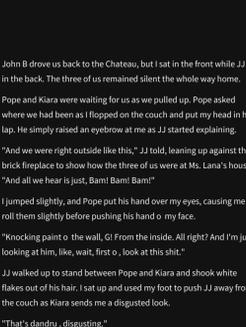


Chapter Thirteen



John B drove us back to the Chateau, but I sat in the front while JJ sat in the back. The three of us remained silent the whole way home. Pope and Kiara were waiting for us as we pulled up. Pope asked where we had been as I flopped on the couch and put my head in his lap. He simply raised an eyebrow at me as JJ started explaining.

"And we were right outside like this," JJ told, leaning up against the brick fireplace to show how the three of us were at Ms. Lana's house.

"And all we hear is just, Bam! Bam! Bam!"

I jumped slightly, and Pope put his hand over my eyes, causing me to roll them slightly before pushing his hand o my face.

"Knocking pain o the wall, Gi from the inside. All right? And I'm just knocking at him, like, wait, first o look at this shit."

JJ walked up to stand between Pope and Kiara and shook white flakes out of his hair, not one and used my foot to push JJ away from the couch as Kiara sends me a disgusted look.

"That's dandruff, disgusting."

"Okay, thank you."

Pope brushed o his shorts.

"Look at all that. All right? That's paint. At that point, I just like, I'm waiting for death."

I patted JJ reassuringly on the arm as he once again leaned up on the fire place.

"Would you like to settle for that or do you want the less dramatic version?"

JJ glared at me, pushing my hand o his arm, and took out his vape.

"Okay, so you saw the guys that shot at us, right?"

"Yep," I answered Pope's question with a nod.

"Did you get a good description of them? What did they look like?"

I pursed my lips as I thought about Pope's question.

"Anything that could help. Anything we can bring to a police report?"

"Burly."

I sighed at JJ's vague answer.

"Burly?" Pope asked incredulously, as if he couldn't believe that was all JJ could say about them.

"Yeah, you know, like..."

"That's not very helpful," Kie shook her head as she interrupted JJ.

"Okay, well, no, like the type of guy at my dad's garage. I mean, you guys know, he made cargo hides for drug smugglers."

I rolled my eyes.

"Yeah, it's not like you haven't told us about eight billion times."

JJ ignored me and kept talking.

"I can tell you with full confidence, these boys, these killers," he paused to take a drag. "They're square groupers."

"They're square groupers, like narco square groupers? Like Pablo Escobar square groupers?"

Pope turned to look at me as if I would deny it.

"I mean, it could be possible."

"You guys, not everything is a Kingpin movie," Kiara says, obviously annoyed with the whole conversation.

"What does this square grouper look like?"

I looked down at the floor.

"They both definitely have dark hair, and I'm pretty sure one has a beard."

Pope turned his attention to me.

"Good! Any more specifics?"

"Uh..."

"You weren't there, bro!"

"Well, apparently you don't know what to look for!" Pope returned JJ's yell, moving his hands as he grew more and more frustrated.

I sat back into the couch, crossing my arms over my chest and deciding to just let them yell at each other.

"Dude! I wasn't taking little mental Polaroids the entire time, man, I was under duress, okay?"

I gave Pope a pointed look to tell him not to freak our blond friend out anymore than he already is.

"But I can tell you," JJ paused, his voice cracking under the stress he was probably feeling. "I can tell you by the way that Ms. Lana was screaming, that these guys are serious, serious, hombres, man."

JJ sat himself on the arm of the couch next to me.

"It's a heavy vibe right now, okay? I'm not liking this very much."

I pat his leg, actually trying to er comfort his time.

"Why do they want the compass?"

"That thing's a piece of shit. You couldn't pawn it o for five bucks if you wanted to."

I kicked Pope in the shin, and his eyes widened as if he just realized what he had said.

"Oh, no one said. I know it's in your family."

"The o ice."

My head shot up to look at my brother as he spoke for the first time.

"My dad, my dad's o ice."

John B walked past all of us and into the house.

"He always kept the o ice locked because he was worried about his competitors stealing his Royal Merchant research."

The four of us stood and followed him.

"We used to laugh at him all the time about it like he was gonna find it, but now that he's gone," he stopped just outside of the locked door that sat between the two of our bedrooms. "We've just kinda..."

"Kept it as he le it," I interrupted him, my voice cracking slightly as the hole le in my heart could suddenly be felt again.

A hand landed on my shoulder, and I gave Kiara a watery smile.

"Yeah for when he gets back."

I could tell that none of our friends believed that my dad was coming back. Just like the police and DCS, they all think that my dad is dead. I just couldn't think that. It meant that the hole that my dad le in my heart could never be filled again.

John B opened the o ice door, and I hesitantly followed behind him. My eyes watered once I saw that it was empty. Part of me was hoping to find my dad sitting at the desk hunched over one of the books. But, just like every other time I've come in here in the past nine months, he wasn't.

"I've slept over here like six-hundred times, and I've never seen this door opened."

I heard Kiara hum in agreement with Pope and watched John B pull the bulletin board with our family tree o the top of a filing cabinet.

"Here, look. This is the original owner, right here."

"Okay," Kie said, looking over John B's shoulder. "Robert Q. Routledge, 1880 to 1920. There's the lucky compass, right there."

"Uh, actually," I jumped in, looking down at the picture she was pointing to. "He was shot like right a er he bought it."

The rooster crowed in the absence of anyone talking.

"Then the compass was shipped back to Henry," John B said, pointing to the next picture.

"Who was killed in a crop-dusting accident when he had it," I added, feeling my friends' eyes on me.

"Right, and a er he died, the compass was given to Stephen. Stephen had the compass with him when he died in Vietnam."

"Let me guess," JJ said from next to me. "He died in action, right?"

"Kind of. He was killed by a banana truck. In country."

I felt JJ's shoulders sag as I shared that information.

"Anyways," John B continued, "a er that, Stephen passed the compass down to him, my dad."

My heart clenched when my eyes landed on my dad's photo. JJ placed his hand on my upper back, rubbing it comfortably.

"Sounds like there's a reoccurring theme here."

"Yeah, um. You two have a death compass."

I rolled my eyes at Pope who stood across from me.

"Shut up, we do not."

"Yeah, you have a death compass."

"Get rid of it. It's cursed and made its way back to you!"

I turned to glare at JJ, moving away from his comforting touch and facing the window.

John B started to explain about the secret compartment, and I continued to look out the window.

Death compass or not, it was the last thing that John B and I have of our father, and I was not going to get rid of it.

"It says Redfield."

I turned back toward my friends with scrunched eyebrows.

"What?"

John B held up the part of the compass that screws o, showing a hand scratched word.

"Holy shit, it does say Redfield?"

"Okay, well, what's Redfield?"

"Besides the most common name in the county?"

"Oh, maybe it's a clue. Maybe it's a clue to where he's hiding."

The rooster crowed again as everyone looked to my brother with disbelief.

"If it is a clue, maybe it's an anagram?"

I glared back out the window as Pope's statement came out more like a question, like he didn't believe the words coming out of his own mouth.

John B handed him paper, and I heard them trying to come up with something that Redfield could stand for. A black pickup truck pulled up next to the van.

"Guys..."

I was ignored as they still worked.

"Dudes!"

My yell caused all of them to look at me.

"Someone's here."

They all came to stand around me as we all grouped together to look out the window. I bit my lip and fiddled with my fingers in anxiety as two guys got out of the truck, looking oddly familiar.

"Guys, is that them?"

It suddenly got very hard to breath.

"Is that them?"

"This is suboptimal."

"No fucking shit, Pope!" I exploded, causing everyone to look at me with wide eyes.

John B pushed JJ up against the wall as the blond started to freak out. My heart stopped in my chest as JJ's face suddenly went blank.

"Where's the gun?"

The blond's face went from blank to relieved to confused as he tried to remember.

"In your backpack," I said, and JJ's eyebrows shot up.

"Right, in my backpack, and then I..."

"On the porch."

JJ pointed at John B.

"It's on the porch."

"Wait," I said as JJ went towards the door. "You're not actually going to go to the porch with the square groupers out there, are you?"

"I gotta..."

The blond opened the door and started running through the house. I bit down on my lip again.

"John Routledge!"

I jumped, biting down on my lip hard enough to break the skin and draw blood. I debated running out a er JJ, but the blond returned to the o ice and closed the door, leaving his back on it.

"They're on the front porch, guys."

I ran my hands over my face as the two men continued to shout through the house.

"Guys, window, window."

JJ and Pope ran over to the window, trying to pull it open, but it wouldn't budge.

"What the hell, guys?"

JJ turned and glared at me.

"It's painted shut."

"Here, try this."

I took the letter opener knife from Kiara and started running it between the window and the window sill, cutting through the layer of paint.

The doorknob to the o ice rattled as someone tried to open it, and my hands began to shake, making my job harder.

"You better not be in there!"

Tears welled up in my eyes as the man's voice sounded from the opposite side of the door, and I somehow managed to slice into my palm as everything became blurry.

"Here, let me. Let me."

Kiara took the knife, and I just watched helplessly as she ortlessly finished cutting at the paint.

The guy began kicking down the door as Kiara put the knife back on the desk. JJ le ed the window open and jumped through it, motioning for me to follow. I did, before looking around for the next place for us to hide.

The rooster crowed again.

I grabbed JJ's wrist as John B was closing the window, and silently tugged him towards the chicken coup.

Somehow the five of us managed to fit inside of it, but the chickens and the rooster were not happy. They were all squawking, and I clutch my still bleeding hand against my chest.

"Shut him up," JJ motioned toward the rooster as his crowing grew louder in protest of us being there.

"What do you want me to do?" Pope whisper-yelled, her own.

"Pet it or talk to it. I don't know," Kiara whispered, but her own tears running down her cheeks.

John B suddenly moved away from his spot where he was watching the guys clean out our dad's o ice and closed his eyes.

Oh shit.

JJ got up from his laying down position and bounced on the rooster, snapping its neck a er hitting it against the ground a few times.

A strangled sob escaped from my throat as JJ slowly let go of the rooster. He looked to me, and I saw the sadness in his eyes. I threw my arm over his shoulder as he sat down next to me, and he rested his head on my shoulder and closed his eyes.

We all sat in silence as we waited for the men to discover our hiding place.

"Batter! What the hell are you doing? Let's go."

John B went back to watching so the guys packed up the rest of the stu and started up the truck. No one moved until we couldn't hear the sound of the engine anymore.

I couldn't hold it in the sobs anymore. Those guys invaded my home and stole my dad's stu. My rooster was dead, my hand sliced to shit, and all I could smell was JJ li ed his chicken poop. It all just became too much.

My whole body shook as JJ li ed his head o my shoulder and pulled me into a full hug. I cried into his chest.

A er we all crawled out of the chicken coup, Pope helped me bandage up my hand, and I changed my shirt due to getting quite a good amount of blood on mine.

John B backed all of us into the van shortly a er that. I found myself in the back with Pope and JJ as John B drove and Kiara sat up front.

"I mean, it's obvious, right? A family heirloom. What better place to hide a message? He had to know it was gonna be stuck to me, right?" I stayed silent as I just looked out the window, backing to the passing trees.

"Yeah. It's possible."

You sounded real convincing there, Kie.

It could also be possible that you're concocting wild theories to help, you know, deal with your sad feels."

"Bro, you know how I process my sad feels," JJ said, and sticking my leg with his foot as he sat across from me. "Dank nugs and the nudgies of ickies, that's how I do it."

I chuckled, shaking my head at my best friend, but kept my eyes glued out the window.

"I'm not concocting, okay? My dad's trying to give me a message. To give us a message."

"If it helps you believe, John B."

I sco ed.

"We don't need a therapy session, okay?" I snapped, and everyone finally shut up. "We're not tripping out."

JJ moved from his seat to sit next to me and threw his arm over my shoulder.

"It's okay to trip, dude, but..."

"No! Our dad is missing, okay? He's gonna come back and prove all you sorry sons of bitches wrong!"

I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the window, still refusing to meet anyone's gaze.

"You don't know what it's like to have one of the people closest to you vanish, having no idea what happened. It leaves a space too big for anything else to fill, and you know that the only thing that could ever make you feel whole again is seeing them come back into your life."

I felt my chin wobble and started fiddling with my hands as my sight turned blurry.

A hand landed on my own fiddling ones, causing them to go still.

"It's been almost a year," Kiara said gently, and I just pursed my lips.

"Hey, he could have been kidnapped. That's definitely a possibility."

"Yeah, could be in a Soviet sub getting interrogated by the KGB somewhere."

"Absolutely. Uh, or Atlantis."

I sco ed, and JJ squeezed my hands.

"What do you think the message is?"

"Redfield. Redfield Lighthouse. That's my dad's favorite place."

I closed my eyes as we passed the faded sign. I really didn't want to go the lighthouse today. My hand hurt, my head hurt, and I really didn't want to see anything else that reminded me of the fact that my dad wasn't here.

JJ let go of my hand as we all piled out, Pope being the last one and shutting all the doors.

"Right, JJ and Jo, you two are gonna post up and look out for boogies, okay?"

I nodded, relieved that I wouldn't have to show everyone how much I really didn't want to go up in the lighthouse.

"Wait, why me?"

"Because, you're not coming," Pope said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"Why?"

"JJ, there are independent and there are dependent variables, and you're an independent variable. We don't know what you'll do."

"Shut up. Shut up, Pope!"

"Hey! Both of you shut up and listen."

The two turn to me.

"Pope, JJ, and I are gonna stay here and be on look out, and Kiara and John B are gonna go see what's what in the lighthouse. Got it?"

I le no room for arguments in my voice.

"Right, if we get split up, we meet back at JJ's house," John B added with a nod.

Kiara and John B started walking toward the lighthouse, and JJ pulled a hacky sack from his shorts' pocket.

"I'm gonna work on my merit scholarship essay, and I'm trying to keep felonies to a minimum," Pope said as he walked back towards the van.

JJ started bouncing the hacky sack from his knee to his feet.

"Would you just shut up already?"

He passed it to me, and I kicked it up from my foot to my knee before bouncing it o my chest. I passed it back to JJ by bouncing it o my thigh. JJ kicks it up before trying to hit it with his other foot, but caused it to go to his right. I laughed as he tried to grab it with his hand but missed.

"Oh, yeah?" He challenged, picking it up and throwing it at my face.

I squealed, bringing my hands up catch it.

"You're an asshole," I laughed before chucking it at his chest.

He let it bounce o and then hit it o his knee again before dribbling it between his feet.

I was glad for the distraction.

JJ and I continued to pass the hacky sack back and forth, laughing when the other tried to do a fancy trick and failed. Pope eventually gave up and joined in the hacky sack fun, at least until flashing lights and a siren interrupted it.

I had just passed it to JJ, so he could bounce it o his shoulder, but he turned around at the sound of sirens, and the hacky sack hit him in the side of the neck instead. Normally, I would've laughed, but instead the three of us ran towards the van.

"Wait," I stopped running, causing the two boys to pass me. "Where are John B and Kiara?"

"They'll be fine, let's go!" Pope yelled, already starting up the van.

"No! I'm not leaving my brother behind!"

Two arms wrap around my waist, and I was li ed up into the air.

"No! JJ, put me fucking down!"

I thrashed in his arms, quickly getting free and running back towards the fence surrounding the lighthouse. JJ outran me, getting in front of me and li ed me up and threw me over his shoulder. He started sprinting back towards the van.

"JJ, stop!"

I heard him slide open the back door, and I was all but thrown onto the bench seat.

"Go, go, go!" JJ yelled to Pope as he jumped into the back with me and slid the door shut.

Pope peeled away from the lighthouse just as the police were pulling up to it. I smacked JJ in the back of the head, causing him to turn to me.

"What the hell, JJ? We just le John B and Kiara to fend for themselves!"

"We're following the plan: get separated, meet at my house."

I groaned in frustration.

"We only got separated because we le them behind!"

JJ let out his own groan of frustration.

"Well, it was better than all of us getting arrested!"

I sco ed and glared out the window, turning my face away from JJ, so he wouldn't be able to see how upset and frustrated I was.

John B is quite literally the only family that I have le right now. My mom split, my dad disappeared, and my uncle never bothered to show up.

It was just John B and I against the world.

If he got arrested, it was ninety-nine percent certain that the DCS was going to find him and ship him o to a foster home on the mainland, and we would be separated until we turned eighteen. That was not something that I could let happen.

"John B will be fine. Kiara is with him, and you know she always talks her way out of trouble."

I caught Pope's reassuring glance in the rearview mirror and replied with a silent nod.

"Jo," JJ tried to talk to me with a so er tone, but I just turned myself further away from him to hide my so er tone.

I angrily swiped at the single tear that slipped out from behind my eye and glared at the passing road. The rest of the ride was spent in silence.

Pope pulled up in front of the Chateau. I scrunched my eyes in confusion.

"What are we doing here? We are supposed to meet them at JJ's house."

"We're gonna leave the van here."

"Pope, that doesn't make any sense."

"You can stay here if you want, Jo, but I'm going home."

"Pope, you can't..."

"Yes, can't!"

My eyes widened in shock at Pope's outburst.

"I can't lose my scholarship, so if that means not going to JJ's house, then I'm not going to JJ's house."

He kicked open the door and got out of the van. JJ and I jumped out a er him, chasing him down the driveway.

"Pope, wait!"

He ignored my yell as he just kept marching away.

"Dude, we'll go with you!"

I turned to JJ with a what-the-fuck look, but he just grabbed my wrist and pulled me into a jog to catch up with our friend.

"But..."

"They will figure out that we went to Pope's when we're not at the Chateau or at mine."

I took a deep breath through my nose and let JJ pull me down the road.

Once at Pope's, we just wasted time in the way we knew how: fishing and smoking. Well, Pope was working on fixing a power washer, JJ was smoking, and I was fishing.

We spent the rest of the a ernoon behind Heyward's. Just as the sun was starting to set, the van pulled up and John B honked while motioning for us to join him.

I ran up to the van, sticking my head through the driver's open window.

"Where the hell have you been?"

"I was in the shert 's o ice."

"You were what?"

JJ hopped in the front seat a er racing Pope to the van.

"Hey, let's go Jo-Jo, John B obviously has a plan if he's picking up your ass."

I glared at the blond sitting next to my brother, and John B nodded and smiled enthusiastically at me.

"Fine."

I got in the back seat with Pope.

"Now, to The Wreck to get Kie."

Once at the restaurant, Pope volunteered to go get the last of our friends. He was inside for a few minutes, and he returned without the other girl.

"She says she's not coming."

I glared at the back of my brother's head.

"Why not?"

"Shit!"

"What'd you do to her, John B?"

I slid out of the van and started making my way towards the restaurant, when John B yelled for me stop.

"I'll deal with this."

"You better! There is already too much testosterone in this group, and Kie helps me balance it out!"

John B flipped me o without turning around.

I smirked before turning back to the van and leaning my back against the passenger side door.

"Twenty bucks says he was stupid enough to listen to your advice."

"What advice?"

"The advice to try macking on her," I sco ed, turning my head to face him.

"He wouldn't be stupid for following my advice."

"Who's more of a fool? The fool, or the one who follows the fool?"

"Don't be spattin' o your nerdy, wise cracks, Josephine."

I smirked and pushed away from the van.

"You underestimate my power."

"Jo..."

"Have you ever heard of the tragedy of Darth Plagueis the Wise?"

"That's it..."

I screamed as JJ opened his door and started chasing me around the parking lot.

I laughed as I ran around the van, but JJ went around the other way, cutting me o. He wrapped his arms around my waist and li ed me over his shoulder, spinning us around.

"JJ, put me down," I laughed, my face red.

"What are you two children doing?"

JJ and I both froze, and I tried to look as dignified as possible being thrown over someone's shoulder.

"Hey, Kie..."

The girl playfully rolled her eyes before stealing the front seat, and JJ walked us to the back of the van before setting me on my feet.

Once all of us are in, John B started driving down the road as the sun disappeared.

Continue reading next part [▶](#)