingering scent of death or items out of place – it's exactly as was before the murder.

"Are you alright?" I ask Ethan, squeezing his arm.

His handsome face is hard as steel, his jaw clenched so tight I can see it twitch. "I'm not sure I can stay in this apartment now."

"There's always my rat breeding farm." I offer.

He hooks his arm around my neck and pulls me in, dropping a kiss on my temple with a chuckle. "Thank you, but I'll give it a few days and see how I feel."

"No one would blame you if you wanted to move." I tell him, pulling out of his hold. "But they also tell you not to make any major life decisions for like 6 months after a loss like this."

He's already reaching for me again, "Does that include custody decisions?"

"We made that decision before this happened." I remind him gently, though in truth I'm beginning to feel increasingly guilty about taking Paisley from Ethan when he's just lost his mother. Slipping out of his reach, I add, "And now that we're home I think we need to re-establish some boundaries."

Throughout our week at the hotel we'd been very affectionate – which I allowed only because there was

nothing sexual about it. It was pure tenderness and Ethan dearly needed it, in fact I've woken every morning this week with both Ethan and our pups in my bed, even on the nights I went to sleep completely alone. "Including with the pups." I add. "I don't mind co-sleeping every now and then but it took me ages to get Ryder, Parker and Riley sleeping independently, and I don't want to backtrack now."

"I agree." Ethan said, surprising me. However when I turn to look at him he's eyeing me like I'm a particularly juicy steak. "I'd love to sleep with just you."

"That isn't what I meant and you know it." I laugh

"Yes, but I'm very vulnerable right now." He teases, "I might not sleep at all if I don't have something soft to cuddle, and then the pack will pay the price: Without a strong leader the city will fall to ruin, crime will break out in the provinces – chaos will reign."

"Oh, you poor, poor apex predator." I quip, dancing away from him as he continues to stalk me through the apartment, "in that case we'll see if Paisley will lend you one of her teddies."

"But teddies aren't warm or sweet-smelling the way a lovely little wolf is." Ethan protests, smiling for the first time all week.

"Fine." I sigh, finally stopping long enough to let him

catch me. "You win."

Ethan cocks his head, as if he doesn't believe his ears. "Really?" He asks suspiciously.

"Of course," I press my palms to his chest, looking up at him as he towers over me. "We'll put Paisley in with the teddy."

Ethan throws his head back and laughs, calling after me as I cart my bags to my bedroom. "Spoilsport!"

I had every last intention of keeping my word, gently cajoling the pups to sleep in their own beds now that we were back home and telling them if they felt lonely to make a puppy pile amongst themselves, then retreating to my own room and closing the door behind me. However hours later, when it was no longer night but the early hours of the morning, I woke and realized there was still a light on outside my door.

Pulling on a robe, I padded into the living room and found Ethan sitting up in the dim lamplight, staring at a photo album filled with images of his childhood. Petra was prominent in many of the photos, and my heart softened towards him even knowing what I slippery slope I was on.

Crossing the cold floor, I reach out my hand to Ethan, who didn't seem to realize I was there until he sees it in front of his face. He looks up at me with red-rimmed

eyes. "Come on." I encourage. "Bed."

I led him to his room and crawled into bed beside him, fully intending to go back to my own room once he was asleep. However the next thing I know it's morning, and I'm waking up sprawled over Ethan's chest, with his arms locked around my body. I try to pull free of him, but his hold only tightens and I decide to give in and stay – just this once.

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"I swear, I've been waiting for the detective to reappear all week long." I tell Eric a few hours later. We're meeting for coffee, reconnecting for the first time since the murder. I know he's probably anxious to find out if I've thought any more about dating him, but the moment we sit down, I couldn't help but spill the developments I've been hiding from Ethan. "I feel more and more nervous every minute. It's a huge relief to finally be able to talk about this with someone."

"I can imagine." He sympathizes, "What makes you so sure it's Eve framing you?"

"Well of course it's Eve." I respond, "I mean who else could it be?"

"Just think about it, Jane. We know Eve wants to get Paisley out of the way because she thinks she's keeping her from getting close to Ethan." Eric says, appearing to

choose his words very carefully, "But if she wants to frame you, then she must realize he wouldn't just end up with Paisley, but all four pups. It would make sense if the attack had been on the five of you, but I can't see how Ethan getting custody of the pups helps her."

"I think you're assuming a lot of logic for someone who is clearly deranged." I counter, "In Eve's eyes I'm a bigger threat than Paisley would ever be, I doubt she's thinking about custody at all."

"She's smart enough to have gotten away with everything thus far." Eric argues, "She might be crazy but she isn't stupid."

"She might also know that I've told Ethan the kids are yours, so she assumes if I disappear, you get the pups." I surmise. At this point I wouldn't put anything beyond Eve, and that includes simply turning on Petra for not defending her after the recording was sent, or simply having a multi-part plan to get rid of the pups after I'm behind bars.

"Maybe so - but there is someone who would benefit greatly by getting you out of the way without any additional schemes." Eric announces gravely, looking suddenly very fierce.

"What are you saying?" I clarify, feeling my insides start to twist into knots.

“Jane, think about it.” Eric advises, “If you go down for murder, and the pups go to Ethan, he’d get exactly what he wants.”

“You’re accusing Ethan of framing me for Petra’s death?” I repeat.

“Eve is on the run already, it would be an incredible risk to come out into the open and I doubt Petra would have let her in after what happened with Paisley. But Ethan lives there – he has full access to your closet and Petra would certainly feel safe enough with him to let him get close.” He argues, “Besides, he doesn’t truly believe the pups are mine and he knows you want to take them from him. He has more motive than anyone to get you out of the way.”

“Are you serious?” I demand, feeling heat flush my cheeks.

“Jane, think about it. What wouldn’t Ethan do to keep his pups?” Eric presses. “It’s not as if he hasn’t betrayed you in the past.”

Sitting back in my chair, I try to wrap my head around this idea. Was it possible?