

## Chapter Twenty-Three



I was out of breath by the time I got to JJ's house. Not seeing his dad's truck in the yard, I assumed that he wasn't there. I smiled at the sight of JJ's bike.

I walked up the few stairs to the front porch and pulled open the screen door before knocking on the main door.

I waited, still trying to catch my breath, and turned toward the main road, looking for any cop cars but turned back when I heard the door open.

"Jo?"

I smiled at the sight of JJ halfway behind the door.

"Uh, hey."

"What are you doing here?"

His voice held concern. JJ usually avoided having us at his house, and I understood why.

"Oh, you know, running from the police and DCS."

His eyes widened, and he opened the door the rest of the way.

"What?"

I explained how they showed up to take us but John B and I escaped. He laughed as I told him about the picture.

"Then, John B told me to come here and that he'd meet me at the Chateau tomorrow night."

JJ nodded, looking out behind me before gesturing inside.

"Get in here."

I laughed and followed him into his house.

We ended up in his room, which I could count on one hand the amount of times I've actually been inside of. We ended up just chilling on his bed for a while. I took out the book from my backpack and started reading, and JJ just laid down next to me.

He began distracting me as he started playing with my hair. He was on his side and started to just twirling it around his fingers, then he started braiding it, and then he pushed some of my forehead, brushing his thumb over the bruise there.

I bit the inside of my lip and pretended to read while I could feel his eyes staring holes into my forehead.

"Let me teach you to shoot."

I coughed as I choked on my spit, sitting up and closing my book.

"What?"

"Let me teach you to shoot."

I shook my head.

"No, I heard you. I guess I should ask why?"

He tapped my forehead, right below my bruise, and used his other hand to gently grab my wrist.

"That's why."

He shook my wrist for emphasis, and I glared at him as my hand flopped back and forth.

"JJ, I'm not gonna shoot a gun."

JJ looked at me.

"No!" I held up a finger, trying to look away from the puppy eyes he was giving me.

"Damn it, JJ. I said no."

He grabbed my face and forced me to look in his blue eyes.

Fuck.

My shoulders sagged as I sighed.

"Fine."

I rolled my eyes as he smiled.

JJ dragged me outside and handed me some giant earmuffs. I put them on and smiled as he loaded the gun and started talking, pointing to the different parts. I nodded along, still grinning from ear to ear. He suddenly stopped talking and turned to me expectantly.

I loaded one of the earmuffs.

"Huh?"

I laughed as he groaned in frustration. He pulled the muffs off my head and let them rest on my shoulders and reexplained everything. Actually paying attention, I nodded and tried to remember everything he was saying.

I held my hands against my chest as he offered the gun out to me. He gave me an encouraging smile.

"You got this."

I carefully took the gun, surprised by its weight. JJ stood behind me, manipulating my arms and legs into the correct stance. He flipped his hat backwards before loading my earmuffs back over my ears and putting his own on. He pointed at a teddybear on a log that he had obviously already been using for target practice.

He stood behind me, his chest right against my back. His hands came up to support my wrists before sliding up to my elbows, adjusting them, and then to my shoulders, giving them a squeeze and staying there.

I took a deep breath before clicking off the safety like he just showed me and lined up the sight with the middle of the teddy bear. I squeezed the trigger, blinking at the loud noise despite the earmuffs, and dodged the empty shell so it didn't hit me in the forehead. The recoil pushed me into JJ's chest even more, and I didn't bother moving as I saw the teddy bear now missing an ear.

JJ squeezed my shoulders again, but I clicked the safety back on and shook my head. I pulled my earmuffs down to around my neck and saw JJ do the same from the corner of my eye.

"What's up?"

"It's too overwhelming right now," I said, lowering the gun to my side.

JJ took it from my hand and set it down on the lawn chair next to us before giving me a confused look.

"What is?"

I gestured around me.

"Everything. DCS, not finding the gold, not knowing if John B is safe, you, Deputy No-Neck being at my house."

"Wait," JJ cut me off before pointing to himself. "Me?"

Shit, shit, shit, fucking shit.

"What?" Was my intelligent reply.

"You said me."

Deny. Deny. Deny.

"P, no I didn't," I scooped, taking a step away.

"Uh, yeah, you did."

"You sure your earmuffs were on all the way there? I think you're hearing things."

He rolled his eyes as I began fiddling with my fingers behind my back. He walked towards me, and I backed up until my back bumped into a tree.

JJ reached behind me and pulled my hands apart, gently holding them up by the wrists.

"You're fiddling, which means you're lying."

Plan B.

"It's nothing you can do."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means, it's for me to worry about and for you to forget about, okay?"

"Jo, I don't understand why you just can't tell me," he said, dropping my hands and shaking his head.

"I just can't!"

"Pogues don't keep secrets from Pogues!"

"Yeah, well, there's no Pogue on Pogue macking!"

JJ's face contorted into confusion as he stared at me.

"What does that have to do with this?"

"Nothing at all." My voice lowed in volume as I looked anywhere but at his face.

"Then why did you bring it up?"

"Just drop it," I begged, leaning my head back against the tree and closing my eyes.

"Wait, do you like?"

"Guys!"

JJ and I both turned our heads as Pope jogged up to us.

"Pope?"

I rolled my eyes at JJ's confusion. Of course it was Pope.

"What's wrong?" I asked, taking in the boy's look on his face.

"JJ, they know."

I furrowed my eyebrows in confusion as JJ gave Pope a pointed look.

"Who knows about what?"

"Alright, chill, bro. They don't know shit."

I scooped as I'm ignored.

"Who doesn't know shit?"

"Topper knows I sunk his boat."

"Topper knows you did what?!"

They both ignore me again.

"How do you know they know?"

"Because Rafe and Topper posted outside of Heyward's and mad dogged me."

"Will one of you please tell me what the fuck is going on?"

"Will you calm down and get a grip, man? They don't know shit."

"They have cameras, they could've seen me."

"There was no power, Pope. How could they have seen you?"

"It's Figure Eight. They got generators."

Pope started pacing in front of JJ and I, and I just stayed against the tree, waiting for an explanation.

"They don't give scholarships to kids who vengefully sink boats. It's not a good look on my transcript."

"Enough with the regret, bro! They caved her face in," JJ yelled, and my eyes widened in realization. "They hit us, we hit them. It's the law of the jungle. Now, if any Kooks come up to you and ask if you had anything to do with it, you walk up to 'em, look 'em right in the eye, and?"

"Deny the living shit out of it."

"That's right. Deny, deny, deny. But, just for safety, we don't go anywhere without protection."

"So," I started to calmly, gaining both boys' attention. "You're telling me that a Rafe and Topper jumped me, and you told me you wouldn't do anything, and then I fell asleep, and you two went and fucking sunk Topper's two-hundred thousand dollar Malibu?"

My voice raised in volume as I kept going, and JJ nodded.

"Yeah that pretty much sums it up."

"Oh, my God," I mutter, placing my fingers against my temples.

"We're so dead."

"Jo, relax."

"Relax? Do you really think that they think it was just Pope? Did you not think for one second that they would think that I was involved?" I pulled at my hair in frustration.

"They are going to kill us, and somebody's gonna end up in prison, and it won't be the Kooks. Oh no, it's gonna our dead bodies in a prison cell! Then, the DCS is gonna come and drag my dead ass into fucking foster care!"

I covered my face with my hands and sat down on the ground.

"We are so fucked."