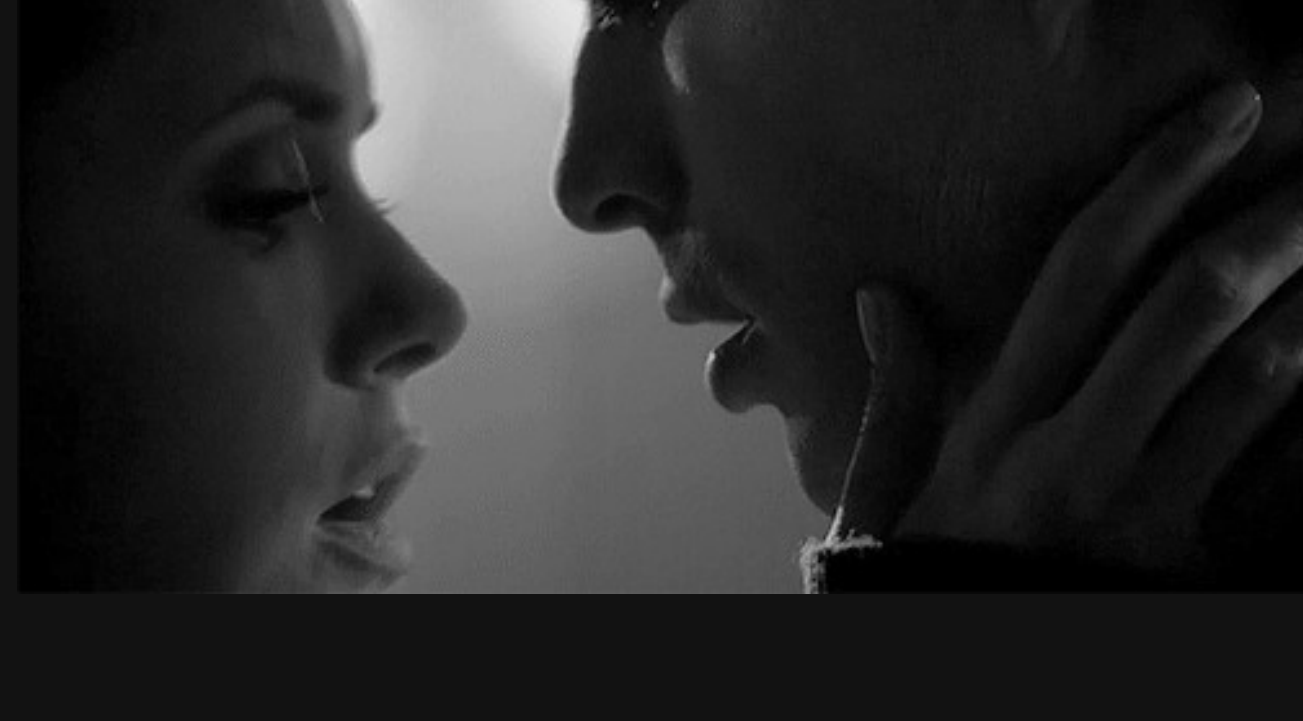


Chapter Twenty-Six



a

I tried to keep the tears back as I ran down the sidewalk to the sheriff's station, the shirt I borrowed from JJ the night before sticking to my back as I began to sweat in the afternoon heat.

I had to get there before they called his dad. I didn't even want to think about how bad that could be if his dad showed up.

I knew there was a chance that I'd show up and Deputy Thomas would grab and ship me off to the mainland for foster care. But, that didn't matter to me in that moment.

I busted into the station, glaring at the elderly lady running the front desk. Her eyes went wide as I approached her.

"I'm here to see JJ Maybank."

The lady rolled her eyes.

"Peterkin said you'd show up."

I slammed my hand on the counter.

"I don't give a shit what she said. I want to see him."

"She also said to tell you that you couldn't see him."

I groaned in frustration.

"She also said to warn you that if Deputy Thomas saw you, he'd take you into custody."

I glared at the woman as she reached for the walkie next to her.

"You wouldn't dare."

She narrowed her eyes at me.

"Get out of this station, and I'll forget that you ever graced me with your presence today, Routledge."

I returned the lady's narrowed glare with a harsher one of my own before leaning down to the counter.

"If anything happens to him, don't be surprised if I come in here raising hell."

I marched out of the station, making sure to slam the door loud enough for everyone to hear. Then, I sat down on the front steps, bouncing my leg up and down for half an hour before I hear the door open again.

"I wonder what restitution's gonna be on a two-thousand nineteen Malibu."

I jumped to my feet as JJ and his dad passed me.

"JJ?"

They both turned around at the bottom of the stairs. JJ's eyes were wide in surprise while his father's narrowed.

"Who's this?"

JJ ignored his father as I walked up to him.

"You don't have to go with him."

My words were rushed and quiet.

"What are you doing here?"

"Please, don't go with him."

My voice cracked as my fear for JJ took over. I placed my hands on his face.

"Just come with me back to the Chateau, or we can go to Kie's. We can go anywhere, but please just don't go with him."

JJ placed one of his hands over mine and leaned into my touch, closing his eyes.

"Let's go!"

JJ opened his eyes and took my hands away from his face.

"I'll be fine, sweetheart. I promise."

"JJ, don't."

He gave my hands a squeeze before dropping them and walking back to his dad. They both walked up to his dad's truck, JJ hesitating before looking back to me over his shoulder. He smiled, pretty convincingly, before getting in with his dad. The truck took off down the road as soon as JJ's door shut.

"God, damn it!"

I kicked over a trashcan, spilling its contents onto the street.

I fell to my knees, my hands gripping onto my hair as tears poured out of my eyes.

I hiccuped as I struggled to breath through the crushing anxiety for my friend. I clenched my teeth together as hard as I could before attempting to take deep breathes.

A horrible idea came to mind, and before I could overthink it and backdown, I got to my feet and started running.

The familiar house came into view with the familiar truck and familiar dirt bike. I tried to catch my breath as I slowed into a fast walk as I made my way closer to the house.

I started to think what I would do if no-one answered the door, and I knew I'd break it down if I had to.

But I didn't.

JJ stormed out the front door, shoving something into his backpack. I froze as he ran down the porch stairs before looking up and seeing me. He froze.

"Jo, what-"

I didn't let him finish as I sprinted the rest of the way to him and basically tackled him into a bear hug. He returned it, pulling me tightly against him.

I pulled away a moment and studied his face.

"This doesn't look fine, JJ."

I reached up and gently traced a finger over the split skin by his eyebrow, on his cheek, and the corner of his mouth. He didn't even flinch.

My chin wobbled, knowing what happened, and, without thinking, I stood on my tips toes, pressing my lips just below the cut on his eyebrow, then next to the bruise forming on his cheek, and lastly on the corner of his mouth. My lips just barely brushed against the corner of his, and I quickly pulled away. I fell back on my heels and stared at my shoes.

"I'm sorry, that was too much."

a

I clamped my hands to my chest to stop myself from fiddling with them as embarrassment heated up my chest and cheeks.

He stayed silent, and I started to freak out.

"I just, I don't know what came over me. Your face, and thinking about how it happened, and about how this is all my fault, and what-"

I was cut off as JJ put his hands on either side of my face and squished my cheeks together.

"This is not your fault."

I closed my eyes, squeezing them shut to try and keep the tears in.

"If I had just not gone with Pope, or let the Kooks have the stupid beer-"

"No! It's not your fault."

"But-"

JJ took half a step closer, bringing his face closer to mine with our noses practically touching. I stopped talking.

I couldn't look away from his intense stare this time. I was drowning in his blue eyes.

"Josephine," he whispered my name like it was the only thing holding him together, and I watched as his eyes flicked down before closing. He unsquished my cheeks but kept his hands there.

My eyes darted down to his lips, and I leaned impossibly closer.

My head was screaming at me to remember the rule. No Pogue on Pogue macking. No Pogue on Pogue macking. No Pogue on Pogue macking!

My heart was telling me to go for it, and for once in my life, I listened to my heart over my head.

"JJ."

His eyes shot open, meeting mine and looking for any doubts or clues that I was hesitating. I gave the smallest of nods, and that was all he needed.

He brushed his lips against mine, and my eyes fluttered closed as he pressed his forehead against mine.

"What about Pope?"

"What about him?"

"I thought that you-"

He paused.

"Oh."

I breathed out a small laugh.

"Just fucking kiss me already, Maybank."

One of his hands slid to the back of my neck, drew me in, closing the last minuscule amount of space separating us, and gently but firmly placed his lips over mine.

a

Continue reading next part [↗](#)