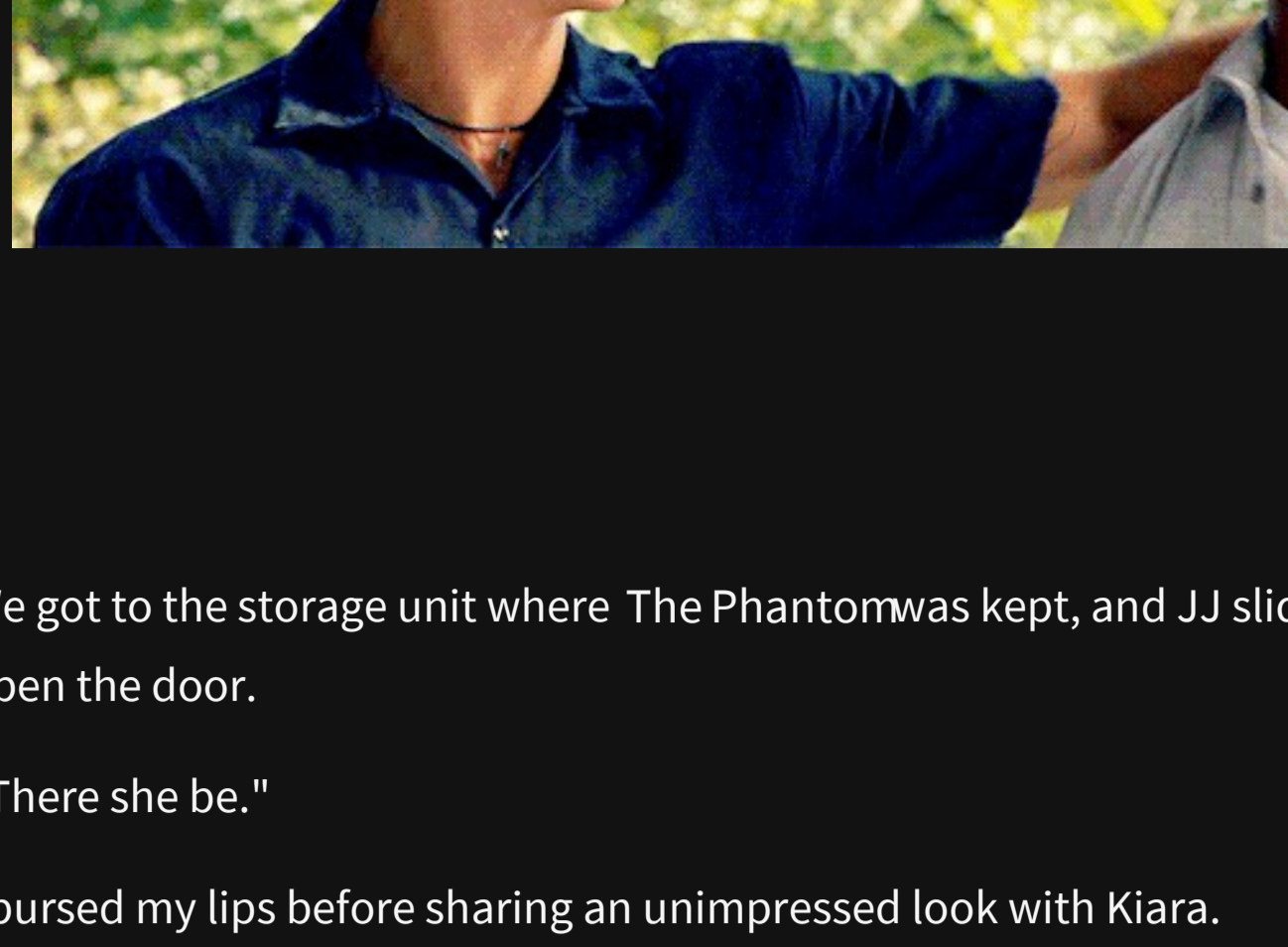


Chapter Fi y



We got to the storage unit where The Phantom was kept, and JJ slid open the door.

"There she be."

I pursed my lips before sharing an unimpressed look with Kiara.

"Hey, girl." He greeted the boat before pulling a blanket o of the bow. "A 1983 Formula 402 SR1. The Phantom"

JJ looked back to me with a grin on his face, and I smiled at him.

"The first boat to make the run to Bermuda in under sixteen hours, Jo. Forty years old! Forty. And still the fastest thing that Kildare's ever seen."

His enthusiasm was a nice change of pace considering how the day was going.

"It's kind of a junker."

I covered my mouth to try and keep the laughter in as JJ looked back at Kiara, o ended.

"Really? She's right there, Kie. She can hear you. Let's just put it this way, you would not be smokin' weed right now if she never existed, okay?"

"I just hope it runs," I said, running my hand across the hull as I made my way towards the stern.

"Oh, no, she'll run alright. She's faster than any cutters the boys in blue got."

"I hope so."

The sound of a motorcycle approaching had all three of us turning towards the entrance.

"Pope, finally!" Kiara yelled, going to go meet him.

I followed a er her, but the two of us froze when we saw someone walk in. It wasn't Pope.

"Hey, there. What's goin' on?"

I grabbed Kiara's wrist and pulled her behind me as Rafe walked toward us.

"JJ? How you guys doin'?"

I whipped my head around at the sound of a whistle, seeing Barry walk in from the other side.

"Well, well," the drug dealer said before pulling out a gun.

My heart hammered in my chest as he pointed it at JJ, causing the blond's hands to go into the air.

"See, don't think I forgot about me and you on the side of the road. I'm here because I want my motherfuckin' money."

"JJ!"

I dropped Kie's wrist and lunged toward JJ and Barry as the latter sent him to the ground, but arms wrapped around me and li ed me o my feet. I tried to kick and struggle in Rafe's grip, screaming insults as I watch Barry smash JJ's head into the floor.

Rafe set me down and got in my face.

"It's not you we want, Josephine. Where's John B?"

"I don't know!" I emphasized my words with a slap across his face.

Rafe's eyes were wide and held a certain tinge of insanity in them as he stalked closed to me.

"I really wish you didn't do that."

"I know what you did," I spat, taking steps back as he continued advancing toward me.

"What? What did I do?"

My back hit the hull of The Phantoms Rafe leaned his face down closer to mine.

"You murdered Sheri Peterkin!"

All I could do is gasp as Rafe suddenly reached out and wrapped his hand around my throat. He pulled me up to his face.

"Don't you ever say those fucking words again. Understand?"

I tried to gasp in air as his grip tightened.

"Where is John B?"

"I don't know!"

He started screaming and squeezing harder, and I tried to pry his fingers o , but his grip was solid. I couldn't breath anymore, and black spots started appearing before my vision started to tunnel, and my ears started to ring.

Suddenly, his grip was gone. I dropped to all fours as I coughed and sucked in air. I could hear mu led grunts and yells, but all my brain could focus on was trying to breath and trying not to puke.

I screamed and fell backwards as hands tried to li me to my feet. It took me a moment to focus and see that it was JJ.

"It's me. It's okay, it's me." I heard him say as my hearing came back.

I let him li me to my feet, and my eyes widened as I saw Pope punching the shit out of Rafe. All I could do was watch as Kiara tried to convince him to stop. JJ joined in, trying to get him to snap out of his rage as he wrapped a piece of hose around Rafe's neck.

"Pope, look at me!"

Pope finally dropped Rafe at Kiara's scream, and Rafe started coughing.

"Guys, we need to go."

Ignoring a beat up Barry and Rafe, the three of us rushed around, hooking the boat trailer to Kiara's car and hightailing it out of there.

We got to the dock and got the boat all ready. She was full of gas, loaded with previsions, and ready to go. JJ and I were checking that the GPS still worked when Kiara yelled in frustration.

"Where is he?"

I tried to ignore the feeling of dread in my stomach at the thought of him being half an hour late.

"Give him a second. He'll be here," Pope said from his spot standing in front of the bow.

"He's coming. He'll be fine," JJ added, giving my shoulder a pointed squeeze.

"JJ," I called out as a police truck pulled up next to Kiara's car.

"Hey, yeah. Get back on the boat!"

"Pope, untle it!" I yelled as Kiara cursed.

The door to the car opened, and we all froze at the familiar face.

"Wait."

"John B?"

I ignored my friends words of surprise and disbelief and jumped over the boat rail and onto the dock, running up to my brother and crushing him in a hug. He grunted slightly as we collided but was quick to wrap his arms around me.

"Shoupe let me take it for a spin," he addressed our friends, still squeezing me in a hug.

"Uh, okay. That's believable. I'll buy that for now."

I pulled out of the hug to let him hug our friends.

"It wasn't easy, bro, but I got The Phantom for you, and she runs like she was made yesterday."

JJ tossed John B the keys from the bow.

"You ready to go?"

"Where's Sarah?"

"She's not with you?" Kiara asked as I just noticed the other girl's absence.

"No, we got separated in the swamp. She said that she'd meet me here."

"No, we haven't seen her, man."

"Okay, well, I'm not leaving without her."

"Dude, you're gonna get yourself caught," I tried to explain to my brother, but he was in full freak out mode.

JJ leaned over him from the bow of the boat.

"John B, look at me. I know you feel bad for leaving, but there's no time, man. You got plenty of gas, plenty of food. Once the two of you get around that point, it's a straight shot across the sound to Dismal Swamp, okay? Once you get there, lay low, alright? Hang out for a couple of weeks and then go overland," JJ explained, John B turned to me with a confused expression on his face.

"Cross the boarder at Brownsville, you got that? Brownsville. Hey!"

JJ grabbed John B by the face and made him focus on him.

"You got that?"

"Yeah, yeah. Brownsville. What do you mean the two of us?"

"You and Jo."

My heart clenched in my chest as I stared at the blond.

"Jo?"

"Yeah, dude. It's not safe for her here, man. She needs to go with you, so saddle her up, saltwater cowboy. Let's do this. Yeah."

John B got on as JJ got o . My brother reached out a hand to help me on, but I didn't move.

"Come on, Jo. We don't have time."

"You're right. You don't have time."

Tears gathered in my eyes as I looked up at my brother.

"Roo, I don't."

"I'm not going with you," my voice cracked as tears spilled down my cheeks. I could feel everyone's eyes on me. "Someone needs to stay behind and make sure the real story is told."

"Jo, don't be stupid, you need to go with him."

"No," I shook my head. "I'm staying here. This is my home, and I'm not leaving it."

John B nodded, tears growing in his own eyes.

"I'm sorry for basically throwing us o a cli with this whole treasure hunt thing."

My chin wobbled and my throat tightned as I realized that this was goodbye.

"Hey, John B, yo. We were bound to run o a cli at some point, right?"

We all laughed weakly through our tears. JJ threw his arm over mine and Pope's shoulders, bringing us to his sides. I threw my arm around Kiara's shoulders, bringing her into the group hug as well.

"At least we did it together, though. Pogue style."

"Pogue style," John B agreed.

"Get out of here! Please," Kiara said.

"Now," Pope emphasized. "We'll see you in two months, down in Mexico."

"Love you," JJ called out.

John B made his way towards the middle of the boat before pausing.

"Wait a second. JJ, take care of my sister."

I smiled up at JJ who looked down at me.

"Always."

He pressed a kiss to my forehead.

"And, if you hurt her in anyway, I'll come back here and kick your ass."

I couldn't keep in the laugh as I buried my face into JJ's chest, removing my arm from around Kiara to grab onto JJ's shirt.

"Right."

"And, uh, tell Sarah I said goodbye, okay?"

I nodded, not being able to imagine how hard it must be for my brother to be leaving everyone and everything behind.

"Don't forget. Cross the border at Brownsville, okay?"

"Got it."

The four of us pushed The Phantomput into open water as John B started her up. I smiled a shaky smile and waved a er my brother as he le the dock, going o into the sunset.

JJ grabbed onto my hand and pulled me toward Kiara's car, sending a pointed look towards Pope and Kiara. He leaned against the car, pulling me into his side with an arm around my shoulder and his other hand resting on my waist. I wrapped both arms around his torso and lent my head on his chest.

I watched as Kiara and Pope hugged. My eyes widened as they pulled apart, only for Kiara to lean in and kiss him. I smiled.

So much for no Pogue on Pogue macking.

"Hey, guys, I'm sorry to ruin the party, but, uh, we gotta go right now."

JJ started opening the back door, but police cars had already blocked o our escape. Shoupe hopped out of one along with some people with SBI jackets on, all with guns.

"Hands up! Hands up!"

JJ and I both put our hands up as one of the SBI guys ran out onto the dock.

"We're too late, god damit!"

I glared at Shoupe as he yelled.

"Bratcher, have your guys stand down. Let me talk to these kids."

I glared even harder at him as he walked up to the four of us.

"Alright, where the hell is he?"

None of us said anything.

"JJ? I see you're livin' up to your name."

I took half a step forward, but JJ sent me a warning look, stopping me.

"Pope, how about you? This isn't a fucking game! You can do the right thing now! Where'd he go?"

He turned to me when Pope didn't answer.

"Josephine. You really wanna follow in your brother's footsteps?"

I li ed my chin and looked him straight in the eye. He shook his head.

"You four are coming with us."

Four di erent o icers grabbed us and put us in the back of two di erent cars. My friends all went in one together, and I sat in the back of Shoupe's car, alone.