

Chapter 99 The Pups Go On an Adventure

3rd Person

Riley, Ryder, Parker and Paisley figured out that they weren't going to get to tell their Mommy the good news about their discovery any time soon, right around the time they heard Ethan and Jane raise their voices. Their parents knew better than to talk loudly enough to be overheard, so the fact that they were all but yelling clearly meant something was up.

One by one, the pups slipped out of their room and tiptoed down the hall, catching the tail end of Ethan and Jane's argument. They didn't understand half of it, but there was no mistaking the fraught energy emanating off the pair in waves.

"This doesn't sound good." Paisley fretted, leaning into Riley for comfort.

Almost as soon as the words were out of her mouth, the door slammed shut, and the kids realized Jane had left the apartment. Racing out into the kitchen, they listened as their father explained she would return, but they weren't so sure. She'd sounded really upset, and he

as their father explained she would return, but they weren't so sure. She'd sounded really upset, and he didn't look like he believed his own words.

They retreated to their room. "We have to do something," Riley declared. "We need to go after Mommy and make her come back."

Parker nodded in agreement, he'd noticed in recent weeks that the more time Ethan and Jane spent together, the closer they came to staying together as a family. Every time Mommy ran off on her own or spent time with uncle Eric, however, she started pulling away again.

It was true that they'd all been hurt by what Ethan did to their mother in the past, but he'd been slowly wearing them down. It was impossible for them not to feel how much he cared for them. He was funny and affectionate and they knew he would always be there if they needed him, and that counted for more than anything with pups. "Daddy won't let us go out alone though," Paisley warned, pleased to see her siblings were finally committed to staying with Ethan.

"Then we won't tell him," Riley declared in a whisper. "We'll wait 'til he goes to the other room or the bathroom, and sneak out."

"I like it," Parker praised, "then we can follow Mommy's scent wherever she went."

It took about fifteen minutes for Ethan to finally stop pacing at the door and head for the restroom, and as soon as he closed the door behind him, the pups were out of the apartment and onto the elevator. They rode downstairs overflowing with anticipation, then ran out onto the street.

"Which way do you think she went?" Ryder asked, looking around and sniffing the air. Unfortunately for the pups, the bakery next door was filling the surrounding area with the aromas of fresh bread and cookies. It all smelled delicious, but it certainly didn't help them track Jane.

"I can't smell anything." Ryder complained.

"I bet she went to Auntie Linda's." Parker suggests.

"That's a good idea." Riley agreed, "but Auntie Linda lives really far 'way. How are we gonna get there?"

"I could give you a ride." A woman says behind them.

They turned in unison, and all four of their little mouths dropped open in shock. Eve was standing in front of their building, with a wide smile on her face – free as a bird.

Back in the park, Jane was still talking with her mother's ghost, and still not convinced that it was truly happening. In the back of her mind she continued to worry that she was losing it, but sane or not, she couldn't deny that

their conversation was helping her gain a new perspective about the past.

“So,” Jane’s mother asked, “What are you going to do? Because I hate to break it to you darling, but you’re already tied together for the rest of your lives.” She announces, pointing towards my mark.

“You know what I mean.” Jane sighed. “With the mark I can still run and live independently. But sharing the pups would mean being forced to interact with him, our lives would always be entwined.”

“It sounds like you keep coming back to the same assumption.” Her mother assessed. “You’re assuming that sooner or later you’re going to need to run away again. You’re still looking for your escape plan.”

“I can’t help it.” Jane admitted hoarsely, “my wolf is obsessed with him – to a concerning degree. Honestly Mom, it’s like having a lovesick puppy holed up in my chest.” She explained, pausing to join the spectral woman in a laugh before soberly continuing. “And my heart wants to trust him, but my head is filled with nothing but what ifs. I can’t be a prisoner again, I don’t think I’d survive it.”

“Well I can tell you this much.” Her mother proclaimed, “your heart and your wolf will never get what they want if you let your fears control you. Not with Ethan, not with

anyone. Do you want fear to rule you for the rest of your life?"

"Of course not." Jane sniffed, her voice thick with emotion.

A ghostly arm wrapped around her shoulders, " And do you want to risk letting your past hurt your pups?"

"No." Jane wept openly now, "it kills me that I let it hurt them so much already. I just kept telling myself that I knew what was best and they'd understand one day, like I was forcing them to eat their green veggies instead of keeping them from their father."

"I know it hurts, Jane." Her mother crooned, "but all parents make mistakes, they're all just trying their best and learning along the way. The trick is to pay attention to the lessons when they come along – remember this pain and don't let yourself make the same mistakes again."

Jane nodded, filled with warmth even though she couldn't truly feel the woman's embrace. "Thanks Mom."

She beamed in reply. "That's my girl." Standing from the bench, Jane's mother glanced up at the night sky, "And just in time too, I'm afraid I can't stay much longer.

"Do you have to go?" Jane asked, suddenly alarmed at the idea of regaining her sanity. "We've barely had any time. There's so much I want to ask and tell you."

"The Goddess's light only lasts so long, my love." Her

mother answered gently, gesturing up to the clouds quickly covering the moon.

"Will I see you again?" Jane questioned hopefully.

"Whether you see me or not, I'll always be here, Jane." She promised. "I'm so proud of the woman you've become, and I love you too much to haunt anyone else."

"It's hardly haunting," Jane insisted, "I love knowing that you're there."

"A happy haunting then." Her mother replied, her shimmering form going thinner by the minute.

"I love you." Jane whispered as she faded away, blending into the scenery as if she'd never been there at all. However her final words echoed long after her shape dissolved, "I love you more."

Jane hiccuped a laugh and buried her face in her hands. She stayed seated on the bench for a long time after her mother disappeared, and though she cried, her tears were less aggrieved and pain filled than they'd been a few hours earlier. Instead they were bittersweet: full of longing, loving memory, and mourning for the young woman she'd once been.

Jane couldn't go back in time and get all the answers she wanted, but she'd decided she couldn't let the past control her anymore. She was tired of living like a shell of her old self, and was increasingly realizing that

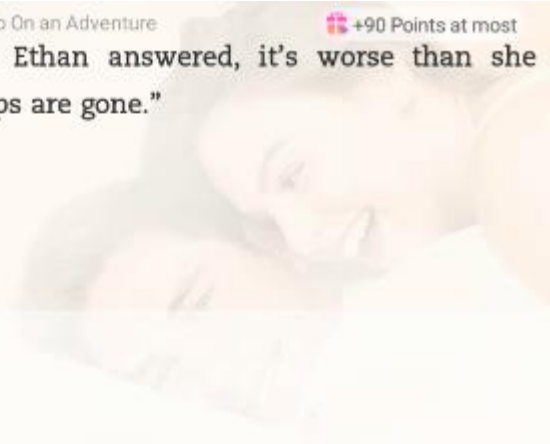
leaving Ethan hadn't set her free at all. She'd become her own prisoner instead of his, too afraid to take any risks or chances, and too paranoid to let anyone get too close to her. It wasn't the future she wanted for herself, or her pups.

Eventually she rose from the bench and retraced her steps out of the park, heading back to the penthouse and trying to decide what she wanted to say when she arrived. She was prepared to tell Ethan she was willing to talk and listen, even if she couldn't make any decisions yet. However when she rounded the corner to the building, she feared her mind had slipped even further than she realized. The street was lined with emergency vehicles, and for a moment she thought she was reliving the night Petra was murdered.

However the closer she drew, the clearer she was able to make out the members of the crowd around the entrance. Ethan was principal among them, towering a head higher than most of the shifters around him. That was enough to get her moving, she ran up to him, the fear she'd so recently vowed to toss aside, suddenly clutching her heart in a fist.

"What's going on?" she asked, her mind already leaping to horrible conclusions. Did Paisley have a relapse? Was one of the other's hurt?

However when Ethan answered, it's worse than she feared. "The pups are gone."



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