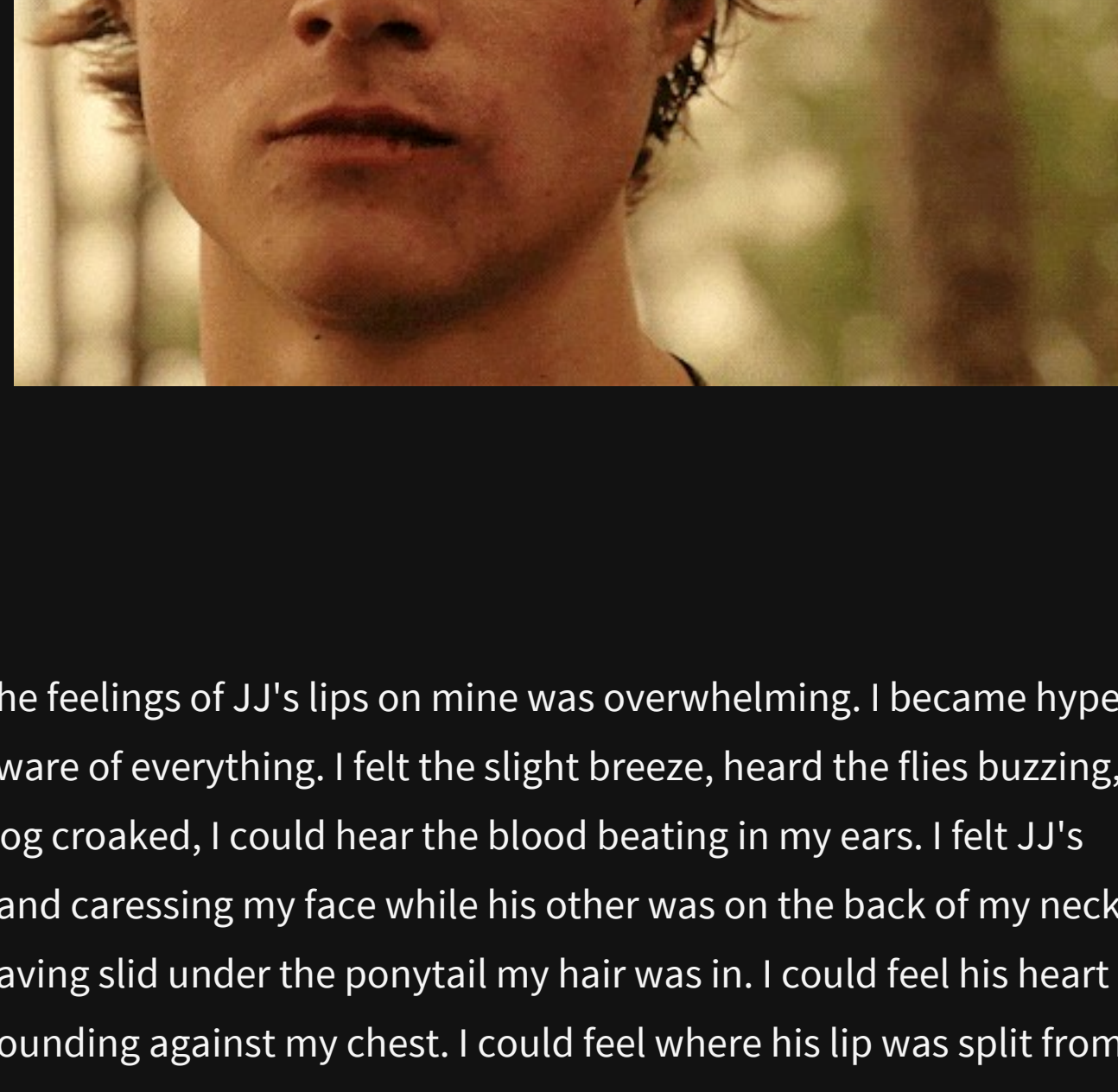


Chapter Twenty-Seven



The feelings of JJ's lips on mine was overwhelming. I became hyper-aware of everything. I felt the slight breeze, heard the flies buzzing, a frog croaked, I could hear the blood beating in my ears. I felt JJ's hand caressing my face while his other was on the back of my neck, having slid under the ponytail my hair was in. I could feel his heart pounding against my chest. I could feel where his lip was split from the fight with the Kooks last night. I could smell the leaves of the trees around his house, the grass that we stood in, and him. His overall salt-water, weed, and Ocean Breeze Suave shampoo smell.

What felt like hours, but still not enough time, passed before JJ pulled away from the simple peck. My hands dropped from his face and landed on his shoulders as I kept my eyes closed and took a deep breath.

"You okay?"

I almost smiled at the concern yet cockiness in his voice.

"Uh huh."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I, uh, I just need a second to..."

"Process?"

"Yeah, to process."

"Take your time, sweetheart."

We both continued to stand there for a moment.

I just kissed my best friend. My best friend, who is also my brother's best friend. My best friend who is a Pogue. My best friend who is a Pogue like me, so we just broke the No Pogue on Pogue macking rule. Oh fu-

JJ suddenly pressed his lips against mine again, adding a little more pressure this time but still keeping it to a simple kiss.

It was much shorter than last time, and when he pulled away, my eyes shot wide open.

"What happened to taking my time?"

"You were overthinking it."

I opened my mouth to say something witty at his matter-of-fact tone, but I came up with nothing. He was right.

"Yeah, whatever."

He laughed and took his hand that was on the back of my neck and used it to sweep away some hair from my face before settling it on my waist. He smiled as he lent his forehead against mine.

"Hi."

I brought my hands up from his shoulders to his neck, returning the smile.

"Hi."

"Do I have to ask permission to kiss you again?"

I chuckled before shaking my head.

"Nope."

"And does that answer count for in the future or just this moment because I really-"

"Shut up."

I leaned up on my toes and kissed him. My heart flipped in my chest as I felt him smirk before he started kissing me back.

The third kiss was much more heated, our lips moved together, and his tongue slipped inside my mouth. I sighed into it, and he brought us impossibly closer together. My fingers began to pull at his hair at the nape of his neck.

A loud crash from inside had us pulling apart and remembering where we were and what was happening.

"We should go," he said, dropping his hands from my waist.

"Right," I sighed, untangling my fingers from his hair.

We walked over to his dirt bike, he handed me his backpack, and I slung it over my shoulders, unsurprised by the weight to it. He got on the bike, and I sat behind him on the back, wrapping my arms tightly around his waist.

"Ready?"

I leaned forward and placed a kiss to his cheek

"Ready."

He revved the engine and ended up popping a wheely, causing me to squeal and cling onto him tighter. I could barely make out the sound of his laughter over the rushing wind.

We were pulling up the driveway of the Chateau when JJ suddenly stopped.

"What?" I asked, but he shushed me.

"There's a car in your driveway."

I leaned around him to see a black, SUV type car in fact in the driveway.

"What the hell?"

JJ mumbled something about Peterkin being right before turning us around.

"Wait, JJ. Wait!"

"What?" He stopped at the end of the driveway.

"John B is supposed to be coming home tonight."

"Shit."

He guided us into the woods that surrounded the Chateau, before stopping once we could see the house. We both got on the bike and waited in silence.

I could feel his eyes on me as we sat.

"What?"

The question seemed to catch him off guard.

"Huh?"

I chuckled before turning to him.

"I can feel you staring at me, so what?"

"Can't a dude stare at a girl?"

I raised an eyebrow at him.

"I heard it," he pouted, causing me to laugh.

There's a few minutes of silence.

"Are you gonna tell me or not?"

He smirked, and I had a feeling what he was gonna say next.

"I was thinking about what it would be like to-"

The sound of footsteps interrupted him, causing us both to look away from each other and towards the Chateau. John B was walking towards it, unaware of the car in the driveway, and JJ and I both ran towards him.

JJ got to him first and placed a hand over his mouth and on his head to try and hide him. Instead, John B flipped out, elbowed JJ in the stomach, and tackled the blond to the ground. I watched from a distance, knowing better to get in between the two.

"Wait, it's JJ, stop, stop, stop, stop."

John B stopped wrestling him and put his hands on his shoulder, sitting up.

"Fuck," JJ breathed out.

"What are you doing, bro?"

"Shut up," JJ whispered, placing his hand over John B's mouth, and shoved him up against the side of the Chateau.

I stepped in, pulling JJ's hands away from my brother's face, and pulled John B by his backpack strap to the canoe stand, pointing to the car.

"See that?"

John B nodded.

"They're watching the house," I whispered, causing John B to turn to me.

"Who?"

"I don't know," I shook my head.

"Let's go," JJ said, pushing John B away from the canoes and grabbing my hand to pull me behind.

We ended up at the edge of the water of the marsh.

"Gotta go this way."

JJ was the first to step into the water. He turned and offered me a hand as I stepped into the cool water. I hiked his backpack up onto my my head to keep it out of the water, John B doing the same with his. We walked through the tall grass, and I tried not to think of the Cottonmouth we found at the cemetery the other night.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait. You got the keys to the Pogue?" JJ suddenly asked John B.

"Yeah."

The water got too deep for me, and I struggled to balance the backpack on my head and full on swim at the same time. John B was way ahead of me, and JJ swam back.

"C'mon, slowpoke."

I glared as I stopped his backpack from sliding off my head for the tenth time.

"Well, if you carried your own backpack," I fired back.

He chuckled, grabbing my arm and pulling me into him. My chest was against his, and his backpack covered both of our heads. He quickly looked behind him before pressing a chaste kiss to my lips. He then turned.

"Piggyback ride?"

I smiled and wrapped my legs around him, allowing me to use my arms to hold the backpack up and him to use his arms to swim and keep both of our heads, and the backpack, out of the water.

Once at the dock, John B climbed into the boat first. I gently tossed JJ's backpack on board before grabbing onto the side and heaving myself up, JJ 'helped' by pushing up on my ass. I could feel him smirking.

I immediately started working on detaching the rope on the port-stern side from the cleat on the dock while John B worked on the bow line. JJ helped me push it away from the dock as John B went to the helm and started up the boat.

The three of us ducked down as we passed the Chateau before John B gunned it. We found a place to tie the boat up where we could talk. JJ recounted what happened last night.

"First, I almost get strangled to Kooks, and now I'm on the hook for thirty grand. We should just dip."

"Okay, where do you wanna go? Hm?"

John B didn't sound like he agreed.

"Yucatan."

I smiled, and John B scooped.

"No, I'm dead serious right now. Surf all day, and then we can just live off lobsters we catch with our bare hands."

That sounded perfect, much better than the shit storm we're living in.

"You just wanna leave 'cause you got your ass beat?"

I pursed my lips, knowing they both need to let out some pent up steam but not liking the way John B was doing it.

"You didn't see the photos," JJ said, referring to the photos of the Square Groupers that were gaged and used for chum that Peterkin showed him.

"Think about it. They're willing to kill for the gold, then it's gotta be out there, JJ."

"Have you lost your mind?"

I stand from my seat on a rock as the boys get in each other's face.

"Guys..."

"One hundred years, man. One hundred years, people have been tryin' to find this Royal Merchant, and no one succeeded, and you think you are gonna be the one that actually finds it? When will you get it in your thick skull if you keep going down this road, you're gonna end up just like your dad!"

John B shoved JJ in the chest.

"John B!"

"I can't give up, JJ! Last time I saw that dude, we got in an argument," John B said between clenched teeth and got in JJ's face again. "And then he took all of our rent money and dipped for this Royal Merchant, and then I told him he was a shit father, and you know how the rest of the story goes."

"Bro, that wasn't your fault."

"It doesn't matter whose fault it is, JJ. Do you not understand that? I can't give up on the hunt, man. I don't care who's out there, who's gonna try to kill us. Do you understand that?"

I stepped between the two, putting a hand on both of their chests and pushing them apart.

"Alright, that's enough!"

John B walked away, grabbing his backpack off a rock.

"Look, I've got a plan. You two comin' or what? Four hundred million, JJ. How much do you owe in restitution?"

John B got on the HMS Pogue and waited for us. I looked to JJ, but his face was a stone cold.

"JJ?"

"Let's just go."

I sighed as he walked past me and onto the boat, sitting at the stern, and glared at the back of John B's head.

I got on, both boys looked at me expectantly.

"Oh, no, I am not choosing sides here. You two work out your own problems."

John B rolled his eyes, and JJ crossed his arms over his chest. I sat down on the bow.