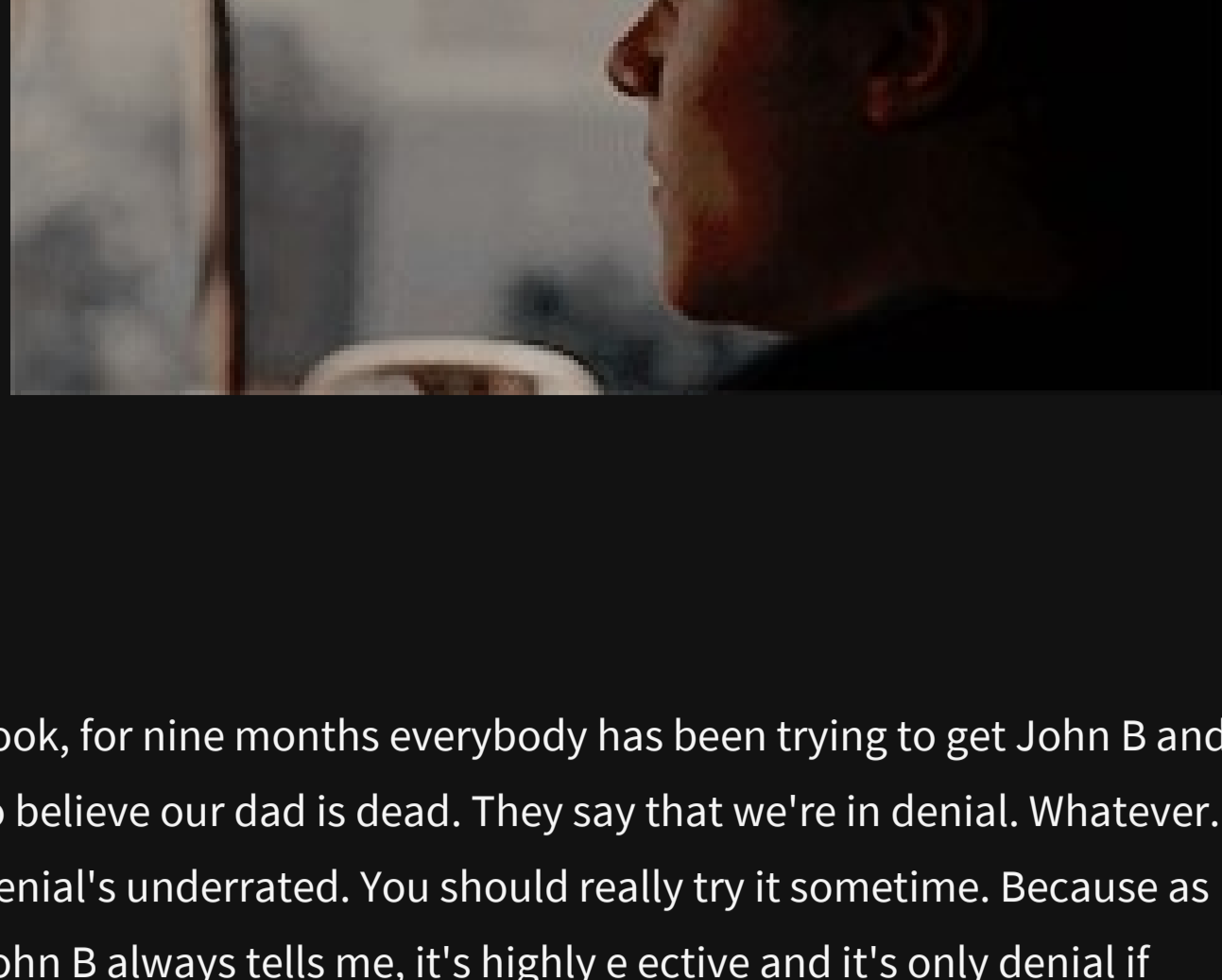


## Chapter Eleven



Look, for nine months everybody has been trying to get John B and I to believe our dad is dead. They say that we're in denial. Whatever. Denial's underrated. You should really try it sometime. Because as John B always tells me, it's highly effective and it's the only denial if you're wrong.

I kept flipping my dad's compass open and closed as I swung in the hammock. This had been and always would be my favorite spot. It was always in the shade and provided a perfect view of the docks and the water. It was the perfect nap spot. JJ and I usually fought over it.

I snapped the compass closed again before letting out a heavy sigh and glanced up at the night sky through the tree branches.

It didn't make any sense. Dad was the last guy who would ever get lost at sea. He taught John B and I everything we know about boating and how to use a compass and even the night sky to find our way home. So, the compass coming back to John B and me is a sign. I was pretty sure John B saw it as a sign that Dad was still alive and that we were gonna find him.

But, me? I wasn't so sure it meant that he was a hundred percent okay.

John B starting up the HMS Pogue woke me up the next morning. I groaned and tried to roll over on the hammock, but the sun was starting to rise and was getting in my face.

I rolled onto the hammock, where I spent the night, and slunk my way into the Chateau. I fell face first onto the pull out bed, not having the energy to make it to my room, and felt myself slowly drifting back to sleep.

I was going to drown.

My chest was burning and the waves were dragging me further under the water. I was so desperate to take a breath, but the only thing stopping me was knowing that I was surrounded by water and not air.

I didn't know how much longer that knowledge would stop me.

Just as I felt like my head was going to explode, I opened my mouth and took a breath, only I still couldn't breathe.

I tried to suck in any air, but I just kept surfacing on water, getting further and further away from the surface and further and further down into the darkness of the ocean.

I gasped and sat straight up, a hand over my chest as I tried to regain my bearings. I wasn't drowning. I was on the pull out bed in the Chateau. I was okay.

Just as my heartbeat was returning to normal, a pounding on the front door caused it to spike again, and the voice following caused it to stop altogether.

"DCS! I know you're in there!"

I was frozen as I stared at the door. Would they just barge right in and demand that I come with them? Would they take me away to the mainland without so much as a goodbye to my friends? Would I ever see my brother again?

The window rattled as JJ jumped and hit it with his hands. I screamed at his appearance and the loud noise he caused.

"Gotcha, slick!"

I glared at the blond as he pointed at me and laughed. I put a hand over my heart as it began beating again and returned to its normal pace as JJ let himself in.

"You should have seen your face," JJ laughed, a hand on his stomach as he pointed to me.

"I hate you."

"Your face was like," he continued, apparently mimicking what my terrified face looked like seconds before.

"I seriously don't like you."

JJ plopped down on the bed next to me on his stomach.

"Aw, c'mon Joey, you know you love me."

I rolled my eyes before glaring at him.

"That seriously wasn't funny, you almost gave me an anxiety attack."

The blond's grin faded slightly as he took in my serious tone.

"I thought those were getting better?"

I pursed my lips and looked away from him. I forgot I had lied about that.

"They are," I murmured and started to push myself onto the bed, but JJ's hand around my wrist stopped me.

"Jo, don't lie to me about this."

Every singly time.

"I'm not," I lied and began to pick at the pilling fabric of the bedsheets.

"Uh huh, right, and Pope doesn't give a fuck about his scholarship."

I sighed.

"They were getting better, but after that meeting with the DCS lady," I trailed off, knowing JJ wouldn't need much more of an explanation.

His thumb began rubbing in-between the bracelets on my wrist.

"Right."

I bit the inside of my cheek as I tried to think of something to say. I made the mistake of looking at the blond.

His face was contorted into a confused focus on my wrist where his thumb kept brushing back and forth. He must have felt me watching him or something because he suddenly looked up at me. I think he was going to say something, but the door slamming open gained both of our attention.

"Good, you're both here and both awake," John B said before nodding his head back toward the door. "Let's go."

I only had time to brush my teeth and grab a clean shirt before JJ stormed into my room and drug me out to the van.

I threw my hair into a messy bun in the back while JJ propped his feet up on the dash as John B drove.

"Still waiting for an explanation on where we're going."

My statement interrupted the boys' conversation where JJ was trying to convince my brother to make a move on Kiara.

"I'm just saying, I don't understand why you don't at least try it with Kiara," JJ continued as they both ignored me. "She clearly likes you."

"Should I use my power of invisibility for good?"

"She's like, 'Oh, John B!'"

"Is that what she does?"

"Or should I use it for evil?"

"Like you could do anything evil," JJ finally acknowledged me with quite the bitch-face before returning to face my brother.

"She's sketching about you diving, then she kissed you, bro."

"She kissed me on the cheek. It's not like we were makin' out."

"Yeah, I kiss you on the cheek all the time, JJ."

"That's different, Jo, and low-hangin' fruit, bro. Don't pretend you don't notice. I see it in your eyes. You're like, 'I kinda like that,' and you start blushing and shit."

"I blush?"

"Uh, yeah, JB. You totally start blushing," I laughed, causing JJ to fist bump me.

The blond reached forward and grabbed Dad's compass, and John B freaked out, lunging to take it out of his hands.

"I was just looking at it," JJ shook off my brother's hands as we swerved slightly.

"Yo, both hands on the wheel and eyes on the road, dude!"

John B settled back into his seat, following my backseat driving advice, and JJ took a more serious tone.

"I gotta admit, your father's compass in Scooter's boat, that's freaky."

"Yeah," John B agreed. "That's why we're going to talk to Ms. Lana and figure this whole thing out."

"Oh, I'm sure she'd love to talk to us," I said, my voice heavy with sarcasm.

"Yeah," JJ muttered. "It's not like her husband just drowned or anything."

The rest of the ride to the widow's house was filled by the music playing. Neither of us said a word.

Welcome to Tree Spirit your Reiki Head-Quarters.

I let out a puff of air as we passed the obviously homemade sign.

John B cut the engine and both boys jumped out, JJ sliding open the back door for me.

I stepped down onto the gravel driveway and walked next to my brother towards the house.

"Know what this house looks like?"

I slowed down and turned to face JJ.

"Whoever lives here smokes too much weed."

I mimicked smoking a blunt with a smirk on my face before laughing and turning back towards the house.

JJ suddenly grabbed my hand and pulled me to a stop.

"Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

A loud crash sounds from inside the house.

"That!"

A man's scream sounded from inside, and JJ started to tug me back towards the van.

"Maybe we should come back. It's a little too soon."

John B told him to shut up as he moved closer to the house. I followed after my brother, and JJ, without letting go of my hand, followed after me.

"Tell me where it is, or I'll fuck you up!"

Ms. Lana screamed again as another crash sounded from inside.

John B and I flinched, ducking down, and JJ pulled me behind him.

"You're hurting me!"

Part of me wanted to go into that house and beat the shit out of whoever was hurting Ms. Lana, but part of me didn't want to take a single step closer. I compromised with myself and squeezed onto JJ's hand and clunched the back of his shirt in my other hand as the three of us walked closer to the house.

"E-" JJ started, probably going to suggest that we go back to the van, but John B turned and gave him a pointed look.

"Shut up and come on."

We ran the rest of the way to the house. John B pressed his back against the siding while JJ and I, still holding hands and me still sliding onto the back of his shirt in anxiety, pressed our sides into the siding.

"Where the fuck is it, you bitch?"

The man's scream caused me to flinch again and bury my face in-between JJ's shoulder blades. JJ squeezed my hand.

"Still think we should stay?" JJ asked, obviously feeling as anxious as I was.

"The compass wasn't in the boat!"

I gripped onto JJ's shirt and hand tighter at the mention of the compass, and a whimper fell from my lips as Ms. Lana sobbed again.

"Don't listen," JJ muttered, but I didn't know if he was talking to me, John B, or himself. "Is that paint?"

"Yes, it's paint," John B whispered, obviously annoyed and anxious.

"Let's get the hell out of here, man," a second man from inside said, and I watched John B move around us to peek around the corner of the house.

"We should just go. He's got smuggler."

"Shut up."

"Smuggler written all over him."

I dropped JJ's shirt but kept a firm hold on his hand as we crept behind John B towards the front of the house.

John B looked around the corner before quickly ducking back, causing both JJ and I to flinch.

"Shut up. Shut up."

The three of us slowly peeked around the corner again as Ms. Lana continued to sob inside. John B and JJ looked back at me, but I watched the men walk all the way down to their boat. A very familiar boat.

I gasped, causing both boys to turn to me.

"What?"

"Those are the guys from the marsh."

"You mean the guys that shot at us!"

"Go back."

We shuffled backwards as the two men passed us in the boat. John B finally rounded the corner, and I followed after him, dragging a very nervous JJ behind me. Not that I blame him. The adrenaline in my nervous system was making me all sorts of twitchy.

We walked through the doorway, not finding the need to knock since the door was ripped off its hinges, and followed the sound of Ms. Lana sobbing through the house.