baby, you make me crazy

by spitzerspace

Summary

When a baby is suddenly placed under Josie Saltzman’s care, the only thing she can think about is how she’ll never know what getting off with Penelope Park feels like.

Notes

https://66.media.tumblr.com/47fac78da377243561103039b6098141/tumblr_phpcx8OqKN1rx73a3_4c
Josie Saltzman was receiving what she was prematurely concluding as the best head of her young adult life when she hears the knock on her front door. The face previously lowered between her legs popped up and stared at her, a crease in their brow.

“Did you hear that?” the stranger quickly wiped their mouth and began to get up off the bed.

Josie had honestly forgotten if they had even exchanged names, after meeting at the nightclub and quickly returning back to her place, and was too afraid to ask at this point. She sighed, resigning herself to not getting to finish.

“Yeah, I’ll go see what they want,” she slowly clambered off the bed and grabbed a robe off her chair. As she walked down the stairs to her front door she heard more knocking and could see the red and blue flashing lights seeping through her front window. Her concern grew as she finally made it down and grabbed the door handle.

“Are you Josette Saltzman?” the officer was holding a small bundle of blankets and seemed exhausted from what Josie assumed was from working the night shift.

“Yes… am I in trouble for something?” she racked her brain trying to conjure any possible ways in which she had broken the law. Maybe it was that illegal movie she downloaded last week... she’s starting to regret asking Hope for lesbian movie recommendations when all the girl would give her was obscure foreign films which couldn’t be found on any streaming platforms known to human.

“No ma’am, there’s been an issue with your sister, Elizabeth Saltzman. She has been placed under custody and has assigned you as the temporary guardian of her child,” the officer slightly lifts the bundle, she now knows to be her baby niece, as an indication that this was, in fact, the child they were speaking of. Josie raised both her brows in shock and stared at the baby of interest.

“I- wh- Lizzie’s in prison?!” she looked up, not knowing where to begin in her jumble of thoughts and her stuttering of words induced a small sigh of impatience from the officer.

“Not exactly. Your sister, Elizabeth, is under police custody and cannot take care of her child, nor are any other parental figures available. Therefore, she is under your care, with your consent, until
further notice in her case is given,” they explain slowly, as if noticing the panic rising in her eyes and wanting not to provoke anything from escalating. Josie takes a deep breath and takes in the information given to her. She exhales and gives the officer a determined nod, set on her abrupt decision.

“Alright. Okay. Yeah, I can take care of her… When will I be able to speak with my sister? Am I allowed to know what she’s in for?” she’s staring intensely at the baby now, like it’s one of those ambiguous optical illusion images where multiple animals can be seen if you look hard enough, maybe she’ll see a puppy instead. Her mind has completely left the conversation and she startles when she hears the officer speak again, puzzlement in their voice.

“Um, she’s currently being questioned so we will notify you when you can see her. The case is confidential for the time being. For now, you will indefinitely be her child’s sole caretaker and, if extreme circumstances occur, you may need to sign paperwork for a more long-term guardianship,” the officer looks about ready to throw the baby into her arms and bounce, so she finally relieves them and reaches out for the child.

“Thank you, Officer. I’ll give you my contact details and I’m ready to cooperate by all means,” as she gently but uncertainly holds the baby, she recites all her details as the officer fills out a clipboard of information they grabbed from their vehicle. The officer thanks her for her support and drives off into the night. She closes the door and lets out a deep exhale as she closes her eyes and leans against it. When she finally opens her eyes she almost has a heart attack.

“Holy shit!” she yelped, almost dropping the bundle. She had forgotten that the other girl was at her house after the past 20 minutes or so and sees her, fully dressed, standing quietly at the bottom of the stairs, leaning against the handrail with her arms crossed.

“You have a baby...?” she quirks her brow, the amusement apparent in her voice.

“Not when we met! Which was what, two seconds ago? Also I’ve forgotten your name, did we even exchange names? What are you still doing here? How long have you been standing there? Why is it so hot in here?” her panic from earlier begins bubbling up as she rants to, or rather questions, the other girl. Her reaction upsets the baby and a loud wail erupts from the bundle and Josie’s anxiety escalates even more. A gentle pair of hands reach for the baby and she lets the other girl take her niece from her. She hears soft cooing as she calms herself down and realises that the crying has stopped and the fuzziness in her head gradually dampens.

“Are you alright?” the stranger finally speaks up and Josie looks at her, thinking she might be an angel in disguise.
“Um, yeah. I’m fine. Just a bit shocked is all… you’re good at that,” the other girl smiles softly at her and looks down adoringly at the baby.

“I had a baby brother growing up, he was my whole world. I’m sorry that this has happened to you and your sister… I’m Penelope, by the way,” Penelope continues to admire the baby, not looking up to see Josie admiring her. Josie takes in her previous words and decides not to question Penelope on her past, grateful that the girl is even helping her at all and hasn’t freaked and ran off the moment she saw the police at her door.

“I’m Josie. This is Lizzy, she’s my niece. I’ve only met her a few times, she’s a few months old,” Josie remembers being in the hospital when Lizzie was giving birth and seeing her hold the newborn in her arms with so much pride. She wonders what had happened between now and then that had Lizzie now in custody, away from her daughter. Lizzie had never told her who the father was, just shrugged it off as some guy at the bar, but she had been so excited throughout her pregnancy that Josie couldn’t help but think she was going to be a great mother. Since then, Josie hadn’t seen her as much as she used to, but she simply brushed it off as a new mother being exhausted from her baby and not having time to catch up. Who knew what was actually going on in Lizzie’s life.

“Isn’t your sister’s name Lizzie…? I thought I heard you call her that,” Penelope seemed confused as she patted the bundle as it began to stir.

“...Yes... but this is Lizzy with a ‘y’! Don’t ask me, alright. Lizzie said there was a difference,” Josie sighed, not wanting to explain something she had barely understood herself when she asked Lizzie about it. Penelope just laughed and finally looked up at her.

“Either your sister has no creativity or is a bit of a narcissist… but hey, I don’t know her life,” Penelope shrugged and walked towards her, looking like she was about to give the baby back, but Josie wasn’t sure if she was ready for that again.

“Uh, yeah, maybe both. I know this is weird, god knows it’s been the weirdest night of my life, but would you mind staying? I think I might freak out being here alone with a baby and you seem like you know what you’re doing,” Josie rambles a bit but then realises that it was a lot of responsibility to place on someone she barely knew so she quickly adds, “or could you stay with her while I quickly grab some supplies from my sister’s house?”

“Josie. Relax. It’s alright, I’ll stay with you tonight. I was planning to anyway,” she gives Josie a subtle wink, making her blush hard as she remembers what they were doing in her bed not too long ago, and continues, “also, I kinda don’t want to wake up to local news of a woman gone mad overnight trying to change a diaper…”
Josie sighs in relief and thanks the gods that she had decided to go out clubbing with Hope tonight, instead of a night in with a tub of ice cream as she had planned. Oh fuck, that reminded her that she had to tell Hope soon as well. That’s a problem for tomorrow, she quickly decides.

“Thank you so much, you honestly have no idea. I am forever grateful that you’re here, and I’m sorry that it sort of ruined our night…” Josie’s aware that this is not what Penelope had signed up for at all and feels a bit guilty. Penelope just smiles at her and reassures her that it’s completely fine and that she already adores the little baby in her arms. Josie sighs for what feels like the hundredth time that night alone and tells Penelope that she’s going to quickly drive over to Lizzie’s house to grab a cot and some supplies. The girl nods at her, barely paying attention as she cooed at the baby.

Josie arrived back to her house an hour later, her car stocked with things from Lizzie’s place and the local late-night grocery store. It was slightly embarrassing buying items in her robe, with nothing on underneath, as she had forgotten to change earlier, but she was too exhausted to care. She opens her door and sees Penelope on the couch watching the television, some late night drama show. Penelope looks just about ready to knock out and is straining to stay awake as she holds the baby in her arms.

“Oh hey, you’re back,” Penelope looks up from the couch and quickly walks over to Josie to help her with the bags.

“Hey,” she’s beginning to get used to the sight of Penelope holding her niece and it sort of warms her heart a little, “I hope she wasn’t too much trouble, I tried to be as quick as possible.”

“No, she was an absolute angel, though I think she might be getting a bit hungry so we’ll need to feed her soon,” Penelope shifts through the bags with her foot, looking for a tin of formula, and finally finds it, bending down to grab it while making sure to hold tightly onto Lizzy. She also sees the small baby rocker and gently places the baby in, securing the buckles around her. Lizzy shuffles a bit in the discomfort of not being in someone’s arms but decides she’s too tired to fight it and quickly falls asleep. Josie just watches in awe as all of this happens in front of her eyes and goes to help Penelope with making a bottle for Lizzy.

“So… I guess this isn’t exactly how you planned to spend your night,” Josie begins, still feeling a bit guilty for asking Penelope to stay with her. Honestly, if the same thing had happened to Penelope, she wasn’t sure what she’d do. Of course, she would try to help, but she had no experience with babies and had a full time job she needed to get to tomorrow morning. Oh fuck, who’s great idea was it to go clubbing on a Sunday night. Fuck Hope and her stupid ideas, though she’s still grateful for meeting Penelope and she supposes that wouldn’t have happened if Hope hadn’t made her go out.
“Hm, I don’t know, do you not usually hook up with a pretty girl and end up taking care of her infant niece that she got in the middle of you going down on her?” Penelope seems amused as she scoops the formula into the bottle and grabs the kettle of boiling water. Josie’s face reddens as she looks anywhere but at Penelope. She quickly composes herself with a breath but still feels her insides stir at the earlier events. She squeezes her legs together to calm herself down and curses her body for still being excited.

“About that, I’m still a bit mad that we were interrupted. That thing you were doing…” Josie trails off as she tries to stop her mind from thinking about it further. From the corner of her eye, she sees Penelope look at her, and bites her lip to stop herself from looking back into those eyes. The same eyes that had attracted her at the nightclub and instantly got her out of the club and into bed. Penelope sets the bottle and kettle down and slowly moves towards her, placing both her arms on the counter behind Josie, locking her in. Josie can feel the smirk radiating off of Penelope and she’s not even looking at her face.

“Oh? Did you like that? Honestly, I really couldn’t tell, your moans being quite ambiguous and all…” Penelope leans in slightly, her lips pressing against Josie’s jaw. Josie lets out a frustrated breath as Penelope slowly moves towards her lips. Josie’s leans in to finally press her lips against Penelope but just as she moves, they hear Lizzy crying near the couch.

“I swear to god,” Josie mumbles as she quickly moves to Lizzy to calm her.

“I told you she was getting hungry!” she hears Penelope yell behind her from the kitchen. Josie rolls her eyes and goes to sit next to Lizzy, soothing her and patting her back. Penelope arrives moments later with the warm bottle and gently places it in Lizzy’s mouth, who begins sucking instantly. After sitting in a slightly awkward silence and stealing glances as they waited for Lizzy to finish, they both went to grab the small cot from Josie’s car and moved it into her bedroom. Quickly settling Lizzy for the night in the bed, they looked at each other shyly, not knowing where to go from there.

“Um, I’ll go take the couch,” Penelope breaks the silence and Josie wonders why she’s suddenly so hesitant after literally having Josie under her just moments ago.

“No, please, take the bed. I feel bad enough making you stay here with me.”

“It was my choice, honestly, and you should be close to your niece, in case she wakes up,” Penelope argues.

“Do you mind if we shared then? I would feel more comfortable if you were here with me if she
wakes, I can give you something to change into,” Josie’s still curious where this shift in behaviour came from and she kind of liked Penelope a bit, after all that had happened tonight.

“Oh, um, sure I guess. Thanks,” Josie goes to her wardrobe and picks out some sleep shorts and a shirt before handing them to Penelope. She begins to undress and Josie shifts her eyes as she blushes and instead moves to lie down on her bed. Penelope finishes changing her clothes and also lies down on the bed, keeping a respectable distance from Josie. The exhaustion quickly settles in and both girls fall asleep soon enough.

The next time Josie wakes up, it’s still dark outside, but a warm body is cuddled up close to her and she feels something else warm inside her own body.

When her alarm goes off it’s bright outside and the spot next to her is empty. She quickly looks around the room and sees Lizzy sleeping soundly in her cot, which she finds unusual that the baby hadn’t woken them up the whole night, but no signs of Penelope. She spots a small note on her bedside table and grabs it.

*Hey Josie, sorry for leaving without saying anything. I had to go to work and wanted to let you get some sleep after such a long night. I fed Lizzy so she should be good for a couple of hours but yeah, best of luck with her. It was nice meeting you, - Penelope*

“It was nice meeting you?” Josie laughs, confused at Penelope’s words, but quickly brushes it off to get on with her own day. She realises that she can’t exactly bring a baby into work so she calls Hope and hopes that her unemployed, trust fund best friend had nothing better to do that day. Hope shows up at her door a few moments later, not living too far from Josie, and knocks way too loud and fast for a normal human being.

“What the fuck, stop that! You’re going to startle the baby,” Josie opens the door and chastises her.

“The baby? I didn’t know you were calling yourself that now,” Hope laughs at her own joke and moves towards Josie’s kitchen, stealing her toast. Josie just sighs and follows her, too exhausted for banter this early in the morning.

“Lizzie’s baby, Lizzy, remember? She’s upstairs in my room,” Hope gives her a confused look and places the toast back on the plate.

“What’s she doing here? What happened to Lizzie? Big Lizzie, I mean,” Hope rolls her eyes,
obviously also still bewildered as to why Lizzie would name her daughter that.

“She’s in prison, well, not exactly in prison, just in police custody. And before you ask any of the
details, I literally don’t know anything. I left the bar with a girl, who I now realise I have no way of
getting in contact with, and the next thing I know there’s a cop knocking at my door,” Josie huffs
out, “I just need someone to take care of her while I go to work and figure out this whole mess.
Hopefully, Lizzie’s not in any big trouble and she’ll be able to take Lizzy back, ’cause if that
random girl wasn’t here last night, I honestly don’t know what I would have done.”

Hope stares at her, brows furrowed as she contemplates something.

“Must’ve been some girl... Alright, Josie. Don’t worry, I’ll take care of her today, but this is a one
time thing, okay? You know I don’t do well with babies,” Josie thanks her over and over again and
rushes to work with a piece of toast in her hand, already dreading the next few days, in the event
that Lizzie actually ends up in prison.

Turns out Lizzie does end up in prison and Josie mentally curses herself. The officer had called her
the next day and told her that Lizzie had instantly plead guilty and that Josie would be able to visit
her as soon as they had her settled. They called her into the station to fill out the paperwork
required for her to be Lizzy’s long-term caretaker and Josie handles it as best as she can, with the
help of Hope and using a few of her saved vacation days from work. She ends up hiring a
babysitter after the first week and after the first month of being together, Josie thinks things might
actually be okay. She calls the officer again, wondering when she can visit Lizzie but all they tell
her is that there’s been a complication and she’ll have to wait a couple more weeks. She decides
that Lizzy isn’t that awful of a baby and, in fact, she’s really growing on her. It’s nice coming home
to someone who’s happy to see her, instead of an empty house, and Lizzy was even pretty cute, she
thinks. Sometimes she wonders what Penelope was doing now and why she had left without
leaving a number or any means of contacting her but she quickly dispels the thought and continues
on with her day. So, maybe things were going to be alright after all. She would wait until she could
visit Lizzie, ask her what had happened, finally get some answers, and hopefully, Lizzie was
actually innocent and wrongly accused of something she didn’t do.

Josie’s wishful thinking didn’t last very long as she was feeding Lizzy one morning while chatting
with Hope, who would be taking care of the baby for the day. Hope had also grown a liking
towards Lizzy, but Josie knows she would never admit it to anyone. She hears a few knocks and
sets down the spoon and bowl to move towards her front door. She thinks back to a month ago
when someone else had knocked on her door and hopes that the situation she was in wasn’t about
to get worse. Maybe she spoke, or thought, too soon...

“Connor? What are you doing here? How do you know where I live?” Josie shifts against the door
and looks at her high school bully in shock. She hadn’t seen him in years and to be frank, she had
forgotten he existed at all.
“Hey Josie!” he greets smugly, ignoring her last question, “I’m here to pick up my daughter, I heard she was with you.” Josie looks at him in shock as she tries to even fathom the idea that Lizzie slept with Connor, of all people. He seems like the exact same asshole as he was in high school, the one who would fat-shame everyone and tease Josie about her sexuality, eventually forcing her to come out to the whole school.

“What? What do you mean your daughter? Where have you been the past month? Scratch that, where have you been the past year?” Josie could feel her anger surfacing at the man standing in front of her.

“Alright, alright, calm down. Yes, I am her father and I was away for a while. But now, I’m here and that’s all that matters. So, can I see her?” he tried to put on a charming voice but Josie wasn’t having it.

“Fuck off! You don’t even know her and she sure as hell doesn’t know you exist and never will,” Josie felt like she was on the edge of losing it and needed to get him out of her face before things escalated.

“I thought you might say that,” he grinned devilishly, “so I’ve had my lawyers sign a few papers and you’ll be hearing from them soon.” He finally steps back and leaves her front porch without another word. The conversation between the two of them suddenly registers in Josie’s mind and she begins to panic, making her way back to the kitchen.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, this can’t be happening,” she sees Hope startle and drop the spoon she was feeding Lizzie with as Josie enters the kitchen again.

“Who was that and what did they want?” Hope asks, moving to settle her best friend. Josie looks at her with a worried expression and tells her about what had just happened.

“No way… Connor is the father? As in Connor from high school who told me I looked fat in my boots? Whatever the fuck that even means…”

“Yes way. He just told me and asked to take Lizzy from me,” Josie’s frantic at this point and pacing around the kitchen, “he said he was having his lawyer sign a form or some shit to get Lizzy and I don’t know what to do, Hope!”
“Josie, please, sit down. It'll be alright. I’ll give you the number for my lawyer, they’re great, gotten me out of heaps of dumb shit. I’ll pay for it all, I’m loaded, remember? It’s going to be just fine, I’ll be right here with you,” Josie has never been more thankful for meeting Hope Mikaelson on the first day of middle school than she is now in this moment.

“Thank you, Hope, thank you so so so much. God, you’ve already done so much for me by taking care of Lizzy, I can’t believe this shit’s just getting worse,” Josie sits down on the kitchen stool, placing her arms on the counter and her hands on her face. She lets out a deep frustrated groan and dreads what Connor’s going to do. She knows he has the means to get what he wants, coming from an influential family and all, but she had no idea why he would even want Lizzy, he hadn’t even met her. Hope reassures her that it’s alright and she’s happy to help Josie with anything, arguing that Josie had been there when her parents had passed away. She gives Josie her lawyer’s number and tells her that she should get to work soon if she doesn't want to be late. Josie accepts that freaking out right now probably won’t get her anywhere and heads to work.

She spends her morning thinking about what she would say to this lawyer person and when she’s off on her lunch break, she decides to give them a call. She enters the number that Hope had given her and listens as the phone rings a couple of times before it stops.

“Hello?” Josie asks nervously, already regretting not preparing herself better. When the other line answers, she instantly recognises the voice.

“Hi, this is Penelope Park’s phone, how can I help you?”

Chapter End Notes

today is the last day before i start a 6 week research project at uni so i decided to begin a multi-chap fic because why the hell not.

Note: i am australian and not a writer nor do i understand how babies or the legal/police-ialulary system work, so please, forgive me. this fic is intended for humour purposes mainly so please don’t take it seriously.

also i’m sorry for the bad use of tense, it's been 20 years and i still don't know how to use it properly.
“Hi, this is Penelope Park’s phone, how can I help you?”

“Penelope? What? You know Hope?” Josie thinks she’s absolutely lost her mind now, and she wouldn’t be surprised after the events of the past month.

“Um, hi? Who is this?” Penelope sounds confused as ever and Josie realises that she didn’t introduce herself.

“Oh, it’s me,” she states, as if Penelope will instantly know who it is, “Josie Saltzman, you know, from that club a month ago. We, um, I had my sister’s baby given to me and you helped me take care of her… remember that night?” Josie is really hoping that Penelope remembers and she isn’t currently making a complete fool of herself, or that it’s even the same Penelope and not some voice-alike with the same name and she isn’t making an even bigger fool of herself.

“Oh! Right, yeah, Josie, sure, from the bar, and the cop, and yeah, Josie. Hey, how have you been, baby and all? Wait, how did you get my number? I don’t think I gave it to you.” Josie feels as though Penelope purposely didn’t leave her number but doesn’t mention it. Her short time with Penelope had been unconsciously replaying in her mind when she wasn’t paying attention, and the fact that Penelope didn’t want to keep in touch after helping her the whole night puzzled her incessantly. Not that Penelope had an obligation to do anything she didn’t want to. But she thought maybe there was something blooming between the two of them and maybe Penelope felt the same, but she guesses it was simply one-sided.

“Actually, Hope Mikaelson gave it to me, she says you’re one of the best lawyers in town. And this is actually about that same baby. Someone’s trying to claim custody and I just want to be prepared in case anything happens,” Josie explains, letting it all out at once.

“I see... yeah, I know Mikaelson, that kid gets up to a lot of dumb shit, you know. Like who even thinks of diving into a tar pit, tries to swim across it, then gets stuck halfway through? That was a whole thing with the museum complaining about private property and whatnot... Anyway, who’s trying to take Lizzy? I thought you were her sole caretaker?” Josie files that brand new information about Hope into the back of her mind for a later time and tells Penelope about her encounter with Connor. She recalls how he had told her about his lawyers so she might be in need of legal representation. Penelope listens without interrupting until Josie finishes recounting her situation.
“So, he’s her father… and hasn’t been around for over a year, or ever. Alright, that’s a bit complicated but it’s good that he’s not on her birth certificate, at least, so he won’t be able to do much yet,” Penelope reassures her and Josie feels slightly relieved at the thought.

“Good, I’m glad. And I still don’t believe that he’s her father. He may have claimed it but what would he want with her? He wasn’t here for any of Lizzie’s pregnancy nor his self-professed daughter’s birth. Plus, Lizzie has hated him since the beginning of high school and she hasn’t mentioned him at all.” Josie lets out a huff of frustration, clearly Connor had bad intentions with her niece and there was no way she was letting him get ahold of her.

“Don’t worry, Josie, we’ll figure this out together. Would it be alright if we met soon? I understand if you’re busy with the baby and work and all,” Penelope sounded hopeful about the case and Josie relaxed a little more.

“Yeah, actually, that would be great. Do you maybe want to come over to my place tonight or tomorrow night and we could talk?” Josie was hesitant in asking Penelope over but the only time she was really free was at night or the weekend and even then had to stay home to look after Lizzie.

“Shit, sorry, I’m busy both tonight and tomorrow. Are you free Saturday morning?”

“Oh, no worries, yeah, I was planning to take Lizzy to the dog park but I can ask Hope to take care of her for a while,” Josie knows Hope wouldn’t mind looking after the baby, from what she gathered of them spending so much time together lately. In fact, sometimes Hope seems way too eager to take care of Lizzy when Josie asks if she’s free.

“How about I meet you at the park instead, you can bring Lizzy along too. I’m sure it won’t be an issue and you won’t have to bother Mikaelson.”

“Okay, sure, that sounds good. I’ll send you the address and time.” They both say polite goodbyes and hang up the phone. Josie quickly shoots off a text message to Penelope and saves her number into her phone.

The rest of the week passes quickly with no major issues and when Saturday morning rolls around, Josie makes her way down to the park, stroller packed for a full day of relaxing after her meeting with Penelope. She stops at a nice patch of grass with a good view of plentiful puppies and unfolds the picnic mat. After unbuckling Lizzy from her stroller, she gently places her down on the mat and sits beside her. Recently, the baby had been attempting to sit up by herself, with great effort, but she mainly still liked to roll around on the floor. Josie tries to help her sit up for a while but Lizzy
doesn’t seem to want to cooperate.

“Alright, Liz, do what you want. But don’t say I didn’t try to help you. Anyway, Penelope should be arriving soon so be good for her, okay? I think you’ve probably forgotten her by now but you met her the same night that you came to my house, remember?” Lizzy just looks at her as if she’s bizarre for talking seriously to a literally baby and lets out an ‘ah’ sound to appease Josie while she continues to roll around on the mat, pulling on some grass. Josie just smiles adoringly at her and looks at the dogs in the distance.

She sees Penelope arrive a few moments later and Josie appreciates the view as she takes her time walking towards them. She had only really seen Penelope in her clubbing clothes, which consisted of a short skirt and loose shirt, and in her own sleep clothes. So, seeing her dressed professionally in a blazer and dress pants was really doing it for Josie. But then she remembered exactly why Penelope was dressed that way and that she was here for business purposes, so she quickly wipes those thoughts from her mind and waves at her instead. Penelope waves back as she nears them and a look of pure joy takes over her face when she sees Lizzy rolling on the mat.

“Lizzy! I’ve missed your little baby face and your little baby hands and feet. Oh hey Josie, nice to see you too,” Penelope grins at her and goes to sit down on the mat with them. Lizzy bounces curiously at the new voice saying her name and instantly sits up, as if trying to impress the newcomer. Penelope praises the baby, saying something along the lines of ‘she’s so talented’ and ‘they grow up so fast’, while Josie huffs something about Lizzy being a show-off attention-seeker, but secretly admires the cuteness of the other girl playing with her niece.

“So, Josie.” Penelope seems to have finished catching up with the baby and finally places her attention on Josie. “How have you been? I’m sorry again about leaving without saying goodbye the other night. Work, you know?” Josie nods in understanding and leans over to grab the tupperware filled with Lizzy’s food from her bag.

“Yeah, of course, I get it. I didn’t know you were a lawyer, though, and Hope’s lawyer, of all people. Small world, huh?” Josie hates herself for giving in to small talk when there are burning questions that have been bugging her since that night. She sees Lizzy perk up at the sight of her red spoon and the baby rolls over to Josie’s lap, forgetting about Penelope and excited to be fed. Penelope sports a small pout as she watches the baby move away from her but returns her attention to Josie once again.

“Mm, yeah, it’s crazy. I didn’t think I’d see you again.” Penelope has a pensive look on her face as she speaks and Josie’s not sure what it means. “But about your case, my main concern is that, if Connor requests a paternity test and can prove that he is in fact the father, he will very much have legal rights to custody and can argue that in court.” Penelope explains the situation to Josie as the author literally has no clue what they’re talking about so won’t try and butcher it and Penelope went to law school so she can use her big lawyer jargon. Josie nods along, growingly concerned
about what rights Connor may potentially have over the baby she was currently feeding in her lap. Though, Penelope seemed confident in being able to defend their case and Hope had said she was a good lawyer, so Josie somewhat trusted that they were both in good hands.

It took a while of going through the details of all that Josie knew, of what Penelope could tell her for sure, and what Josie should ask Lizzie when she’s finally allowed to visit, in case Penelope could help her case as well. Lizzie was leaning back on Penelope’s crossed legs, after long finished eating, and was now peacefully watching the dogs, trying to reciprocate a sound every time they barked. Penelope was about ready to leave and Lizzie appeared to be able to feel her impending movement, whining a little. However, an unforeseen shadow suddenly appeared, blocking the sun, and they both looked upwards to see a dark rain cloud directly above the park.

“Oh snakes!” Josie had been practicing moderating her profanity usage in front of Lizzie and was proud of herself for a quick two seconds. They both get up as rain begins to sprinkle down, upsetting Lizzie. Josie quickly buckles her into the stroller and grabs the waterproof cover from the compartment underneath. Once Lizzie is safe inside, Josie packs all of their other items with Penelope’s help and they quickly run for cover underneath a large tree. The rain only seems to get heavier and Josie knows she needs to take Lizzie home soon or she’ll catch a cold.

“Hey, my place is just down the street, follow me.” Penelope tries to argue but Josie has already left and is making her way home. They pace as quickly as the pram will allow and Josie gets Lizzie out once they’re safe inside. Both dripping wet, but Lizzie mostly dry and giggling at them, Josie leads them to the bathroom upstairs to grab some towels. She hands one to Penelope and notices that her white shirt has essentially become transparent and is sticking to her skin. Josie darts her eyes towards the ceiling and hopes Penelope doesn’t say anything about her obvious gazing.

“Um, there’s another bathroom in my room if you want to take a shower, fresh towels are in the cupboard. My room’s down th-”

“I remember, thanks.” Penelope leaves them both in the bathroom and Josie exhales a breath she knew she was definitely holding. She fills Lizzie’s baby bathtub with warm water and removes her slightly damp clothes. Once Lizzie’s settled in the tub, Josie goes to sit next to her.

“Liz, what’s going on…” Lizzy just sighs, lets out a ‘mm’ sound, and continues to play with the bubbles. “Yeah... me too, Liz, me too.” Once Lizzy is clean and happy, Josie dries her off as she walks them to her room to find some clean clothes. She dresses Lizzie and places her in the cot for an afternoon nap. Josie was finally able to remove the clothes that were sticking to her body but had mostly dried out. She takes off her pants and as she removes her shirt she hears the door adjoining her room open. Shooting her head up at the sound, she scolds herself for forgetting that Penelope was in her house, once again. So she tries to act natural instead.
“Oh hey Penelope! Don’t mind me, just changing in my room, as one tends to do.” Josie doesn’t even have the time to review the spew of words leaving her mouth, but Penelope’s only wearing a towel and the connection between her brain and mouth seems to have incinerated. “Was everything okay? Do you need clothes? Let me just grab some clothes.”

She does exactly that and all but catapults the first clothes she can find at Penelope’s head, who catches the pile, stares wildly at Josie, gives her a once-over, nods, and goes back into the bathroom. Josie quickly grabs her own clothes, chucks them on haphazardly, and runs downstairs to pour herself a glass or five of water. She honestly had no idea what was going on at that moment and really needed to get a grip of herself.

Penelope enters the kitchen a few minutes later, changed into her clothes, and Josie instantly loses that grip she was trying so badly to get back. Her hair is still wet from the shower and she’s holding her damp clothes. She gives Josie a small greeting.

“Sorry about earlier, I didn’t realise you’d be changing in your room, as one tends to do,” Penelope repeats Josie’s previous words, chuckling a bit. “But thanks, for the shower and the clothes.”

“Yeah, of course, no problem at all…” Josie’s outright staring at her now, there’s really no denying it. Josie knows it, Penelope knows it, hell, Lizzy probably knows it. Josie starts walking slowly towards where Penelope is standing, her brain unable to stop her movements, as much as it is begging her to.

“You know, you really shouldn’t keep a baby out too long in the sun, Lizzy’s looking a little tan,” Penelope notes, keeping eye contact with Josie as she approaches.

“Mmmh…” So maybe Josie’s mind has left her body. Who knows.

“Josie… what are you doing…?” Penelope asks cautiously, though she doesn’t make any move to step back when Josie reaches her. Standing in front of Penelope, Josie is aware that this is a bad idea but she needs to know something, she’s not sure what exactly. She slowly leans in, hoping Penelope won’t back out, but giving her the space and time to.

“Um, I don’t know...” Her voice is barely a whisper. Penelope doesn’t move back, though she doesn’t lean in either, and instead her breath hitches as her eyes move towards Josie’s lips. They’re only a few centimetres apart now. “Do you want this?”
Penelope answers by closing the distance between them and kissing Josie hard. She places her hands on both sides of Josie’s face, sucking on her bottom lip. Josie wraps her arms around Penelope’s waist and pulls her closer. After a few more moments, Penelope abruptly pulls back, seemingly just realising what they were doing. With both of them out of breath, Josie quickly goes to apologise.

“Crab! Sorry, we shouldn’t have- I shouldn’t have done that.”

Penelope smiles a little. “Yeah, we probably shouldn’t have… Look, Josie, I know we had that thing and all before this whole thing, but I think it’s best if we keep it professional.”

“No, yeah, no, I understand, that makes sense.” Josie shakes her head. “I’m not sure what I was thinking, sorry.”

“Josie, really, it’s alright. It’s not like I tried to stop you, plus, I kissed you first. We’re both at fault.” Penelope shrugs. “But if we are going to work together…”

“No yes, of course. Professional. I can do that. This is about Lizzie and Lizzy.” Josie nods, taking a small step back, and tries to compose herself.

“Good. That’s good. Well, I should probably leave. Do you mind if I return your clothes the next time I see you?”

“Sure, no worries, I’ll talk to you soon.” Josie’s so ready to be alone now, she thinks as walks Penelope to the door. They both say goodbye to each other and Josie quickly closes the door so she can begin attempting to erase the last 10 minutes of her life. She hears her phone ring in the kitchen and goes to find it. Apparently her mind has not decided to rejoin her body yet and she answers the call without looking at the number.

“Hello, Josette? I am calling to let you know that your sister, Elizabeth Saltzman, has been transferred to Mystic Falls Penitentiary and you may now see her if you wish.”

Chapter End Notes

if ur thinking that i don’t think before i type, u are absolutely correct.
a few notes from my google doc:
- turns out there’s not much to do at uni yet except look at radiographs so i had a spare moment to type a thing or two
- this story may not make sense, but the metric system sure does
- if u like pina coladas… and getting caught in the rain
- the more times i need to correct my own tense usage, the more tense i get
- the law is in my hands now, i’ve decided. and realism is out the window. welcome to trash city, i am lord mayor, and thank u for ur time
- there’s a video of someone diving into the La Brea tar pits on youtube… so no one’s allowed to say i don't do my research
- my search history is: when can babies sit, when can babies crawl, how to write speech punctuation correctly, is it illegal to swim in a tar pit
- does it also start to suddenly pour down in your city/town too or is that just mine
Josie had been excited to see her sister again. It had been almost two months since she last saw her, when they had met for lunch and nothing seemed unusual; of what Josie could retrospectively recall, that is. But now, waiting in an empty room for the guards to escort her sister, her nerves were beginning to act up. There were so many questions she wanted to ask and they were slowly muddling up in her mind as time passed. Alright, maybe she had like 3 questions, but they were important questions that lead to more questions and there was just a lot to figure out. Honestly, she wasn’t sure if she even really wanted to know, now that she was so close to finding out.

Her eyes dart to the door as she hears it open and sees a guard enter, her sister following close behind. The guard nods at her, locks Lizzie’s handcuffs to the table, tells them that they have 10 minutes, and leaves them alone in the room. Lizzie’s smiling widely at her, obviously excited to have a visitor, and Josie wonders what the first thing Lizzie says will be.

“Josie! My second favourite sister! I’m so glad you’re here, you have no idea! It’s been ages, girl, how’s life? What have you been up to?”

Well, Josie was not expecting that for sure. The dumbstruck expression on her face goes unnoticed by Lizzie and she starts telling Josie about a new television show she was watching last night. Not a single sign of discomfort was apparent on her face and she was acting as if they had gone out for brunch to catch up on each other’s lives.

“Lizzie!” Josie interrupts. “What is going on?! Why are you in prison? Why did a police officer come to my house in the middle of the night, at the worst time possible by the way, and hand me your daughter? Why haven’t I been able to visit you for over a month? Why is Connor showing up at my door and saying he’s your baby’s father?” That should do it, Josie thinks. She huffs and sits back to let Lizzie process her outburst of questions.

“Oh. That’s what you came here for. Well, if you must know, they arrested me for petty theft… and I may have then accidentally maybe tried to run away and then threw a banana at the mall cop’s face when they chased me… and they may have accidentally slipped on said banana, allegedly. So I got charged for theft and battery or assault or whatever.” Lizzie shrugs, as if saying what can you do.

Josie thinks that that is the most Lizzie thing to occur and doesn’t even question the sanity of it. All this time she had thought her sister was caught up in some falsely-accused, deep criminal case that Josie was going to help defend her out of. But honestly, with Lizzie’s extensive track record of...
shoplifting, it wasn’t the most surprising thing that could have happened. Also, she really can’t be bothered to chastise Lizzie for stealing, or for throwing a dangerous and trip-hazardous boomerang fruit at someone.

“Really, Liz? You threw a banana at someone?”

“Yeah, what about it? It was the only large item I had in my bag, okay?!”

“Okay… and what about your daughter?” A look of longing passes Lizzie’s face for a moment before it dissipates as quickly as it appeared. “You kinda just left her in my hands, you know.”

Not that Josie didn’t love Lizzy and taking care of her, but it had been truly out of the blue and her weekly schedules had to be rearranged quite a bit to accommodate the new baby.

“Yes, good. I’m glad she is with you and they didn’t fuck that up like when they were moving me around,” Lizzie says offhandedly, seemingly contemplating something else in her head while speaking. She decides to leave it at that and continues before Josie can question her. “Anyway, like I said, I am so glad you are here. I need some items sent to me. Are you ready? Note this down exactly as I say.”

“Wait, what! I don’t have a pen or paper.”

“Shush. Alright, I need dairy and-”

“Dairy? What kind of dairy? Like, milk?”

“Josie! Shut it and remember this.” Lizzie lifts up her hand to start counting the items. “Okay, you got dairy, right? I also need veal, and cumin for mi goreng that I’ve been stashing up.”

“Lizzie, I’ve literally never seen you eat any of these things.”

“Quiet, there are more items. Alright, I need some eggs too. Listen closely, I need a few different kinds of eggs. I need hen eggs.”
“Alright…”

“Other eggs,“

“What the frog does that mean? Like, from an emu?”

“And rooster eggs.”

“OK, what the fuck, Lizzie. What the fuck are rooster eggs. Why in the world would you need that.”

“Josie. Hush. Just remember it, alright.” Josie’s pretty sure she’s forgotten at least half of the list but nods anyway, maybe she’ll just send a carton of normal eggs and Lizzie will be happy. “Okay, good. I will be looking thoroughly for those things in the mail, so don’t forget. Was there anything else?”

“Right… Yeah, did you hear me when I said that Connor came to my house and said he was Lizzy’s father?!” Josie whisper-shouts her last words, as if there was someone listening to their conversation in the empty room.

“Yeah I heard, obviously.” Lizzie rolls her eyes.

“And? Is he?”

“Look, just don’t worry about that or him. He’s just bothering you because he’s scared.”

“Of what?” Lizzie’s face drops as if she had a sudden realisation, but is relieved when Josie continues. “Of Lizzy?!”

“Yes, actually. Babies terrify him.” She avoids eye contact with Josie and checks her arm for a watch that she isn’t wearing.
“Lizzie, you know you are making absolutely no sense right now.”

“Jo, it was great seeing you, come by again soon. I think our time is up.” Lizzie smiles and looks up at the camera in the corner of the room, waving to it cheerfully.

“What? No, we have at least a couple more minutes, why are you waving at the camera?” Josie argues, but as if Lizzie had predicted the future, the guard enters the room a second later and proceeds to unlock her from the table. Lizzie stands up, ready to leave the room.

“Remember my items, Jo, and tell Hope to come by soon, I miss that hot bitch.” Lizzie grins as she walks to the door, already chatting animatedly at the guard who seems to have no interest whatsoever in what she was saying.

Finally, before she completely leaves the room, Josie asks sincerely. “Wait, Lizzie. Are you going to be alright? In prison and all...”

“Don’t worry Jo, I’m fine here. Better than fine actually, just focus on keeping Lizzy safe. And the eggs, don’t forget the eggs.” With that, she’s out of sight and her chatter to the guard fades down the hallway.

Josie remains in the seat, totally confused about what had just occurred. But frankly, Lizzie has acted stranger in the past so this wasn’t her first rodeo; she knew something was up.

/ 

“Are you sure that’s what she said? Like, did you hear her correctly?”

Penelope slowly paced behind the desk in her office. Josie just stares at the large metal sign on the wall that reads Parks and Regulations Law Firm and sighs. She had called Penelope as soon as she left the prison, telling her how unusual Lizzie had acted and that she had cut the time short, leaving quickly. Penelope suggested they meet up as soon as possible to figure out what was going on.

Josie had pondered on her visit with Lizzie during the following days, and still, none of it made sense to her. So, here they were a few days later, in Penelope’s office after hours, with Josie lounging on one of the arm chairs in front of her desk.
“Yeah, I’m sure, I wrote it down when I got in my car. And then she waved at the security camera like it was Google Earth or something.”

Josie shakes her head at the memory. It had bugged her that Lizzie was so unbothered about being in prison, regardless of being away from her daughter, whom she knows her sister adores to death. Not to mention the reason she was in there. The weird thing was that Lizzie has shoplifted many, many times in the past, Josie was aware of this after Lizzie had bragged about it on multiple occasions, so, what the fuck?

“Alright, let me take a look.” She reaches for the paper that Josie hands her and gives it a good inspection for a good couple of seconds before she nods once in understanding. “Wow, yeah, I see… Connor isn’t the father…”

“What? How’d you come to that conclusion? She literally just seems like she has the appetite of a stoned college kid who wants an avant-garde omelette.”

“It’s a secret message, Josie. She said hen, other, rooster.” Penelope walks over to her whiteboard and writes down the words in a single line without spaces. “Henotherrooster. He, not, her, rooster.”

“He’s not her rooster?”

“Roosters are father chickens, Josie,” Penelope states, matter-of-factly. ”A rooster is biologically a male, which is the ‘father’ of an egg, and she’s talking about eggs.”

“What the frog is this bullsheep! That is literally the most stupid thing I’ve heard. When did Lizzie suddenly become a cryptologist, and why couldn’t she just tell me that?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. But more importantly, Connor isn’t Lizzy’s father, which means that he’s lying. But why?”

“Are you sure about this…? I might send her some eggs anyway, just in case. But what would the other part mean? What’s with her strange need for dairy, what, is she trying to tell us that someone’s going to kill her,” Josie mocks, rolling her eyes, tired of this absurdity.
“Actually… yeah.” Penelope writes the words on the board again and reads them out loud, “Dairy, veal, and cumin for mi goreng… They’re evil and coming for me… goreng… I’m guessing she had to take some liberties with that last part, but, I think we get the message.”

Josie thinks she’s going to pass out and that she needs a camera to look at like she’s on The Office. She had looked at the list over and over again but nothing ever clicked into place. Honestly, who has the time to come up with this sort of stuff.

“That… makes sense actually. Lizzie would never get caught for petty theft, she basically puts the heft in theft with all the things she’s lifted in the past. I don’t know why she threw the banana though, that just seems wasteful of good fruit. And why are they so expensive these da-”

“Josie. Forget about the banana. Lizzie’s given us some really important information that we can use in our case against Connor.”

“Right, yes, you’re right. Damn. It’s not like I believed him for even a second, but the fear was there.”

“Luckily, Lizzie seems to know exactly what she’s doing. This is great news, Josie.”

Penelope smiles, delighted to have had some progress in their case, and Josie can’t help but think she looks radiant. However, she quickly squashes those thoughts with her mental bulldozer and instead lets herself relax at the thought of their peculiar findings.

They both agree to meet up again soon to hash out a plan to, essentially, get Connor off their back and figure out who it was that Lizzie was afraid of.


/ 

The next day, Josie receives an envelope in the mail. There’s no address on it but her name is printed on the front, meaning someone dropped it off themselves. She’s weary about it but opens it anyway, immediately seeing the Mystic Falls Hospital logo at the top corner of the page.

It’s a DNA test. Lizzy’s name is printed at the top and Connor’s at the bottom, saying that there was a 98.9% probability match in allelic profiles, confirming that he was the father. Josie, shell-shocked, slowly walks back into the kitchen where Hope is gossiping with Lizzy.
“Josie? What’s wrong?” Hope notices her sickened expression instantly and gets up to walk towards her, seeing the letter in her hand.

“I- I don’t understand. This has to be fake, right?” Josie feels like now would be a good time for divine intervention.

Understanding dawns upon Hope’s face as she reads the contents of the paper and she looks up at Josie.

“Fudge nuggets… how the hot smoked salmon did Connor manage to get the hospital to do this.”

“I don’t know, he wouldn’t have been able to get Lizzy’s DNA, I’m sure. But if that’s really from the hospital, then we’re Scrooge McDucked.”

“Oh god, alright, don’t worry. We’ll call Park, she’ll know what to do, she always does.”

/

“Fuck.”

“Penelope! Lizzy is right there, don’t say that!” Josie reprimanded her. Hope had called Penelope soon after and they had scheduled a meeting on the weekend at Josie’s house.

Penelope gives her a small apologetic look and mouths a ‘sorry’ to Lizzy, who is sitting on Hope’s lap, before continuing.

“This is bad. And you confirmed it with the hospital?” Both Hope and Josie nod. It had been the first thing they’d done before calling Penelope, to make there was actually something to worry about.

“Shi- Schinus. The court won’t believe anything we say now that he has this as proof.” Penelope’s genuine concern is stressing Josie and it must show on her face, since Penelope moves to sit down
on the couch next to her, wrapping an arm around her back. “Don’t worry, we just need to somehow show that he’s not the father, and I don’t know your sister, but I trust her when she cryptically says he isn’t.”

Penelope gently rubs her back in comfort and Josie allows herself to sink into her side. She sees Hope lift her eyebrows at the sight (Josie may or may not have forgotten to tell Hope that Penelope was the girl who was with her that first night) and Josie shoots her a look that says *not right now, Hope*. They hear a knock on the door and Hope quickly gets up, saying that she’ll answer it.

She hears Hope open the door and a few moments later, Josie recognises a voice she really does not want to hear right now.

*What the fuck is he doing here?*

Josie gets off the couch, surprising Penelope, and all but stomps to the front door, ignoring the concerned voice calling after her.

Connor sees Josie coming towards them and a wicked grin appears on his face. “Hey Josie! Did you get my letter? Oh, she looks angry, oops, was it something I said?”

Josie pushes past Hope and grabs Connor by the collar of his shirt.

“You motherfrogger! Lizzy looks nothing like your donkey-ass, duckface, crabhead, cunt-try mouse, piece of sheep. There is no way you’re her father and no amount of forged documents will change that!”

Connor pulls her hands off his shirt, still smiling and unperturbed about Josie’s burst of questionable insults.

“Woah, woah, woah, what’s with all the fowl language,” he nudges the air next to him with his elbow, as if an invisible person was cracking up at his awful joke. “Calm down, jeez, save it for court, would you. Oh, how rude of me, this is my lawyer, by the way.” Connor points at the man wearing a suit behind him.

“Why are you here? Can’t you just leave us alone?” Josie yells, feeling the pang of impending tears slowly rising behind her eyes.
“To see if you want to bow out now, of course. See it as me saving you from the embarrassment of court and whatever,” he vaguely points around Josie’s face, “this is.”

And Josie is this close to attacking him and his smug face, but as she steps forward she feels a hand wrap around her upper arm, pulling her back. She turns around and sees Penelope looking at her with concerned eyes and she huffs, retreating back into the doorway and behind Hope.

Penelope, level-headed as ever, but with hints of agitation on her face, attempts to soothe her with hushed whispers as Hope takes the opportunity to yell her own insults at Connor. Lizzy laughs joyfully in Hope’s arms, taking her yelling as excitement, oblivious to the dire situation.

Josie feels like she has calmed enough and listens back into the conversation, though still taking comfort in Penelope’s warmth.

“Who are they going to favour, single aunt with a busy full-time job, or loaded father with the means and the time to take care of a child,” Connor jabs.

“Well, Josie’s not single. In fact, she’s engaged and has a fiancée,” Hope retorts. Josie’s head shoots up and she looks at Hope but keeps quiet.

Connor scoffs, obviously not believing Hope’s words. “Who, you? What, did Josie’s hopeless crush on you finally pan out?”

Josie rolls her eyes at that.

Hope ignores him. “No, it’s her,” she says, pointing at Penelope, who is quietly standing beside Josie with an arm wrapped around her. Penelope looks up when both Hope and Connor look at her, clearly having not been paying attention to their conversation. “Penelope and Josie are getting married. I’d say a happy family looks better than an absent father, wouldn’t you?”

Josie’s going to kill Hope, but for now, she can’t let Connor know that what she’s saying isn’t true, so she moves slightly closer to Penelope.

Penelope, to her credit, seems impassive after hearing what Hope had said, though she’s currently
refusing to make eye contact with Josie and instead stares Connor down.

“Didn’t you just say she was your lawyer?” he questions, suspicious of Hope’s sudden claim.

“Yes? What’s the issue? She happens to be a lawyer. People are lawyers, Connor. Now, was there anything else you needed or will we see you get your dusty ass handed to you in court? No? Alright, goodbye.” Hope shuts the door before he can say anything and lets out a huge breath as she leans back against it. She stares back and forth at the two girls glaring at her.

“Oh, fishsticks.”

Chapter End Notes

don’t mind me, i’m just out here digging myself into deeper shit

p.s. the key to secret messages is making them so stupid that you yourself don’t understand them
“What the freesia hibiscus was that, Hope?” Penelope speaks first and Josie’s glad because she doesn’t even know what to say right now. “Why did you tell him that we were engaged?!”

Hope, on her part, looks mildly guilty as if she’s just now realising the implications of what she had said. “I don’t know! It made sense at the time, alright. What was I supposed to do? Let him continue insulting us?”

“No, but there are other ways of shutting him down without outright, blatantly lying to him. If he finds out we’re lying, it’ll make Josie look bad and he can use that against us!” Penelope looks mad or upset, Josie’s not sure but she sure is glad she isn’t Hope right now.

“I know, I know, I’m sorry!” Hope hugs Lizzy tighter to her chest, as if attempting to find comfort in the baby. “But it’s not like he’ll actually check for proof, right?”

“We don’t know that for sure! He seems really set on taking Lizzy, even though he’s not even her father! What is the deal with that?”

“I have no figging clue… but this could work, right? If you two pretend to be a couple until Connor is gone and then break up or whatever, what’s wrong with that? Wait, you’re not dating anyone, right, Park?”

Penelope looks at Josie, who has been standing quietly watching the two of them argue, before looking back at Hope.

“No, but that’s not the point. I’d be engaged to Josie and we’d be lying!”

“Gosh, I know you don’t know her very well,” Hope nudges Josie, “But give her some credit, Josie’s a catch and you’d be so lucky to be fake-hitting this.” Hope winks at Josie, clearly proud of her unknowingly-ignorant wingwomaning skills.

Penelope and Josie share a quick look before diverting their eyes.
“What was that?” Hope asks, baffled.

“What was what?” Penelope answers, faux-innocent, as if she had no idea what Hope could possibly be referring to.

“What was that look? You two just shared a look. What was that?” Hope’s eyes narrow in suspicion as she alternates between eyeing them both.

“Nothing, Hope, it’s just a weird situation is all.” Penelope should get an Oscar for this performance, Josie thinks.

“Do you two know each other? I mean, outside of you being Josie’s lawyer.”

Josie’s finding the small crack in the corner of the ceiling behind Hope’s head especially interesting at that moment, maybe she should fill that in with some plaster, *hmm, much to consider*…

Penelope stays quiet for a while, before finally speaking.

“We may have had a one night stand…”

Hope eyes widen as she faces Josie.

“What?! Josette??”

Judging by the unusual mix of shocked, amused, and impressed on Hope’s face, Josie thinks she should probably say something now, so that she’ll stop making that disturbing expression.

“Um, Penelope might have been that girl I was talking about… from that night Lizzie was arrested,” Josie says.
“Park? You were at the club that night? How did I not know about this?” Hope is expertly putting the pieces together, giddy about the new information, and her amusement prevailing.

“Sorry! I didn’t know you two knew each other! And when I found out I didn’t want to tell you that your lawyer was the one who I left the club with and the one who left me the next day with barely a trace,” Josie breathlessly explains.

Penelope looks slightly ashamed, which Josie takes as enough confirmation that she purposefully hadn’t wanted a means of contact between them, and the disappointment that was always there deepens just that one stab more. Penelope clears her throat and looks away.

“Look, I think I should go. We all need some time to think this out and come up with a plan.”

“Jeez, you and your plans, Miss. Planelope Park,” Hope jests, easing the faint tension.

“Hey, they’ve got you out of deep poopoo, haven’t they?” Penelope teases back and then looks at Josie, “and I mean literally. Did Hope tell you about the time I found her in a huge pile of-”

Hope slaps her hand onto Penelope’s mouth so fast that Josie’s worried about Lizzy getting whiplash.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, whatever, I’m sure Josie’s not interested. Just get your butt out of here and go jack off to a plan or whatever.” Hope pushes a giggling Penelope out the door and quickly slams it shut.

“Hope! What have you done?”

“It was one time! And I was drunk, and the zoo didn’t lock their gates properly - which is just irresponsible, by the way, the elephants could have easily escaped so they can’t blame me for trespassing - and there were no lights and it was night time, so I couldn’t exactly see the big pile of poo!”

“I meant the fake engaged thing.”
“Oh yeah, me too. Damn, girl, you hit that and you didn’t tell me?” Hope recovers quickly.

“That is your lawyer, Hope! And I didn’t even ‘hit that’, we were interrupted by Lizzy.”

“Ooft, baby girl,” Hope says as she looks down at Lizzy and does her awful baby voice, “did you clam jam your aunty Jo? Yes you did, didn’t you, who’s a little clam jammer? Who is? You are!” Lizzy laughs excitedly as Hope tickles her and Josie rolls her eyes.

“Hope! Focus! What am I going to do?”

“I don’t know, pretend to be her fiancée I guess.” Hope shrugs, helpful as ever, “who cares? It’s not like you have feelings for her, right?”

Josie looks back at the oh-so-intriguing crack behind Hope’s head and wills herself not to blush.

“Nope,” she says, popping the ‘p’ the same way she wants to pop herself out of existence at this exact moment.

“Oh my god, you totally like her, don’t you?”

“No! I mean yeah, I like her, she’s my lawyer. But not in the way you’re thinking.”

“Oh, I bet,” Hope nods, “I bet you’d like her to court you. You’d like to get served by her, with no objection. Your mens rea finds her appealing, beyond a reasonable doubt.” It didn’t seem like she was going to stop any time soon so Josie just leaves the room, exasperated, as Hope continues to yell god awful puns at her.

/ Josie receives another letter the next day; a piece of paper with no envelope, hanging from the mail slot in her door.

Lizzy’s half year birthday was today and Josie was beginning to get ready to leave before she saw
the note. It’s simply a single line of large black text.

*I am watching (and listening to) you.*

She gasps as she reads it and sends a text message to both Hope and Penelope.

Hope barges through her front door 15 minutes later and goes straight to pick up Lizzy from her rocker.

“Happy 6 months, baby girl! Where are we going to celebrate?”

“I can’t believe you kept track, you and Lizzy are getting way too close, and I was planning to take her to the park. Anyway, that’s not why I texted you, I got a note from Connor. Well, I assume from Connor.” Josie shows Hope the paper.

“Welp,” Hope looks around the room, searching for any surveillance technology, and then whispers, “I guess you ladies might actually have to put up an act, how awful for you.” Hope’s face says *oops, my bad,* but is betrayed by her eyes shining with amusement.

“It is awful! She’s our lawyer, what if something goes wrong!” Josie whispers back, hoping there are no microphones inside her house. There shouldn’t have been any way that Connor would’ve been able to place cameras or microphones inside, anyway, or at least Josie hopes. They both continue to whisper, just in case.

“Is that the only reason, Jo? You’re worried that we’d need another lawyer? Nothing to do with your huge crush on her?” Hope grins suggestively, one eyebrow lifted.

“I don’t have a huge crush on her! Just be quiet, whatever, I’ll pretend to be engaged or whatever. For Lizzy.” Josie then narrows her eyes and points at the baby. “You owe me big time, baby.”

Hope did have a point, the worst that could happen was that they’d need a new lawyer. Well, actually, the worst that could happen was that Penelope would never speak to her again. Which, to be fair, it’s not like Josie knew her very well at all, it was mainly just a physical thing. But the concern that it might become something more than just attraction worried Josie. But sure, she was a grown woman who could control her feelings, she thinks determinedly.
“Right, for Lizzy, of course,” Hope has a shit-eating grin and Josie rolls her eyes.

They hear a knock and open the door to find Penelope, dressed casually, on what Josie supposes is her day off. She looks nice, Josie muses, platonically of course.

“Hey, I came as soon as I got your message, what’s going on?” Penelope has worry written all over her face.

“It’s Lizzy’s half year birthday! We’re celebrating!” Hope offers, lifting Lizzy up, Lion King style. Lizzy drools and blabs a bit, still tired after waking up.

“Ignore her, I got a message from Connor saying that he’s keeping an eye on us, babe.” Josie pulls at Hope’s arms to bring Lizzy back down and shows Penelope the letter. Penelope lifts a brow at the last part but then looks down to read the note.

“He’s bugged your place?” she whisper-shouts. “That’s a bit creepy and illegal,” she says the last part louder, as if talking to the possible surveillance, and inspects the room.

“We don’t know, but I don’t think he could’ve came inside the house. Though, he could have easily bugged outside or have people listening in a parked van, I wouldn’t put it past him,” Josie sighs.

“Right, there’s no point worrying about that right now,” Hope interrupts, “we’re going to Liz’s favourite spot to celebrate her half-birthday, you coming to the park, Park?”

Penelope sighs. “Sure, Mikaelson-Mikaelson,” Penelope nods and looks at Josie. “I guess it would be a bit suspicious if we were never seen together, right, fiancée,” she teases, and Josie really can’t do anything but blush.

“Right, yeah,” Josie manages to choke out.

They quickly pack a lunch and picnic supplies before heading out to the dog park. Lizzy babbles excitedly and plays with her socks as Hope pushes her pram down the street. Every few minutes the baby will manage to pull off a sock and proceed to chuck it out of her stroller and onto the
sidewalk, making Hope have to stop as the girls alternate picking up the thrown sock and putting it back on.

They’re about halfway to the park, chatting about trivial topics, when Penelope suddenly holds Josie’s hand and intertwines their fingers. Hope, who’s in front of them, keeps walking, unaware of what was happening behind her. Josie sends Penelope a questioning look as they continue following Hope.

Penelope moves closer and leans in to whisper in her ear.

“Don’t look, but someone has been following us for a few blocks.”

Obviously, Josie immediately goes to turn around and look. She sees a suspicious man on the other side of the road, a few metres behind them, who she swears she saw near her house. She looks back at Penelope, who’s giving her a ‘seriously?’ face. Josie just shrugs and continues on as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

They finally make it to the park and notice the man sit on a bench a couple of metres away from them, now conveniently with a camera in hand and a newspaper. Josie scoffs at their attempt in being sly as she sets out the picnic mat.

They let Lizzy roll around and yell at the dogs as they talk; Josie and Penelope sitting closer than they should to each other on one side of the mat, with Hope and Lizzy on the opposite corners.

“So, one night stand, huh?” Hope says after their small talk had died down a bit.

“Hope, if you don’t shush, I will tell Josie what happened last year in March,” Penelope threatens lightly, and Hope immediately pretends to zip her mouth with her hand. “Anyway, we both decided it would be best to keep it professional, at least until-, nevermind.” Penelope cuts herself off and Josie looks towards her, wondering what she was about to say as they had not discussed ‘at least until’s’.

“Mhmm,” Hope nods and Josie shoots her a glare. “So, Josie, did Penelope ever tell you how we met?”

“What do you mean? Is Penelope not your family’s lawyer?” Josie’s interest has peaked.
“Nope, I am not, and Hope, we don’t need to share this right now,” Penelope tries to change the subject, intriguing Josie more.

Hope ignores her. “No, I fired that old guy after my parents passed, he was a doughnut-hole. So, Park had just graduated law school - early, might I add, such an overachiever - and we happened to be at the same bar. I was super drunk, so obviously I tried flirting with her cause she’s hot, which didn’t work at all. So she said if I managed to sell a bag of weed that she had to this other random guy sitting at the bar, at a good price, then she’d give me her number. Obviously I accepted, and it was going great, I was really close, I swear, until he then proceeded to show me his badge and tell me that he’s a cop. And Park’s just sitting on the other side of the bar cracking up and taking the piss out of me. Long story short, Park got me out of the charges so easily that I ended up hiring her.”

“Wow,” Josie laughs and Penelope smiles at the memory, then leans in close to Josie’s ear.

“Don’t tell Hope but I saw his badge when I walked into the bar,” she whispers and Josie shivers at the feeling but manages to let out a giggle.

They relax for another couple of hours, chatting about nothing in particular. Josie and Penelope unspokenly make sure to act more discernibly couple-like, with lingering touches and prolonged gazes. Honestly, it was coming way too naturally than Josie is comfortable with, but she ignores that feeling. The man who had followed them was still seated on the bench and would lift the newspaper up every time one of them looked his way.

They decide to look at the row of shops on the other side of the park before returning back to Josie’s house. Josie sees a store that she hasn’t visited in a long while and tells the others that she wants to say hi to the owner.

They arrive at the large sign in front of the store: Ma-Gazine’s Comic Book Shop.

“Josie!” A friendly face pops up from behind the counter as they enter the small shop, “Hope! Penelope?”

“Milton? This is the bookstore?” Penelope’s surprised as she looks around the room.

“You all know each other?” MG asks, confused, looking between the three of them.
“Yes, actually, Penelope is my fiancée,” Josie boldly tries out, gauging his reaction.

MG had attended the same high school and was close friends with her and Hope, though they had drifted apart over the years since then, but she had no idea that he also knew Penelope. His eyes widen before a huge grin appears on his face.

“No way! Congrats, ladies. You know, Peez here helped me out with a lawsuit with another store a couple months back,” he smiles gratefully at Penelope. “And Hope? Is that your baby?”

MG bends down to peek at Lizzy in the stroller and gives her an excited wave. Josie looks in surprise at Penelope, wondering if she’s literally the only lawyer in town since everybody seems to know her.

“No, she’s not mine, this is Lizzy, Lizzie’s baby,” Hope answers. Josie’s not surprised that MG had thought she was Hope’s, seeing as Lizzy’s hair wasn’t blonde like her mother’s.

“Who’s Lizzie-Lizzie?” MG asks, dumbfounded.

“Her name is Lizzy, she’s 6 months today,” Hope says, pointing at the baby, “and she’s Lizzie’s daughter, you know, you had a big crush on her and all that.”

“Right, Lizzie,” MG follows, sheepish, as he scratches the back of his head and contemplates something. “How is she? I guess I really haven’t seen her in a big while, I didn’t even know she had a baby.”

“Um, she’s fine. She’s maybe in prison, but she’s fine,” Hope offers quickly.

“Prison?! For what?” MG seems exceptionally worried about the news but, to be fair, he did have the longest crush on her so it made sense.

“I don’t know, banana nunchucks or something,” Hope shrugs. “But yeah, and Connor - yes, Connor from high school - is claiming to be her father, which Lizzy said was not true, and he’s bugged Josie’s place!”
MG looks like he can barely keep up with all the new information.

“Now that’s messed up… why would he need to bug Josie’s place?”

“Oh, um, he’s probably trying to find evidence that makes Josie look bad or something,” Hope somewhat tells the truth.

“Right, that’s wild. You know what, let me help y’all out, come round the back with me,” MG says indiscriminately, waving them into the back area.

The girls just look at each other and shrug, following him towards a door that leads to a large storage basement below the shop. The place was filled with tall shelves of random technology, including surveillance gear.

“Woah, MG, what is all this?” Penelope speaks what’s on everybody’s mind.

“This used to be a tech shop that my dad owned before I turned it into a comic book store,” he explains.

“No wonder you were the president of the AV club for so long, nerd,” Josie thinks out loud. MG had been involved in lots of technology electives and clubs in high school, so it wasn’t a surprise.

“I can set you up with all the surveillance you need and help you check if your house has been bugged,” MG offers, still as friendly as ever.

The girls thank him incessantly on their way back to Josie’s house until he has to tell them to stop or he’ll go home. He quickly sets up an alarm system on the front door and a few security cameras on the outside, which alerts them in the case of intruders.

“Alright, I only detected one small microphone in the vent in Josie’s room, but I found a few cameras on the street pole outside,” he lifts up the dismantled objects with an apologetic frown.
“Oh, snapdragon, Connor is not playing around,” Penelope curses.

MG stays for dinner and they catch on one another’s lives. They all thank him again before he leaves and promise to come by the shop again soon. He laughs, saying it’s no big deal and that they can thank him by sending him an invitation to the wedding, which causes both Josie and Penelope to flush.

“So, what’s our plan? If Connor was able to put up cameras outside and a microphone upstairs, he could easily do it again! And there could be some downstairs that MG didn’t find!” Josie worries, but chooses her words carefully.

“Well, we have nothing to hide,” Hope says loudly, in the most awkward and unnatural tone, “and it’s getting late so Park will stay here, as she usually does, because you two are together, and that’s what people who are together do, and I will go home, because that’s where I live.”

Josie and Penelope stare at her with expressions saying really, Hope? and Hope gives them both a double thumbs up before leaving the house.

“Alright, well I guess it really is getting late and we should go to bed soon,” Josie says in an equally awkward tone to Hope’s.

“Right, because that’s what we do,” Penelope joins the awkward talk club.

They wordlessly settle Lizzie down for the night, who had recently moved to her own room, and Josie hands Penelope some clothes to change into. Penelope comes out of the adjoining bathroom, changed out of her day clothes, and Josie suddenly realises how alone they are, without Lizzy or Hope to act as a buffer.

Josie, who had been sitting against the headboard waiting for Penelope, lifts up the sheets on the other side of the bed and sends a questioning look towards the other girl. Penelope frowns a bit and then shrugs, not saying anything as she moves to lay under the covers. Josie turns off the lamp on her nightstand then mirrors Penelope, so that they lay face to face in bed.

“Well this feels familiar,” Penelope whispers, aware that they could be heard.

“I’m sorry you got dragged into this, I don’t think they covered this in law school,” Josie whispers
back, chuckling at the absurdity of their whole situation, as they both keep their voices low.

“I mean they told us about sleeping with the enemy, but I must have missed the class on sleeping with the client,” Penelope teases, “but honestly, it’s fine, Josie. I know you didn’t mean for any of this to happen. It’s not exactly ideal, and I really dislike lying, but I’m glad I can somehow help getting that ass- aleea away from Lizzy, she doesn’t deserve that.” Penelope seems to ponder something, looking reminiscent.

“You once said you had a baby brother,” Josie recalls, hoping she’s not pushing too hard, “do you still see him much?”

She hadn’t been sure what Penelope meant back then, judging by her use of past tense, but it seemed like she cared for him a lot still, irregardless.

“Um, no, not really,” Penelope looks away as sadness overcomes her profile.

“Oh. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to prod,” Josie quickly apologises, “it just seemed like you two were close.”

“Yeah, we were… my parents weren’t around much when I was growing up. He’s still alive, if that’s what you’re trying to ask, at least I hope to every god that he is. But my father left without a trace, taking him away as well, when he had barely just started kindergarten and I haven’t seen them since. I don’t think he even remembers me,” Penelope lets out a hollow laugh. “Anyway, that was years ago and I’ve tried looking for him since but I’ve had no luck… I like seeing Lizzy though, all babies sort of remind me of him, they just have a sweet kind of innocence.”

Josie sees a tear roll down the side of Penelope’s face and reaches out to wipe it away, her heart dropping in empathy.

“That’s awful, Pen,” Josie shuffles closer to smooth her hand on Penelope’s upper arm, gently comforting her. “No one deserves to go through that.”

Penelope smiles sadly at her, teary-eyed.

“I guess. But it is what it is,” Penelope half-heartedly shrugs. “And if I’m in a position to stop it ever happening again, then I will do everything I can for Lizzy. I don’t care if that means having to
stay here and putting my life on hold, as long she’s safe.”

Josie doesn’t know what to say to that, overwhelmed by Penelope’s willingness to help a baby she barely knows, so she simply lets out a breath and leans forward to hug her.

“Thank you, Penelope,” Josie closes her eyes as Penelope hugs her back. They let go after a while but keep close to each other.

“So? Any tragic backstory? I basically made you listen to mine,” Penelope laughs sadly.

Josie gives her a melancholic smile and wipes away another tear that escapes, but leaves her hand there, cradling the side of Penelope’s face.

“Tragic, yeah, but I’ve had time to heal. My parents both died in an accident when I was younger, and I felt like the whole universe had been torn apart. My aunt Caroline raised us, but she travels a lot for work so we don’t see her much anymore. Lizzie and I still visit their graves every year,” Josie wistfully gazes at the wall behind Penelope, recalling the few and faded memories she had left of her parents. “I think I’m okay now, Lizzie took it harder but we got through it together.”

Penelope has a furrowed brow and her eyes are glossed with sorrow. She lets out a helpless sigh before gently placing her hand on the nape of Josie’s neck and leaning forward to press a soft kiss on her lips, allowing her enough time to move away if she wanted.

Josie feels wrecked at the gentleness of it all and Penelope tenderly pulls back a moment later. They stare at each other for a while before gently placing her head into Josie’s side and wraps an arm around her waist. Josie shifts to lay on her back, so Penelope can rest on her shoulder, and wraps both arms around her.

“Goodnight, Josie.”

“Night, Penelope.”

Chapter End Notes

*woozy face emoji*
good plot and deep characters? i don’t know her

anyway, some housekeeping and whatnot:

this is maybe as “heavy” as it gets, i reckon, just wanted some backstory, so next chaps
will be back to bullshit shenanigans

every time i think about last chapter’s events i laugh so hard that i made actual real
people read that with their own two eyes, haha, sorry everybody, literature at it’s finest

also can i just say that some of yall's comments are freaking hilarious, like the person
who suggested carrying the baby with a drone… you’re amazing. i do read all
comments btw, and i love and appreciate them all, thanks for reading this
ridiculousness

finally, i realised the plot was moving way too fast without much fun happening so i
might slow it down a bit, who knows, definitely not me. peace, that’s all from me
Josie wakes up to an empty bed, again. She checks her nightstand but there’s no note this time. She sighs, invariably confused about Penelope’s actions, and gets out of bed to wake Lizzy, as she does every morning.

Lizzy’s cot is empty and Josie feels a mild panic rising as she quickly scrambles downstairs.

The disseminating fire in her heart is immediately extinguished when she sees Penelope in the kitchen, sitting at the table, chatting with and feeding Lizzy in her lap. Penelope registers her presence but doesn’t notice her alarmed expression.

“Hey babe, I made breakfast.” Penelope barely looks up as she continues feeding Lizzy, who’s happily playing with the ends of her hair.

*What the fuck is happening,* Josie thinks.

“Oh, awesome, cool, great, thanks,” Josie stammers and quickly adds, “honeybun.”

The awkward term of endearment causes Penelope to glance up and she lets out an amused snicker at Josie’s timid expression. Josie looks away to stifle her embarrassment and busies herself by looking for a plate and cutlery.

“Aren’t you late for work?” Josie wonders. Penelope had left quite early for work last time so she was curious as to why she’s still here.

“Josie, I was serious when I said I would do anything to keep Lizzy safe, so I’m putting work on hold for a while. Plus, *you know* my grandfather owns the firm so I don’t really need to go in at all.” Penelope makes sure to minimise the chance of her words revealing that they hardly knew one another.

Josie digests the new information, was everyone around her loaded with *legacies* or what. To be fair, she did inherit her parents house and didn’t have to pay the exorbitant rent that someone her
“Right, of course. I appreciate that,” Josie smiles at her. “But that doesn’t mean you have to take care of her, Lizzy’s babysitter is coming soon, and what about your other clients?”

Josie grabs some pancakes off the plate on the kitchen table after sitting down across from Penelope and starts eating.

“I pretty much gave all my clients away to coworkers. I still have one, but her case is basically finished, and I’ll probably meet with her today to settle everything,” Penelope says as she finishes feeding Lizzy and rests the baby’s head on her shoulder to pat her back, attempting to burp her. Josie’s heart warms at the domesticity of the scene, wishing she could stay at home and spend the day with them both.

Josie nods at her. “Have I ever told you that your pancakes are amazing, by the way, what’s your secret?”

Penelope’s eyes crinkle in mirth as she grins. “Secret recipe, Saltzman, even if we are engaged. I’d tell you but then I’d have to kill you, which would be such a waste of a pret-”

They hear someone entering the front door, causing the alarm system to go off, followed by a loud shriek. Both girls quickly look at each other in dismay before moving towards the front of the house.

A startled babysitter is standing in the middle of the opened door, arms flailing as they look around aimlessly to find something that will stop the beeping. Josie quickly types the code into the panel next to the door and the disconcerting noises fade away immediately.

“Well, at least we know it works,” Penelope mumbles, one of her hands covering Lizzy’s ear to supposedly save the baby from potential hearing loss.

“Morning, Nia, sorry about that alarm thing. We just upped the house security a bit. Oh, this is my fiancée, Penelope,” Josie gestures at Penelope, who smiles and gives Nia a small wave. “I don’t think you’ve met, she usually goes to work early and comes home late.”

Nia seems surprised to learn that Josie’s engaged but doesn’t mention it.
“Hi Penelope, it’s nice to meet you,” Nia returns Penelope’s smile and looks back at Josie, “I see Lizzy likes her a lot, she was so fussy with me when I first met her.”

Josie chuckles and allows herself to admire Penelope and Lizzy for a short moment.

“Yeah, she’s quite the charmer,” she nudges Penelope, “got me into bed the first night we met. Oh god, sorry Nia, too much information.”

Penelope and Nia both playfully laugh at her.

“Anyway, I’ll take Lizzy off your hands and let you ladies get on with your day,” Nia happily takes the baby from Penelope and walks into the living room.

Josie and Penelope head upstairs to Josie’s room so that they can get changed out of their sleep clothes.

“So, Nia’s cute. Is she single?” Penelope lifts a brow and smirks at Josie.

“Wha- What, I don’t know, I’d never ask her, I mean, that’s so inappropriate, and-” Josie is a nervous mix of bafflement and modest jealousy.

“Oh my god, Josie, breathe. I’m just pulling your leg. Besides, is it as inappropriate as being engaged to your lawyer?” Penelope remarks as she takes off her borrowed sleep shorts.

“Shut up,” Josie immediately blushes, god damn it.

“Stop blushing, we’ve seen each other naked, honeybun,” Penelope teases, not even lying, and then slowly lifts up her tank top.

Josie’s face is basically a strawberry field at this point (and she wants so badly to be picked and washed in cold water) and she quickly turns around.
“Just get dressed already,” Josie huffs out as she quickly does so herself. When she turns back around she sees Penelope looking at her with an unreadable expression.

Penelope clears her throat. “Alright, good to go.”

They both head downstairs to the living room to say goodbye to Lizzy and Nia. Penelope gives Lizzy a gentle pinch on the cheek before giving Josie a quick kiss on hers, perhaps a little too close to her mouth, whispering a seductive ‘bye JoJo’ into her ear. She says goodbye to the three of them, saying her client is waiting for her, and heads out the door.

“She’s cute,” Nia wiggles her eyebrows up at Josie, clearly in awe of their relationship.

_Oh my god, why don’t Penelope and Nia just date already_, Josie thinks, but without any real malice.

“Yeah, she really is something else,” Josie smiles, not even having to lie about that. “Anyway, I’m off to work, I’ll see you tonight. Be good for Nia, alright Liz?”

Nia says bye and moves Lizzy’s baby arm into a waving motion. Josie laughs and heads to work.

And work was the same as always: perform diagnostic tests, prescribe hieroglyphic medications, get subtly hit on by one of her coworkers (Rafael could not take a hint, but also, Josie was too kind to outright say anything), receive an apologetic grimace from Landon, enter patient data, and bang on the CT machine that always seems to break down at the worst possible time (i.e. when a patient is inside and Josie has to pretend to be interested in their lives while she faux-calm frantically tries to fix it).

After finishing her shift, she’s making her way home but sees someone familiar.

Penelope is standing on top of the stairs outside her firm, Josie only realises now that she passes it on her way home, and chatting with another woman. Another woman who seems very enamoured with what Penelope was saying, laughing hysterically and placing her hand on her fiancée’s arm when she says something particularly humourous. What’s worse is that she sees Penelope flirting back at the woman, smirking and running a hand through her own hair.

Josie decides now is a good time to butt in.
“Hey stranger,” Josie conjures up her biggest and cutest smile, walking up the stairs.

“Josie! What are you doing here?” Penelope looks surprised but, nevertheless, excited to see her.

“I was just on my way home and I saw you standing here,” Josie replies and turns to smile at the other woman in acknowledgement.

“Oh, what a coincidence,” Penelope beams, looking between the two girls. “This is Dana, by the way, she’s one of my clients. This is Josie, my fiancée.”

Dana lifts an eyebrow in astonishment. Obviously Penelope had not mentioned Josie before as their situation was a recent development. In fact, Dana had probably known Penelope for longer than Josie had.

“Nice to meet you, Josie. I wish I could say I’ve heard a lot about you, but that might be a lie,” Dana laughs, but her tone isn’t hostile.

Penelope just smiles at Dana. “I’m a pretty private person and I keep it professional, you know that.” Oh yeah, Josie had one of those professional deals as well. “Plus, Josie and I only got engaged recently.”

Penelope reaches out to hold Josie’s hand and tenderly squeezes it. Dana ignores the action, clearly uncomfortable and disinterested, and half-heartedly congratulates them before saying she’s late to meeting a friend on the other side of town and leaving.

“You totally did that on purpose,” Josie says, letting go of Penelope’s hand and nudging her playfully.

“Perhaps,” Penelope smiles, crossing her arms. “But she’s been flirting with me throughout the whole case, and I never really had any interest.”

“I saw you flirting back earlier!” Josie scoffs light-heartedly, hoping she doesn’t sound like a total creep who had been watching them.
“So what? I flirt with all my clients. Oh gosh, did you think you were special?” Penelope smiles smugly, pretending to have an oops expression.

Josie stutters, “Wh- I- No, I-” Penelope laughs in amusement and Josie realises she’s kidding again. “Stop being mean to your fiancée!” Josie lightly slaps her arm, making Penelope laugh harder.

“Alright, alright, let’s go. I’m driving us home, I have no idea how you walk all the way back, especially in those scrubs.” Penelope grabs her hand again and leads her to a car parked on the streets. Josie doesn’t mention how Penelope just called her house their home but something about it feels indecipherably weird, but sort of in a good way.

They arrive at Josie’s house and relieve Nia of a Lizzy who has an iron-grip hold of her hair. Nia thanks them and wishes them both a good night before leaving.

Penelope helps Josie cook dinner while simultaneously entertaining Lizzy, who’s watching them in her high chair.

After dinner, they decide to settle down to watch a movie on the television. Lizzy lays snug and content in Penelope’s arms as they both lie on opposite ends of the couch. Josie misses some of the start of the movie watching them instead.

About a quarter of the way through the movie, Lizzy is fast asleep and Penelope tells Josie she’s going to place her down in her cot.

Penelope comes back downstairs moments later with the baby monitor and a large blanket from Josie’s room. Penelope lays the blanket on Josie’s legs and goes to sit in the middle this time, instead of the end of the couch. Josie follows her, sitting next to her with their arms pressed together.

Maybe halfway through the movie, Josie dozes off, her head resting on Penelope’s shoulder.

She wakes up to Penelope tapping her cheek lightly and opens her eyes to the credits rolling on the screen.
“Hey babe, how about we go to bed.” Penelope has a sweet smile on her face.

Josie tries to argue, wanting to spend more time with Penelope, but the sleep is apparent in her voice. “But it’s only 9:30, and I’m not even tired anymore.”

“JoJo, that would be way more convincing if you hadn’t literally just drooled for an hour,” Penelope chuckles.

Josie playfully slaps her arm and wipes away the non-existent drool from her mouth. “Whatever, you’re sleeping on the couch, _babe._”

Penelope faux-gasps in shock as Josie leaves the living room and heads to her room to get ready for bed.

Josie’s about to get into bed when she realises that Penelope had taken the blanket for their movie earlier.

She slowly walks downstairs and can immediately see Penelope smirking at her from the living room couch.

“Need something?” Penelope asks, sounding innocent if not for the overflowing amusement in her eyes.

“It’s _my_ blanket, I should get it,” Josie pouts.

“Alright, you can have it. But just know that I come with the blanket.” Penelope’s way too smug right now and Josie just wants to get her back for once.

“Oh, honey, I’ve come _on_ the blanket.” Josie attempts a smirk and internally rejoices when Penelope blushes, looking away.

“That’s gross and you know it, get this blanket off me,” Penelope laughs, pushing the sheets off.
“Oh, I’ll help you get off my blanket.” Josie is really bringing it home now, pulling out the big guns.

“You’re awful, you know that? It’s no wonder Mikaelson had to wingwoman you so much,” Penelope gets off the couch, handing Josie the blanket.

Josie grabs it happily and walks backwards towards the stairs. “Yeah, whatever, you coming or what?”

“I don’t know, JoJo, neither of us did the first time,” Penelope regains her prowess.

And Josie’s back to being a blushing mess. “Please don’t remind me.”

They both head into Josie’s room and Penelope quickly changes and brushes her teeth with the spare toothbrush she had used the previous night.

Josie’s already half-asleep in bed, laying on her side with her eyes closed, by the time she gets out of the bathroom and Penelope just giggles.

“Not tired, my ass,” Penelope pokes fun.

“I can hear you,” Josie replies, words mumbled, but her eyes remain closed.

Penelope laughs again, lifting the covers. “Good, now shove over.”

Josie makes no effort to move over and instead curls up further into the middle of the bed, sighing loudly in comfort. She hears Penelope huff.

“Be that way.” Penelope gets under the covers and purposely leans over Josie to turn the lamp on the nightstand off. Josie opens her eyes a crack and sees where Penelope’s tank top rides up, exposing the skin above her shorts, and immediately forces them closed again.

Once Penelope lays down, Josie moves to wrap both arms around her waist, pulling her closer, and
her hands feeling the exposed skin of the small of her back. Penelope shifts so that her arm is
tucked under and around, and Josie’s head can lay on her chest.

“Goodnight, babe.”

“Night, honeybun.”

Chapter End Notes

bro, that shit’s gay, bro... but no homo

i’m not into real full-blown jealousy so i hope it doesn’t come off that way
also i had way too much fun writing this short little chap, thanks a shitload for reading
a screenshot from my google doc, a behind the scenes, if u will:

**Accently meet after work, as Josie’s on her way home, sees Pen’s client**

p.s. i use xD ‘ironically’ so much that it’s just straight up my favourite now, no shame

edit: i only realised the other day that i had been spelling 'accidentally' wrong my
whole life but i refuse to let go of my australian accidently
Josie finally (finally) wakes up to a non-empty bed. She sees Penelope, sleepy-eyed and looking at her with a small smile. They’re no longer cuddled together but still close, laying face to face on the same pillow.

Josie smiles back and Penelope wordlessly reaches forward to tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear, leaving her hand there to gently caress her cheek. They stay like that for a few more moments, content in each other’s presence and soaking in the morning sun.

Penelope eventually pulls her hand back when they hear Lizzy wailing in her room next door. Josie sighs at the loss of contact and their broken moment but they both get up to check on her and get ready for the day.

“So, I was thinking of taking Lizzy out for dinner tonight, if you’d like to join us?” Josie asks absentmindedly as she prepares lunch for the both of them.

Penelope turns from where she’s feeding Lizzy in her highchair and raises a brow at Josie.

“Babe,” Penelope says slowly, her grin spreading, “are you asking me out on a date?”

“Shut up, we’re literally engaged, you dingus. I just thought it would be nice since I really haven’t gone out since Lizzy. Plus, Lizzy’s my actual date, you would just be the third wheel,” Josie smiles back.

Penelope pretends to be hurt, gasping and clutching a hand to her heart. “If anything, you would be the third wheel, because Lizzy loves me more. Don’t you, LizzyLoo?” Penelope tickles her neck gently with her fingers and Lizzy giggles loudly. “I think that’s a yes.”

“That’s not fair, she’s a baby, she can’t help it!” Josie pouts.

Penelope’s face turns mischievous as she puts down Lizzy’s food after finishing it and stalks slowly towards Josie. “Is that so? And how about you? Can you help it?”
Josie can already tell what’s about to happen and she starts moving backwards, until her back meets
the corner of the kitchen counter and she has no route of escape.

“Penelope… don’t you dare…” she holds out a finger in warning but Penelope continues to
approach her.

Once she reaches Josie she places both her hands on either side of her on the counter. Josie’s
outstretched hand presses against Penelope’s front and she gently relaxes it against her, ready to
push back if need be.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Penelope says, innocently. She leans in slowly as her
eyes, hooded, lock onto Josie’s lips. Josie can’t help but follow suit as she gazes down at
Penelope’s mouth, slightly parted.

As soon as she feels Penelope’s breath on her lips, she closes her eyes, bracing herself for the
contact that she so badly desires.

She finally feels Penelope’s touch, but it’s in the form of two hands tickling her sides as she hears a
soft laugh. Josie’s body reacts instantly, squirming as she tries to get away.

“You’re evil!” Josie exhales breathlessly as she finally escapes Penelope’s playful torture, moving
behind Lizzy’s chair for a means of obstruction.

Penelope just grins, proud of herself. “I know. But Lizzy loves me anyway.”

Penelope walks over to tickle Lizzy’s chin again, making the baby giggle, and then runs a finger
along the side of Josie’s jaw as she walks out of the kitchen. Josie’s in a daze as she watches her
leave, adding the last 5 minutes into her ever-growing mental folder of Penelope’s mixed signals.

She continues packing their lunches into tupperware boxes, asking Lizzy whether she thinks
Penelope likes her or not, but the baby sadly gives her no answer. A few moments later she hears
Penelope coming back down the stairs.

Penelope walks back into the kitchen, fully dressed in her pant suit, and thanks her as she takes one
of the boxes.

“I’ll pick you up at 5 outside the hospital?” Penelope proposes, “I’ll get Lizzy on the way too.”

“Sure, sounds good,” Josie beams, excited for their not-date with the person she’s in a fake-engaged lawyer-client relationship with.

Penelope mirrors her expression and quickly kisses her cheek in valediction before leaning down to kiss Lizzy’s forehead and leaving the house.

Josie hears the front door open again not a second later and begins to wonder how many people have keys to her house.

Hope bounces into the kitchen, clearly excited about something. “Guess who I just passed on my way here?”

“Um, Penelope? She literally just left, it’s not that hard, Hope. And good morning to you too, what are you even doing here?” Josie hadn’t planned anything with Hope that she remembers, and she had to leave for work soon anyway.

“Wow, someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed, has Park been making you sleep on the couch? Plus, I thought you’d be more excited, seeing as you have a date tonight,” Hope teases.

“First of all, we sleep in the same bed, as people who are engaged do,” Josie rebuts, not being able to deny out loud that it’s not a date, but hoping her menacing expression will do the job, “and second, how do you even know that?”

Hope wiggles her eyebrows at her first words, seeming to have mentally confirmed something, but let’s it go.

“Park told me. She asked if I wanted to join but I politely declined, you’re very welcome,” Hope says, acting as if she had done Josie the biggest deed in the world. “Is that lipstick on your face?”

Josie shoots her a glare, quickly wiping the spot where Penelope had kissed her, grateful that Hope
can’t tease her out loud. Hope winks at her anyway and she knows she’ll get ribbed for it later.

“She left like 5 seconds ago, how did you have a full conversation with her. Also, you didn’t answer my question, what are you doing here? I don’t think we have plans.”

“Honey, Park and I could have a full conversation with just our eyes, we’re just that close,” Hope jokes, winking at Josie, “and I’m here to babysit Lizzy for the day. I haven’t seen her in years and I miss her.”

Josie rolls her eyes as Hope walks over to pick up Lizzy.

“It’s literally been one day since you last saw her. Also, Nia’s coming soon.”

“Oh yeah, she’s not coming. I told her she could have the day off.”

“What? Why do you even have her number?” Josie asks, confused as fuck.

Hope shrugs. “I don’t know, I thought she was cute so I asked.”

Josie huffs at that, of course Hope did. “You and Penelope both,” she mumbles, but smiles at the thought of her fake-fiancée.

“Ooh, is someone jealous?” Hope looks down at the baby and softly tickles her, “Is your aunty Jo jealous? You’re so right, Lizzy, she so is.” Hope looks back up at Josie and proudly sighs. “She’s so wise for her age.”

Josie stifles a laugh and makes her way out of the kitchen. “Whatever, I’m going to work. And stop hitting on my babysitter, I like her and she’s good with Lizzy,” she yells as she bounds upstairs to change, hearing Hope laugh in the kitchen.

Josie changes into her scrubs and packs an extra outfit for later tonight. She heads back downstairs and sees Hope talking to Lizzy on the couch, not noticing her presence.
Josie watches them for a bit, Hope chatting animatedly about nothing in particular and Lizzy listening intently as if the baby was going to be tested on the information in midsems. She wonders if Hope had been lonely lately, seeing as she used to spend time with Lizzie a lot while Josie was at work. Hope didn’t have many other friends outside of the twins but she occasionally hung out with Landon, as the two used to date.

Josie decides she’s done enough creepy staring and bids them both goodbye.

Penelope texts her during the day, saying she knows a good restaurant if Josie’s okay with that. Josie smiles at the phone and says it’s fine.

She’s about an hour away from finishing her shift when she’s approached by Rafael, Landon in tow.

“Hey Jo, some of us are planning to go to the bar after work and I was wondering if you’d like to come. I know Hope’s been taking care of Lizzy all day, she literally won’t stop sending Landon snaps about it, so maybe she can babysit for the night as well?” Rafael asks, a hopeful smile on his face.

Josie mentally curses herself as she usually uses Lizzy as an excuse not to come, meaning she had to tell them about Penelope.

“Sorry, Raf. I’m busy tonight, I have a date,” she attempts, trying to look Rafael in the eye.

Rafael is slightly taken aback at the news.

“Oh, that’s cool. I just didn’t know you were dating someone, you know, after you told me you weren’t dating anyone,” Rafael says coolly, but Josie can see the annoyance in his eyes, and Landon softly hits his arm as if telling him to back off a little.

“Oh, yeah, I haven’t really told anyone about her, we’ve been keeping it low-key,” Josie partly tells the truth, hoping to gently placate him.

“Right, of course, no yeah, that’s cool,” he says, though his expression has signs of scepticism, “I’d love to meet her.” Landon hits him again, trying to get his friend to stop pushing, but Rafael ignores him.
Josie really needs as little people as possible to know about their relationship, so that it’s easier when they eventually ‘break up’. Strangely, the thought of that happening sends an unsettling feeling in the stomach, even though they only began the charade a few days ago.

“Um, yeah, she might be coming by later to pick me up, but we’ll see,” Josie says, hoping her smile is enough to convince him to stop prodding.

He nods, satisfied, and she gets paged a second later, quickly saying bye to them both.

Josie’s shift is about to end when she sees two familiar faces talking to the receptionist.

Penelope’s holding Lizzy in her arms, and she’s changed into a loose button-up and black pants. She looks up at Josie then, smiling, and gives her a small wave.

Josie smiles back, walking down the hallway towards them. When the receptionist notices her, he gives Josie a wave.

“Josie! Your cute friend’s looking for you, and she’s being held by a stunning girl,” Ryan smiles as Josie reaches the front counter.

Josie laughs at that. “Thanks, Ryan, but flattery will literally get you nowhere,” she says before kissing Penelope on the cheek in greeting. “Hey there, how did you know where to find me?”

Ryan looks between them sheepishly before the phone rings and he excuses himself.

“Hey back. Mikaelson told me when I went to pick up Lizzy, she was acting weird, and I mean weirder than usual,” Penelope furrows her brows and shakes her head at the thought. “Anyway, are you almost ready to leave?”

“Yep, let me just grab my things.” As Josie turns around, she sees Rafael and Landon making their way out of the staff change rooms and towards the hospital’s exit, which means that they’ll pass the front reception. “Oh son of a finch,” she whispers loudly.
Josie turns back around and looks at Penelope with a panicked expression.

“Josie? What’s wrong?” Penelope looks at her with concern, confused about her sudden change in demeanour.

“Um, I might have told one of my coworkers that we were going on a date, to get him off my back,” Josie says, regretfully, “and he might be walking towards us right now.”

Penelope looks behind Josie, registering Rafael and Landon’s presence, and then locks their eyes again.

“Do you trust me?” Penelope asks, reaching out to hold Josie’s hand.

“Huh? Yeah, I guess so,” Josie replies before her arm is gently tugged forward, making her step into Penelope’s space.

Penelope leans closer, her eyes searching Josie’s for some kind of permission, which she gives with a small nod. She feels Penelope let go of her hand and it instead moves towards the nape of her neck, pulling her in to close the distance.

Josie closes her eyes as she feels the soft press of Penelope’s lips and it drowns out the world around her. She moves both her hands to cup Penelope’s face and deepens the kiss, reveling in the small surprised moan that Penelope releases. Their lips continue to move in sync and Josie thinks it might be lasting too long but Penelope makes no move to stop either, so she presses on, sucking on her bottom lip.

She feels a sudden yank on her hair, causing her to yelp and pull away. Lizzy, who had been sandwiched between the two of them, giggles loudly at Josie’s reaction and tugs her hair again. Penelope laughs, not at all bothered that Lizzy had ended their kiss, but moves her hand to unravel Josie’s hair from Lizzy’s grip.

Josie Pretends to scowl at Lizzy and looks up at Penelope, “she gets her evilness from you, you know?”

“Hi! You must be Josie’s low-key date.” Josie jumps in surprise at the voice, having completely forgotten why they had been kissing in the first place.
Rafael stands beside them, next to a bashful Landon, with a large grin on his face.

“I wouldn’t exactly say being engaged is *low-key* but if that’s what they’re calling it these days…” Penelope smiles teasingly at Josie, who averts her eyes in embarrassment, cursing her earlier self.

“Penelope, this is Rafael. Raf, Penelope, my fiancée, as she so *kindly* announced,” Josie quickly introduces them while subtly tugging at Penelope’s hand, wanting to leave the conversation at that. However, Penelope doesn’t seem to take the hint, too entertained at the situation.

“Fiancée? Josie, you only mentioned her a couple of hours ago and you said it was just a date!” Rafael crosses his arms, confused and irritated about the abrupt development.

“Aw, babe, you mentioned me to your coworkers? That’s so sweet,” Penelope teases and Josie glares at her, trying to convey via facial expression that she would like some assistance in her current situation. Penelope sends her a look back, as if giving her a reassuring *you can do it yourself*, but honestly, Josie’s not a mind reader so she can’t tell. She decides to take it as that, anyway.

“Well, Rafael, I don’t think I owe you an explanation and I don’t really appreciate your tone,” Josie states, suddenly feeling courageous. “Penelope and I *are* happily engaged and we *are* going on a date, so if you’ll please excuse us.” She grabs Penelope’s hand and drags her to the staff change rooms.

Once they’re inside, Josie becomes aware of what she just did and she paces along the lockers.

“Oh god, why did I do that,” she thinks out loud. “Was that really rude? I felt like I was really rude. I think he might hate me now.”

Penelope places a hand on her shoulder to stop her pacing. “Josie, please breathe. It really wasn’t that bad, I promise. I’ve actually never seen someone be so polite while shutting someone down. But I’m kind of impressed that you did it, I didn’t think you would.”

“So you *were* telling me to stand up for myself,” Josie wonders and Penelope nods. “Oh god, do you think he’ll talk to me again?”
“He’s a grown man, I’m sure he’ll be fine. At least he won’t bother you anymore, right?”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Josie finally concedes, “let’s just get out of here.” She opens her locker and quickly grabs her bag before walking towards the door.

“Are you wearing that?” Penelope asks and Josie looks down at her dirty scrubs.

“Yes. What? Not sexy enough for you?” Josie bites her lip, smiling at Penelope, who looks like she’s holding back a laugh.

“No, I’m really digging it, it’s certainly colour coordinated,” Penelope nods, pretending to be serious but her eyes are crinkling, “I can’t wait to see what the people at the fancy restaurant think.”

Penelope grabs her hand and gently tugs her towards the door, and Josie has a feeling she would actually let her go out like this so she surrenders.

“Alright, alright, fine. Give me a second to change,” Josie waits for her to turn around but Penelope just sits on the middle bench, crossing her legs and leaning an elbow on her knee as she watches her. Josie huffs and Penelope’s grin spreads. “Turn around, you perve.”

Penelope rolls her eyes dramatically and jokingly calls her a prude, but turns around anyway. She quickly gets changed into a simple black dress and a jacket and lets Penelope know that she’s ready.

Penelope stands and gives her a very not subtle once-over with a mischievous smirk, before clearing her throat and saying, “I think I liked the scrubs better,” causing Josie to roll her eyes and slap her arm playfully.

Once they’re outside, Penelope holds out her hand so that she can lead Josie to her car in the car park. Josie promptly accepts it, enjoying the warmth against the chilly night. She sees that Lizzy has fallen asleep in Penelope’s other arm and smiles at how comfortable the baby is.

“Hey, sorry about earlier,” Penelope apologises as they’re walking and Josie gives her a questioning look. “You know, for kissing you without asking.”
“Oh, right. It’s fine. It was a nice kiss, actually,” Josie admits and the look on Penelope’s face immediately lets her know that she shouldn’t have fed that ego.

“Is that right?” Penelope teases, “then maybe we should do it again sometime.”

It feels unusual to hear Penelope’s flirting outside of the house and away from other people, knowing it isn’t necessary, and Josie’s not sure exactly what it means but she decides now’s not the best time to think about that. Instead, she plays along.

“Maybe we should,” Josie giggles, squeezing Penelope’s hand and Penelope squeezes back, a glint of something in her eyes.

Once they get to Penelope’s car she buckles Lizzy into the car seat that wasn’t there yesterday and they drive off.

“So. This is a date, huh?” Penelope asks, keeping her eyes on the road.

“Shut up, I didn’t know what else to say.”

“I’m not complaining,” Penelope shrugs, and Josie doesn’t know what the hell that means.

“I’m kind of glad now that I said what I did, though. But I can’t believe it took me fake-dating someone to get him to back off.”

Penelope hums in agreement, her brows furrowed as she concentrates on the road, uncharacteristically silent.

“So where are we going?” Josie asks after a couple moments of quietness.

Penelope is seemingly pulled out of her thoughts. “I know the owner of a vegetarian restaurant on the other side of town. Their food is truly amazing.”
They pull up to a busy strip of shops and Penelope steps out of the car to get Lizzy in the back. Josie gets out and walks over to them, reaching a hand out to Penelope, who happily holds it and leads the way.

They reach a restaurant with a large gold-painted sign: KaleBeans Bar & Restaurant.

Penelope tells the host that they have a reservation under her name and they’re lead towards a table with a high chair placed next to it.

Once they’re situated and have ordered from the menu, Josie realises that she has no idea what to talk about with Penelope, now that they don’t need to pretend to be anything to each other.

“Do you go out much?” Josie settles on, hoping to spark a conversation.

Penelope, who had been playing with Lizzy, looks up at her. “No, not that much. Just a few drinks after work, usually,” Penelope answers, “You?”

“Well, you know, not since Lizzy, but Hope used to drag me out at least once a week,” Josie shrugs. “Actually, she dragged me to the club where we met.”

Josie flushes as she reminisces on that night. She and Penelope had locked eyes too easily, danced too close, turning into a heavy make-out session in the middle of the club that lasted too long, and then left too certain about where they were headed.

“Oh, so that was just a casual Sunday night for you?” Penelope smirks. “Was I just another notch?”

Josie’s tired of blushing, and after the day she’s had, she rides out her somewhat of a bold streak.

“Perhaps, but I promise you’re the prettiest so far,” Josie teases.

Penelope laughs at that, “Ouch, Saltzman, you wound me. I don’t know if I can get married to someone who’s such a player.”
“I can’t help it that I have game, Park,” Josie says, dramatically flicking her hair.

“Oh really, I bet you can’t get our waiter’s number,” Penelope challenges.

“Oh, you mean the cute waiter that was totally checking me out earlier?” Penelope rolls her eyes but nods. “What’s in it for me?”

“Whatever you want, I’d owe you one. But if you lose, you’d owe me one.”

“Alright, you’re on,” Josie maintains their eye contact as she runs a hand through her hair and Penelope looks back at her with hooded eyes and a smile, uptilted at the corners.

As if on cue, the waiter appears again and Josie brings her A game.

“Would you ladies like any drinks tonight?” asks the waiter, who Josie hopes she correctly remembers introducing himself as Sam.

“You look like you have good taste in wine, Sam. Surprise me,” Josie says in her most seductive voice, smiling at the waiter, and then she gestures at Penelope. “My babysitter here will have the same.”

The waiter nods, smiling back at her - in what she hopes is interest, and goes to get their drinks.

“Babysitter? Really?” Penelope laughs.

“Well, he can’t exactly think we’re on a date, can he? That might kill the mood a bit,” Josie giggles.

“I think your awful flirting killed the mood a bit,” Penelope raises a brow.

“Shut up,” Josie smiles and gently slaps Penelope’s hand on the table, “Okay, shush, he’s coming
"Here you are, two glasses of the house white, let me know what you think," Sam says, waiting for them to try the wine.

"Mmm," Josie hums in delight, maybe slightly over-sexually, "I love a good, massive burst of flavour in my mouth." Penelope chokes on her drink at that but Josie ignores her. "It's so creamy and smooth as well."

Sam seems smug and proud of himself, staring at Josie’s lips as she takes another sip.

"I’m glad that you like it, don’t hesitate to ask if you need anything else," Sam winks at her and leaves the table.

"Ugh, I can’t believe your appalling flirting is actually working," Penelope laughs.

"Hey, it worked on you, didn’t it?" Josie lifts her brows once at Penelope and winks.

"Yes, and I’m regretting it already," Penelope rolls her eyes in a playful manner.

Their food arrives a few minutes later and they end up talking a lot, finding they have quite a few interests and opinions in common. Josie keeps attempting to flirt with Sam, who seems more and more interested. Penelope ignores them and instead feeds Lizzy some mashed potatoes, making a mess of her clothes, and Josie giggles at her about it when Sam leaves. She watches the two of them as she continues chatting with Penelope about some random book they both enjoyed as children, and everything feels too comfortable and easy.

A person walks up to their table and Josie thinks it’s Sam so she quickly tosses her hair back, but when she looks up it’s someone else.

"Kaleb! It’s so good to see you!" Penelope gets up from her chair and hugs him, "Josie, this is Kaleb, he owns the restaurant. Kaleb, this is the girl that I babysit for, apparently. And this little one is Lizzy, Josie’s niece."
“Hi Josie, hi Lizzy, nice to meet you both. Hope you enjoyed the food,” Kaleb smiles friendly at Josie.

“I did. Penelope said it would be truly amazing and it really was,” Josie agrees, “There really aren’t enough vegetarian restaurants in Mystic Falls.”

“That’s exactly why I opened this one. I, personally, can’t stand the taste of animals, something about the blood, I think,” Kaleb shrugs. “Anyway, you two enjoy the rest of your night, and don’t worry about the bill, it’s on the house.”

Penelope and Josie both thank him and he shrugs it off, saying it’s nothing, and leaves them to get back to work.

Penelope sits back down and they continue chatting and giggling over a shared dessert. As they’re finishing up, they see Sam heading towards their table.

“So, do you ladies have any plans later in the night?” Sam asks suggestively as he collects their plates, addressing the both of them but looking directly at Josie.

Josie looks at Penelope, not wanting to turn him down but also not wanting to go out with him. Penelope plasters a large smile on her face.

“Well, I have to take the little one home, you know, babysitter duties and all. I think Josie’s free though?” Penelope smirks at her and Josie sends her back a glare.

“How about you give me your number and I’ll call you later,” Josie suggests, putting on her cutest smile, ready for this to be the money shot.

“Oh, I refuse to own a cellphone,” Sam says with an air of superiority, pointing at himself, “I refuse to be another sheep brainwashed by social media, while all of my personal data is stolen.”

Josie’s jaw drops and Penelope’s stifling a laugh.

“I think my fiancée and I are perfectly set for the night, thanks Sam, have a good one,” Josie says
quickly, collecting her bag and getting up from her seat. She all but grabs Lizzy, taking Penelope’s hand and dragging her out the door from a confused and sputtering Sam.

Penelope is laughing hysterically once they’re outside and Josie pouts at her, crossing her arms around Lizzy.

“That’s so not fair! I spent all that time flirting for nothing,” Josie huffs, sad that she lost their bet.

“Aw, don’t worry babe, you still have me,” Penelope gives her a sweet smile, patting Josie’s cheek, and she can’t help but smile back.

“Whatever, you’re okay, I guess,” she jokes, pretending to sigh in loss.

Penelope reaches for her arm, causing Josie to uncross them, and trails her hand down so she can intertwine their fingers. “Alright, let’s go. I’m taking your sore loser butt to get ice cream.”

Josie perks up at that and excitedly follows her lead. They resume their chat about random subjects as they walk to the ice cream shop, and make their way to the nearby park afterwards.

The two of them stroll around the dimly lit park for a while, huddled close as they eat their ice creams, Lizzy having long fallen asleep. They laugh and argue about the most nonsensical topics and it feels too much like a real date.

When they get to bed, they wordlessly curl up with each other, exhausted after a long day.

They build a routine of sorts over the week. Wake up next to one another each morning, Josie makes breakfast and lunch while Penelope feeds Lizzy, Josie goes to work, Penelope works on their case, they have dinner at home and usually end up falling asleep to a movie on the couch, which they then move to the bedroom to nestle in the warmth of one another, Hope shows up from time to time to subtly tease them, Penelope rolls her eyes and brushes it off, and Lizzy is having the time of her life incessantly tugging at everyone’s hair.

Rafael apologises the day after and Josie forgives him and also apologises for not telling him earlier, but she’s still proud of herself for saying something, regardless. Penelope’s clothes start piling up in her room so she gives her one of her drawers, leaving a post-it note to let her know. Penelope thanks her by showing up at the hospital with lunch so they can spend some time alone
together.

Josie would be lying if she said she wasn’t scared where it was all going. She’s been enjoying their time together but she has no idea what Penelope is thinking or feeling, and asking while their case is ongoing is really just a bad idea.

So Josie just leaves it for now and enjoys her new normal.

That is, until she receives an A4 envelope in the mail a week later and she thinks she might just glue her mail slot shut because literally no one else ever sends her letters. She opens it and reads the top:

*Notice of Intervention by Person Entitled to Intervene.*

*Dear Ms Saltzman, A Procedural Hearing has been set regarding the custody of Elizybeth Saltzman and you are required to attend court at the specified time and location below.*

Chapter End Notes

to the person in the comments asking for a real kiss … … …sorry?

to the person yelling at me to post a new chapter, this one’s for u ☺
(i think u might be the same person)

at this point, i’m really just draggin this out aren’t i. but i don’t have the energy rn so i’ve held back the plot just a bit longer, call this part B of last chap. i apologise if ur actually invested in what happens and want to know, or if u enjoy #angst, but i am indulgent as fuck, so

also u gays make me really happy with all ur nice comments (even the ones yelling)

fun fact: i spend more time thinking of shitty shop/firm names than i do on actually writing the story or researching legal things
The court date was set for exactly 2 weeks time. Penelope didn’t seem too bothered after Josie had told her about it and reassured her that she had been working on their case and that it was fairly solid.

They both decide it would probably be a good idea to visit Lizzie beforehand to get their facts straight, as Josie’s last meeting with her had been nothing if not indisputably cryptic.

“Hey, lovebirds, where are you headed?” Hope asks them as she barges into Josie’s house, both now being used to Hope’s teasing and her sporadic entrances. They had asked earlier if Hope was able to babysit that day but hadn’t given her a reason why, for certain reasons.

“We’re going to visit Lizzie to let her know what’s going on and clear some things up,” Penelope answers, pulling some socks onto Lizzy.

“Oh sweet! Lizzy and I are coming too,” Hope, at breakneck speed, unfolds the stroller placed next to the door and places Lizzy in before either can say a single word.

“Hope, what are you doing, we’re literally driving there,” Josie deadpans, reminded of the certain reasons they didn’t tell Hope, “Plus, I don’t think it’s such a great idea to bring Lizzy to a prison.”

“Come on, it’ll be good,” Hope says as she subtly lifts Lizzy out of the stroller and tries to quietly fold it back up, “Lizzie hasn’t seen her daughter in months, it’s only fair.”

Josie looks at Penelope for some guidance but all she does is just shrug and smile, leaving her to handle it herself.

Josie sighs, not having the energy to argue nor having a good enough excuse. “Alright, fine, get in the car.”

They all quickly buckle into the car and head towards the prison.
“So, are you two betrothed ready for the hearing?” Hope questions from the backseat.

“As ready as we’ll ever be, I guess. But we don’t know what Connor has up his sleeve,” Josie mumbles, keeping her eyes on the road while driving.

Penelope places a hand on her thigh in comfort and the car maybe swerves a quarter of a metre to the side but Josie hopes no one notices.

“It’s going to be fine, I promise. I, myself, have certain tricks up my sleeve as a last resort, if it comes to that, but I’d rather not use it,” Penelope says, and this is the first time that Josie’s hearing about it. However, Penelope moves on before she can ask anything about it. “Besides, after we get some form of confirmation from Lizzie, I’m hoping to have a chat with his lawyer to get him to back down before the hearing.”

“Is that a good idea? He doesn’t seem like he’ll drop the case after all the trouble he’s gone through to forge proof and spy on us,” Josie says, sceptical of what Penelope was planning.

“Trust me, his lawyer is probably already worried,” Penelope lightly squeezes Josie’s leg before pulling her hand away. “But no matter what, we won’t let him touch Lizzy.”

Josie pulls up outside the penitentiary and exhales before giving Penelope a soft smile and placing a hand on hers.

“I do trust you, Pen, you’ve been nothing but sup-”

“God! This is so gross!” Hope yells from the backseat, ruining their moment. “Lizzy and I are literally five seconds from puking in this car. I mean, I know I tease you both, but you two make it too easy, acting like you’re married or something.”

Hope unbuckles Lizzy from her seat and gets out of the car. Josie rolls her eyes at Penelope, who giggles at Hope’s outburst.

They enter the same room that Josie had visited her sister in the first time and Josie’s not exactly sure why they allowed three people and a baby to visit at the same time but she doesn’t question
“My baby!” Lizzie walks into the room and has to be held back by the guard as she attempts to launch herself at her daughter. She whispers something to the guard and they nod, releasing her from her handcuffs. Josie watches in curiosity as the guard leaves the room, without restraining Lizzie to the table.

Lizzie immediately picks up Lizzy from Hope’s lap and gives her an engulfing hug. The three of them watch her as she continues to hold tightly onto her baby, seemingly oblivious to the other girls.

She eventually releases her embrace slightly and sits down with Lizzy in her lap; the baby happy to see her mum again and curious at the newfangled blonde hair she can pull.

“Hey Josie. Hope. Rando,” Lizzie greets one by one, “how is everyone?” she smiles widely.

“Lizzie, this is our lawyer, Penelope Park,” Josie introduces, “she’s helping us with the case against Connor.”

Lizzie looks at Penelope and nods at her before looking back at Josie and grinning with amusement.

“So this is the Park that I’ve been hearing all about,” she turns to Hope and wiggles her eyebrows, “Hope has been filling me in since my own sister is apparently too occupied to come visit me.”

“What? Hope, you’ve been visiting Lizzie?” Josie turns to her with a questioning look. Hope had never mentioned even seeing Lizzie after Josie told her that she missed her.

Hope shrugs, “Yeah, and what about it? I get bored when you’re at work.”

“And what exactly did you say?” Josie narrows her eyes at her, no doubt in her mind that Hope had been telling Lizzie about her actual feelings for Penelope, whatever that was.

“Nothing much, just that she’s your lawyer and that you’re in a relationship with each other,” Hope
looks pointedly at Josie and her eyes motion to the camera in the back corner of the room. Josie looks at her with a confused expression, wondering why Hope wouldn’t tell Lizzie that it’s not a real relationship, but she plays along, deciding to ask her later.

“Right. A relationship,” Josie looks at Lizzie, who now wiggles her eyebrows suggestively at her.

“As much as I love all this ambiguous eye communication, can we focus on the case?” Penelope speaks up, getting straight to the point.

“Ooh, she’s demanding. I see why you like her, Jo,” Lizzie teases.

“Shut up,” Josie huffs, “Liz, is Connor the father or not? Just let us know for sure instead of giving us your grocery list or whatever.”

“I thought I told you not to worry about him,” Lizzie deflects, unbothered the fact that Connor wants the baby that she’s currently holding possessively in her lap.

“Liz, he’s literally trying to take your daughter, why would we not be worried?” Josie argues.

“There’s no way he can get her, he has no basis,” Lizzie says calmly, confirming their question, though Josie really has no idea why she won’t outright say it.

“He, I hope, doctored DNA tests to say that he was her father! That’s a pretty good basis,” Josie exclaims, slightly frustrated that Lizzie doesn’t care more.

“Oh,” Lizzie finally concedes, “that jackhole. Maybe it is good that you have a girlfriend lawyer then.” Lizzie turns to Penelope. “What are your intentions with my sister?”

Penelope looks back at Lizzie, stunned, clearly not expecting to be asked that. “Well, I-, I’m her lawyer-”

“Liz! Stop focussing on that, we need to know what you got yourself in-”
“Park thinks Josie’s hot,” Hope interrupts and Josie groans, not even having the headspace to unpack that right now.

“Hot, huh?” Lizzie asks, ignoring Josie, and not too impressed by Hope’s statement, “Is that all she is to you, Penelope Park? A hot girl?”

Penelope looks like her soul has left her body. “I literally don’t know what’s happening right now,” she mutters.

“Oh, and they sleep in the same bed!” Hope offers, as unhelpful as ever, and obviously enjoying the current predicament.

“Hope!” Josie puts her face in her hands, elbows leaning on the table.

“Josie!” Lizzie gasps.

Lizzy lets out a loud ‘ah’ sound to feel included.

“Lizzie,” Penelope says, calmly but cautious, “Are you going to let us know anything else?”

“Are you going to break my sister’s heart?” Lizzie backfires.

“Alright! This is obviously going nowhere, I think we have enough information for now,” Josie gets up from the table, uncomfortable as to where the conversation was heading.

Hope shrugs, following along and letting Lizzie say bye to her daughter before picking her up again.

Penelope asks them if they can wait at the car as she wants to talk to Lizzie about something in private. They both nod and close the door behind them.

Once they’re in the parking lot, Josie asks Hope the question that’s on her mind. “Hope, why didn’t you tell Lizzie that Penelope and I are just pretending to be together?”
Hope shrugs. “The first time I visited, Lizzie might have hinted that Connor had connections with some prison guards,” she explains, “so I didn’t want to risk him finding out, just in case.”

Josie nods. It explains why Lizzie acts so unusually whenever she visits, and never explicitly says things, but it also worries Josie more that Connor’s also watching her sister.

They see Penelope coming out of the front door a few moments later, putting something in her jacket pocket as she walks towards them. Her face doesn’t give anything away when she finally reaches them, and Josie wants to ask what they were talking about but decides to do it later.

“What?”

They arrive home and Hope says she’s meeting Landon for an early dinner.

Josie’s exhausted from their trip, which didn’t amount to much, and slumps down on the couch as Penelope places Lizzy in her baby bouncer.

Penelope walks over to Josie and sits down on the couch by her legs, rubbing them gently. “Hey, are you alright?”


“Alright, get up, let’s go take a nap in bed. Lizzy needs one too anyway.”

They place Lizzy in her cot and settle into Josie’s bed, the sun slowly setting outside and lightly illuminating the room through the closed curtains.

Josie lays half on top of Penelope, wrapped in her arms as her head rests against her chest, and she sighs softly in contentment. After a few minutes, Josie suddenly remembers something from earlier in the day and smiles to herself.
“So, you think I’m hot, huh?” Josie murmurs, her eyes closed as she’s almost about to fall asleep.

“Shh, it’s nap time,” Penelope quietly deflects, also sounding like she’s about to knock out.

Josie giggles softly and lightly kisses Penelope’s collarbone. Josie opens her eyes when thinks she feels Penelope’s heartbeat increase but she can’t really tell for sure.

Penelope opens her eyes slightly then, looking down at Josie, and reciprocates with a small kiss on her forehead.

Josie, feeling bold, kisses Penelope on the side of her jaw this time.

Suddenly, it feels as though they’re both wide awake, staring at each other.

Without warning, Penelope pushes Josie onto her back so that their positions are reversed.

She hovers over her, looking into Josie’s eyes for a steady moment, before moving down to press kisses on her neck. Josie hums at the feeling, moving her hands up Penelope’s shirt to feel the warm skin of her back. She really wants to pull away and just kiss Penelope on the mouth but she also wants Penelope to be the one to kiss her first.

They continue kissing each other on the jaw, neck, collarbone, shoulder, for long periods of time, both breathing heavily and gradually getting worked up as their hands roam. It gets to the point where there’s some unspoken challenge to not be the first person to kiss the other on the mouth, though there are moments where both of them are close to doing just that, before moving away to kiss another place.

/ 

“God, Josie, you’re so tight.”

Josie moans as Penelope presses her fingers into her.
“You are really good at that,” Josie compliments, looking over her shoulder.

Penelope rubs her again and Josie relaxes in her touch.

“I know.”

Josie rolls her eyes as she hears the smugness in Penelope’s voice.

After their heated make-out-without-actually-making-out session, Penelope had pulled away and told her to sit up and turn around before proceeding to give her a shoulder massage.

“I could feel how stiff you were,” Penelope explains, and Josie’s about to say something before she’s prematurely interrupted, “I swear, if you make a sexual innuendo… I’ll stop.” Josie shuts her mouth immediately, zipping it for the added effect, and Penelope chuckles.

Neither of them bring up whatever it was that had just happened between them and continue on as normal.

/

They walk hand in hand into Connor’s lawyers office the next week, Penelope having asked to speak with them before the hearing.

Connor sits next to his lawyer, both behind the desk, as Penelope and Josie take a seat on the other side.

“So, you decided to officially surrender?” Connor starts, crossing his arms in what Josie assumes is staged confidence.

“The opposite, actually,” Penelope replies calmly, “We just wanted to let you know what you’re up against, in case you may want to change your mind.”
Connor scoffs at that. “What could you possibly have except your boring relationship?”

His lawyer shoots him a look at the words but doesn’t deny it. “He’s correct, Ms. Park. Your case is lacking and negligible at best.”

“We know you’ve been spying on us!” Josie claims, before Penelope can reply. “Mainly because your dumbass client told us, but regardless, we both know it’s very illegal.”

Connor doesn’t seem too bothered by that but his lawyer shows a very minute expression of annoyance, hinting that he didn’t approve of Connor’s taunting.

“You have no proof,” Connor says, though Josie knows he’s aware that they took down a few of his cameras and microphones.

“Sure, Connor;” Josie narrows her eyes at him, “You and I both know that’s not true.”

Connor mockingly narrows his eyes back at Josie before childishly rolling them.

“Regardless,” Penelope states, probably tired of their juvenile back and forth, “We have a statement from the mother of the child confirming that Connor is not the father, as well as evidence that the DNA tests were falsified by the local hospital.”

Josie doesn’t know if Penelope’s lying or not but she’s not sure if they actually have that, since Lizzie kept deflecting. However, Josie had also forgotten to ask what Lizzie and Penelope talked about at the end of their visit.

Connor and his lawyer seem moderately worried at Penelope’s assertion.

“I don’t believe you. You could easily be lying,” Connor says, not even denying that the documents were fake.

“If you would like to take that chance, please, be our guest,” Penelope stands, accepting that they won’t change their minds, and moving to leave. Penelope takes Josie’s hand and they make their way to the door.
“Wait!” Connor huffs, slightly agitated at the turn of events, “give me and my lawyer a few minutes to speak privately.”

Penelope nods. “You have five minutes, we’ll be waiting outside.”

Once they’ve closed the door behind them Josie shoots her a confused look.

“Do you actually have that?” Josie whispers loudly, but careful not to be too loud.

“Somewhat,” Penelope confirms, “but the evidence is dubious and the less you know, the better.”

Josie sighs but nods, trusting that Penelope has a plan.

They hear the door open a few minutes later and Connor exits.

“Fine,” is all he says.

“Fine what, Connor?” Josie shoots back and Penelope squeezes her hand as if to tell her to relax a bit.

“Fine, I’ll drop the case, Josie,” Connor mocks back and glares at her.

Josie’s surprised that he actually agreed but relief fills her, until Connor speaks again.

“I don’t know what you know, but it’s obvious that I’m not that child’s father,” he confirms, surprising Josie again, “and I’ll admit that the court will probably favour a family over a single parent.”

Connor was acting suspiciously nice, after being a dick less than 5 minutes ago, but Josie takes it as a win.
“Thank you, Connor,” Josie says, as politely as she can muster at that moment, “I’m glad you’re dropping the case, but don’t do this to any other child ever again.”

“Yeah, sure, whatever,” he shrugs, “But I have a feeling that you both know who the actual father is. Know that he’s a dangerous man with powerful connections. That’s who you really should be afraid of…”

He gives them both an indecipherable look for a couple of moments before turning to retreat back into the office.

Josie looks at Penelope questioningly. “Well that was weirdly easier than I thought.”

Penelope seems apprehensive about what had just occurred. “Yeah, I wouldn’t count on his word. For all we know, he could just be luring us into a false sense of security.”

They walk towards the entrance of the building. “He outright admitted it so surely he can’t win the case, anyway. At least it’s kind of over now, right?”

Penelope sighs, “Yeah, maybe, we’ll see…”

Josie’s not sure exactly what it meant for her and Penelope now that the case was possibly closed and Connor had basically confessed that he wasn’t the father. Though, it did mean that their fake relationship was no longer necessary and she wasn’t sure how much Penelope cared for Lizzie; whether she would stick around to help figure out what was going on with her sister.

They make it home and Hope, who had been taking care of Lizzy, asks them how it went.

“Fine, he dropped the case,” Penelope says, not seeming too overjoyed about the fact.

“That’s great, right? He won’t bother us anymore,” Hope says, happily hugging Lizzy.

“Yeah, no, yeah it is,” Penelope agrees, nodding pensively, “and I knew I could make him drop it,
but I didn’t think it would be *that* easy.”

Hope shrugs. “Who cares, he’s gone and we should celebrate. I’ll call Nia!”

“Wait, Hope, and she’s already on the phone…” Josie trails off. Penelope smiles at her and motions for her to follow her and sit down on the couch in the living room, which she does, unquestioning.

“Hey, so I know we never talked about what happens *after*, but I can still help you try and get your sister out, if you wanted,” Penelope offers. Josie looks into both of her eyes, searching for something, but Penelope must think she’s hesitant so she continues, “It’s just that you said it was weird that she was in there in the first place and there’s probably something else going on, which is why Connor wanted Lizzy, and then Connor said those weird things about Lizzy’s actual father, and a lot of weird things which don’t make sense have-”

“Penelope,” Josie places a hand on hers to stop her rambling, “I’d really like it if you stayed.” Josie blushes when Penelope lifts a brow. “I mean, stayed around, to help. You don’t have to stay at my house anymore or anything like that, unless you wanted to, I’m not sure why though, there’d be no reason for you to stay over, I mean, we’re not-”

“Wow, now who’s rambling,” Penelope laughs. “But you’re right, there *is* no reason for me to stay here anymore, right?” Now it’s Penelope who looks like she’s searching for something in Josie’s eyes.

“Right,” Josie looks back at her and they stay silent for a few moments, looking at each other as if they’re trying to read or get the other to admit something.

They both jump apart in shock when they hear Hope talk from behind the couch. “You both are literally the biggest numbnuts.”

“Hope, Jesus Christ! How long have you been standing there?” Josie presses a hand to her chest.

“Long enough to know that you both are literally the biggest numbnuts,” Hope repeats, “Anyway, get dressed, Nia’s coming soon and we’re going out tonight!”

Josie feels that arguing would be a losing battle and she’s probably long overdue for a night out
after the past few months. Also, it was a Saturday so she didn’t have work tomorrow and could go hard if she wanted. Penelope agrees to come too and they hastily leave the house once Nia arrives.

They go to the same bar where Josie and Penelope had met and find a booth to sit in. Penelope excuses herself to go to the bathroom after a few minutes.

“Hey, Jo, I invited Landon too but he’s asking if Raf can come as well. Is that alright?” Hope asks, unsure if Josie wants to see him. “I understand if not, and it’s totally fine.”

At this point, Josie’s too happy about the case being over to care.

“Yeah, sure, actually,” Josie nods, “It’s fine, I’m going to go get some drinks.”

She thinks she might need a few, in case Raf drinks a bit too much tonight and tries to pull something, which hopefully won’t happen.

Josie waits patiently at the bar on one of the stools after telling the bartender her order and paying. She feels someone come up next to her and she thinks it might be Hope so she looks up, but it’s just some random guy who’s smiling at her. Josie gives him a small smile back before looking away, hoping he won’t talk to her, but she has no such luck.

“You here alone?” he grins, an attempt to be charming.

“No, I’m here with a few friends,” Josie gives him an awkward smile and wonders when the bartender will be back with her drinks. Maybe she should just leave without them.

“Oh, shame. Can I at least get you a drink?” he proposes, leaning on the bar and moving closer to her.

“That’s kind of you to offer, but I’m just waiting for my own drinks,” Josie replies, looking for the bartender, who has apparently disappeared.

“Aw, come on, just one?” he attempts again, clearly not picking up Josie’s deterrent hints.
“I’m alright, thanks.”

“Are you sure?” Josie’s starting to think this guy will not give up until she says yes.

She feels a hand slide down her thigh and she’s about to jump out of her seat and potentially attack this man when she hears another voice.

“I think she’s sure, buddy, just like the other times she said so,” Penelope interjects and Josie relaxes, placing her own hand on top of the one on her leg.

“Oh wow, ladies, this just got way more interesting,” he says suggestively, smirking as he looks between the two of them, no doubt with crude thoughts running through his mind.

“Fuck off,” Penelope says lowly, glaring at him, and Josie can’t take her eyes off of her, thinking it’s one of the hottest things she’s ever seen. Maybe also because she hasn’t used or heard a curse word for a solid while.

Penelope’s jaw clenches and she looks like she’s 2 seconds from punching him square in the face, though Josie knows she would never resort to violence.

He seems to take the hint at that and scowls. “Whatever,” he scoffs, walking away to presumably find another conquest.

“What an asshole. I mean, I know you didn’t need my help but he was a jackass. Are you good?” Penelope turns to her and Josie bites her bottom lip, her mind clouded before any alcohol has even entered her system.

“Yeah, I’m arouse- alright! I’m alright,” Josie corrects herself, “is what I meant to say.”

Penelope laughs lightly and nods.

“Okay, Josie, I’m glad,” Penelope says as the bartender finally returns with her drinks. “Let me
help you with those.”

They return to their booth and see Landon and Rafael sitting and talking on either side of Hope.

“Hey Josie!” Rafael perks up when he notices them. “Penelope, nice to see you again,” he acknowledges, less excitedly.

They all say their hello’s and formally introduce Landon and Penelope to each other. Penelope slides in next to Landon and Josie follows her, sitting on the edge of the U-shaped booth.

They start drinking and chatting about their jobs, the news, and really anything else that comes to mind. Every so often Josie feels Rafael staring at her and she subtly inches closer to Penelope. She ends up wrapping an arm around Penelope’s shoulder, who relaxes into it as she continues talking to the others, without missing a beat, about something that Josie’s a bit too tipsy to pay attention to.

“So have you set a date yet?” Rafael asks Penelope, peaking Josie’s interest.

“Oh, um, no, not really,” Penelope answers, looking at Josie. “I guess we haven’t really planned anything yet, have we?”

“Nope! I just like you a lot,” Josie slightly slurs her words as she pokes Penelope on the nose with her free hand and pecks her cheek. Maybe those tequila shots weren’t a great idea, Josie thinks retrospectively.

“Interesting…” Rafael murmurs. “And who proposed to who?”

Josie hears a new song starting and she moves her arm from Penelope’s shoulder to hook their arms together. “I did! Anyway, I love this song, let’s dance.” She drags Penelope out of the booth and onto the crowded dance floor.

“What’s this song?” Penelope asks, close to her ear so that she can hear over the loud music, and Josie shrugs.
“No idea, just wanted to get away,” Josie yells as she dances to the beat anyway, pulling Penelope closer.

It feels like their first night again, sans the making out, and Josie revels in the sentiment.

Josie wakes up in bed alone the next day, changed into her pajamas somehow. Her head aches from the bright sunlight streaming through her window, but she sees an ibuprofen packet and a glass of water on her night stand. She takes a pill and gets up from her bed to go check on Lizzy, but then she remembers Nia had offered to take care of her overnight at her own place.

She feels relief at that but then a marginally cracked drawer of her dresser grabs her attention. The space inside is completely empty, once holding a stackful of Penelope’s clothes. Her heart drops at the implication, confirming her hazy memory of Penelope crashing with her in the bed and then seemingly leaving early in the morning with her things.

Josie sighs, feeling like their first encounter is having a direct play-by-play reprise.

She goes downstairs to eat something that will hopefully help her hangover and checks her phone to see a message from Penelope.

*Hey JoJo, sorry for leaving early, I had a few things I needed to do. Call me if you get official word on the case closing, but I’ll see you around anyway, to help with Lizzie’s situation.*

Josie doesn’t hear from her for the rest of the day, nor the rest of the week. She feels somewhat heartbroken at the sudden loss of someone who’s been present practically every day for the past couple of weeks.

To be fair, Josie has kept herself occupied with work and looking after Lizzy at home, which seems much more lonelier and bigger now, and hasn’t reached out either. Hope still comes over to hang out with them both but the mild forlorn expression that Josie wears prevents her from teasing or prodding about Penelope.

She receives no notice of the case being dropped and two day before the supposed hearing, she begins to feel antsy and wants the call Penelope, telling her about how they maybe spoke too soon.
But then she receives a message that Connor has closed the case and joyfully calls Penelope to share the news.

Penelope seems happy for her, over the phone, and Josie thanks her repeatedly, saying they should meet soon to talk about Lizzie’s case. Penelope agrees but tells her she’ll talk to her tomorrow as she’s currently busy organising something for her firm.

The next day, Josie hears the buzzing of her phone, letting her know she’s received a message, and she excitedly drops the vegetables she was preparing in anticipation of Penelope getting back to her.

Instead, it’s a message from an unknown number and an attached photo.

*Your choice, Saltzman. It’s her or the baby.*

It’s an image of Lizzie, looking bored as she rolls her eyes, but her mouth has a strip of duct tape on it.

The blood drains from Josie’s face and her first instinct is to let Penelope and Hope know.

Josie feels like she really can’t catch a break, and that she might be developing wrinkles at all the stress and concerned faces she’s pulling.

After telling the other two, they all end up in the basement of MG’s bookstore again, asking if he had any equipment to track Connor down. It was obvious to them all that they would not give up Lizzy to him and the best way to get Lizzie back was to find where he’s keeping her.

MG was more than happy to help, seeming extremely concerned as to how Lizzie was in prison a second ago and has now been kidnapped.

Josie had messaged the unknown number back, asking where he was keeping Lizzie and how he had managed to abduct her, which seemed like a useless question to ask but MG had said it would
help to ping the latest location if he replied.

Obviously, Connor, being Connor, replies.

*Did you think your sister was the only person with connections in prison?*

Hope’s previous statement that Connor had people working for him in the prison had gradually made more sense, but the fact that Lizzie also had ties confused Josie.

MG yells excitedly when they pinpoint a location of the tracked cell phone. The red dot on the screen points to a familiar city in the south.

*Last location: New Orleans, updated 7 minutes ago.*

Josie, once again, sighs, “I guess it’s time for a road trip.”

Chapter End Notes

me + knowing what i’m doing? unheard of

*tbh this is my way of avoiding having to research about court & probably could’ve been split into 2 chaps but i just wanna get back to more gay fun as fast as i can while still making some semblance of sense*

also i’m trying to have as little pain & angst as possible because that’s not what this is about

that being said, it’s a bit hard with the stupid ass situation i put them in bc i do not possess that specific ability to think before i type

anyway, thanks for reading this weird chap where a lot happened but also nothing
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

After a lot of arguing and fuss, they eventually lay out a plan of who was going where and how. Josie had argued that Hope was the most familiar with New Orleans but Hope said that it was best if she stayed with Lizzy, since she was the only person, bar Josie, who had spent long periods of time taking care of the baby alone. MG had said he would love to tag along but he had important business that he couldn’t leave. Penelope had suggested that maybe it would be faster if they took a flight, but they checked and the next available ticket was a few days from then.

So that left Josie, Penelope, a car, and a 2-day drive.

Josie gets some time off work, thanks to Penelope, who apparently helped the hospital with an ethics case last year, which resulted in her being in the good graces of the chief medical officer. It explained how Penelope had somehow obtained evidence that Connor’s documents were fake, while Josie had been too nervous to even ask her co-workers whether the DNA tests were real, in the off-chance that she might unintentionally offend them.

Before they leave, Josie questions MG about the extent of his tracking technology and all he does is nod, saying he’ll see what he can do and that he’ll keep them updated on Lizzie’s position if he finds anything.

The next morning, they’re packed and ready to leave.

“You numbnuts better be careful, the both of you,” Hope says, genuinely concerned for their safety, “we really don’t know how far he’s willing to go and what kind of people he has working for him.”

“We will,” Josie assures her, “keep Lizzy safe.”

“I will literally die for her, Jo,” Hope replies, looking down at the baby.

“Well, you don’t have to-”
“I will die for her,” Hope interrupts.

Josie just nods and they all say their goodbyes, not knowing how long they’ll be gone.

They load the car with their small hastily-crammed suitcases and drive towards the highway.

“So what do we actually do once we get there?” Josie asks, already doubting their rash actions. Though, the issue seemed time-sensitive even though Connor hadn’t given them any deadline or indication of what exactly would happen to Lizzie if they didn’t comply.

“I have no idea. Hopefully MG will find something to help us,” Penelope also seemed slightly on edge, probably not used to making decisions without a solid and well-thought-out game plan.

They sit in silence for the first few hours of their trip, passing expanses of dirt and trees, both deep in thought about what was going to happen and how they would possibly find Lizzie in a city of almost half a million people.

Josie senses that they’re both tense and after deciding that her worrying is doing more harm than good, she takes the next turn she sees, pulling up to a small strip of shops after a few more turns. Penelope gives her a confused look, questioning why they’re stopping after only a few hours.

Josie shrugs and gives her a reassuring smile, “Lunch?”

They walk up to a small diner and quickly get seated in a booth next to the window.

“How are you feeling?” Penelope asks, her hands playing with the buttons on her shirt.

“Honestly? I don’t know. On one hand, I’m freaking the fuck out that something’s going to happen to Lizzie, but on the other, I know she can handle herself, probably better than I could, and that Connor’s not a murderer, so… that’s how I’m feeling,” Josie leans her elbows on the table and cradles her face with her hands.

Penelope nods slowly. “We’ll find her,” she encourages Josie, taking one of her hands with her own and resting it on the table. “What do you think Connor meant when he said Lizzy’s fath-”
“Well aren’t you two just the sweetest,” a waiter appears at their booth, pencil and notepad at hand, eyeing their joined hands.

Josie instinctively goes to pull away but Penelope’s grip tightens slightly, keeping her in place.

“Thanks, recently engaged,” Penelope smiles up at the waiter, who’s name tag says ‘Beth’.

“Oh my goodness! Congratulations!” Beth says, “What can I get for you two?”

They both order off the menu and Josie gives Penelope a questioning look once Beth leaves.

Penelope just shrugs. “Easier than explaining we’re not together.”

Josie nods, and maybe it hurts a little that the reality is they’re really not together. But with everything that has been going on recently, there hasn’t been much time to think about what they meant to each other.

They both get a message from MG, updating them about Connor’s most recent location, and it’s even further away than the previous one but still in the same city.

They discuss ways in which they can find Lizzie and what they’ll do about Connor, since he seems unrelenting. Penelope says she probably has enough evidence to put him behind bars, not that it’ll help much since he has people there anyway.

Josie gets another message from an unknown number and she immediately dreads that it’s Connor giving them an expiry date to the ultimatum.

But it’s not.

The message seems like it’s from Lizzie.
Hey ignaloser, I’m fine. Worry about Lizzy.

Josie lets out a soft laugh of relief and Penelope furrows her brows, confused about the sudden change in demeanour.

Josie shows her the text message. “It’s from Lizzie,” she explains, though it should be clear enough.

“What’s an ignaloser?” Penelope asks.

“It’s an inside thing between us, don’t worry about it.” Josie’s never been so glad to be insulted before.

“Alright... but how do we know it’s not a trap?” Penelope’s eyes narrow in thought.

Josie sighs, “I guess we don’t. But why would Connor make Lizzie tell me to keep her daughter safe? It doesn’t really make sense.”

“I don’t know. Maybe he knows that we’re coming and he wants us to drive back, so that we’ll be further away from Lizzie. Then, he’ll make his move,” Penelope suggests, though her face shows that she doubts her own trail of thoughts.

“Maybe so. But Lizzie wouldn’t tell him the stupid nickname that she used to call me unless she wants me to know it’s her.”

Penelope bites her lip, deep in thought. “Okay. I trust you. We’ll find her.”

Josie takes a deep breath in and nods, relaxing slightly. “As long as Lizzy’s with Hope, she’ll be safe. We just need to find where Connor’s keeping my sister.”

They finish their lunch and head back on the road for another few hours of soft music and pointing at cows.
Josie feels less concerned than before but it still weighs down on her.

It eventually gets dark and both of them are yawning excessively, inducing more yawns just by seeing the other yawn, until it’s just a back and forth of yawns.

Penelope pulls up to the first motel showing vacancy and they pull out their suitcases. It’s dank but it’ll do.

The man behind the reception desk looks like this is the last place he’d like to be right now.

“Double room?” he asks, barely looking up from the computer screen in front of him.

Penelope looks at Josie, unsure, and she’s about to say something which looks like a correction.

“Sure, thanks,” Josie says before Penelope can speak.

The man hums and picks out a key from behind the desk, handing it to them. They pay for one night and make their way towards their room.

“Are you sure about this?” Penelope questions, “We can ask for a twin room, you know.”

“Easier than explaining we’re not together, right?” Josie quips back. “Unless you’re sick of sharing a bed with me…?”

Penelope raises a brow and Josie smirks, knowing that she isn’t. “Whatever,” Penelope huffs and walks ahead, as if she had been caught.

They both take a quick shower and decide to go straight to bed, exhausted from just driving all day.

They lay there on their separate sides, the bright moonlight shining in from the window.
It’s awkward at first, having been a moment since they’ve slept in the same bed. Josie’s unsure if Penelope wants to be close to her, but she herself sure does, needing a form of comfort.

“Would it be weird if we cuddled?” Josie asks.

Penelope turns her head and looks at her for a second before a small smile appears on her face, “I don’t see why not.”

Josie immediately moves in to wrap her arms around Penelope’s waist and rests her head on her shoulder. Penelope relaxes into the embrace and lays her hands on the small of Josie’s back.

Josie looks up and stares at Penelope’s profile, her eyes closed as she breathes gently.

Penelope lets out a long exhale after a while, her eyes still closed and her breathing evening out as if she’s almost asleep. “Don’t tell Josie, but I’ve missed this,” Penelope whispers.

Josie giggles softly against her neck. “I won’t,” Josie whispers back, “but me too.”

They make it to New Orleans the next day, in the afternoon, and check into a local bed & breakfast to drop their bags off.

Once they’re settled, they head to the last location where the phone pinged. It leads them to a loading dock with hundreds of shipping containers, stacked in maze-like configuration. The place seems somewhat abandoned, with no workers or ships around.

“Well this is going to be difficult,” Josie sighs, “Lizzie could be anywhere around here, or not even here at all.”

“Show me the image again,” Penelope says.

Josie pulls out her phone and shows Penelope the picture of Lizzie rolling her eyes in what looks
like a dark space with light coming in from one side.

“The background,” Penelope notes, “it definitely looks like the walls of a shipping container.”

Josie takes a look herself and the ridged pattern behind Lizzie does resemble the large boxes in front of them.

“And it looks dark blue, so we should probably start there,” Josie says.

Penelope nods, “Alright, let’s split up, we’ll get through them faster that way.”

They separate and begin opening up each blue container they can find, while shouting Lizzie’s name in case she replies.

The running and the constant twisting of the heavy locks gets tiring fast and the sun has set before either of them realises. They both meet at a point with no luck in finding Lizzie and decide to leave when they start hearing voices in the distance, sounding like a shady drug deal.

Josie feels exhausted, and it doesn’t feel like they’re any closer to finding Lizzie. She crashes on their shared bed, taking comfort in Penelope’s embrace, and hopes that tomorrow they’ll find her.

The next day is the same; and the next, and the next. The only difference is that Connor sends them a message every day: a photo of Lizzie (sometimes pulling a face and other times just looking bored out of her mind) holding up one or two of her hands. After the first couple, they think it’s a countdown, since she’s holding up 5 fingers in the first and what appears to be 4 fingers in the second, but it also looks like she’s just trying to block the camera with her hand. When Lizzie holds up a peace sign for the next two of them, they realise that it’s just Lizzie being Lizzie.

Some of the images come with a text as well.

*Tick tock, Josette. She’s pissing me off.*

*Why does she keep talking about eggs?*
You have until the end of the week to decide. Or we can just wait and find out what happens.

Josie never replies to them, not wanting to provoke Connor, but she receives a call from him on one of the days.

“Hey, just confirming that you’re getting my texts?” Connor says casually, as if he’s not holding her sister hostage.

“Yes, Connor, I’m still deciding, be patient,” Josie lies and hangs up the phone immediately after.

They’ve almost checked all the blue shipping containers and none of them contained even a trace of Lizzie. They update the others each day and ask if Connor’s location has changed, but MG tells them that the phone hasn’t moved.

They’d even tried to get to the dock earlier, around the time that Connor sent the messages, but they didn’t see anyone come in or out.

Josie can feel the hopelessness gradually growing and Penelope’s reassurances aren’t helping as much anymore, as she too seems to be losing hope.

They don’t receive any more messages from the other unknown number, which they had assumed was Lizzie, which doesn’t help either. Josie tries calling the number every day but the same message about the phone being unavailable comes up each time.

She gives the number to MG to check if it’s in the same location as Connor’s phone and he confirms it, though he mentions that the last update was a couple of days ago.

On their fifth night, a Saturday, right before they’re about to head to bed after another fruitless day, they hear a knock on the door of their room.

They both look at each other, confused and reasonably scared. The knocking sounds again, louder this time. They both stay still, waiting to hear the voice of a worker or someone from another room, but no one speaks up. The sound turns into full blown fist-banging on the door and Penelope decides to get up from the bed.
She slowly approaches the door, still vibrating with loud bangs. The noise stops and Penelope reaches for the handle and twists it.

She’s pushed back straight into the adjacent wall when the door flies open and reveals the person on the other side.

“Jesus, finally!” Hope whispers, barging into the room. Josie relaxes against the headboard when she sees her face, glad that it’s not a serial killer.

“What the fuck Hope?” Penelope closes the door and rubs the shoulder which had slammed into the wall. “What are you doing here? And at almost midnight?”

“I’m here to help, obviously. And before you ask, Lizzy’s fine, she’s with Nia, they’re at Josie’s house, I got MG to upgrade the security, I took a flight here, et cetera, et cetera. But it seemed like you two weren’t getting anywhere, and there’s only one day left, so I’m here,” Hope explains, looking around the room, “What’s with this one-bed situation here, I thought-”

“Hope! You could’ve warned us or just said it was you at the door,” Josie chides her.

“Well it’s night time, I don’t want to wake everyone up,” Hope shrugs, jumping on the bed on Penelope’s side.

“And banging loudly on the door like a murderer doesn’t do that?” Penelope crosses her arms, standing at the foot of the bed. “How did you know we were here?”

“This is my city, I have my sources here,” Hope says coolly, “Also you told me which B&B you were staying at, and the receptionist was easily swayed by my undeniable charm and told me which room you were in.”

Josie rolls her eyes at the lack of privacy from the front desk.

“Alright, whatever, we’ll discuss it tomorrow,” Penelope sighs, visibly drained, “I’ll take the couch.”
Josie feels slightly disappointed that she won’t be able to sleep next to Penelope tonight, but saying anything will only fuel Hope’s fire. She hugs her pillow instead and turns out the light.

They recieve the last message the next day. An image of Lizzie doing another peace sign but her tongue is stuck out between her fingers, and the caption ’She thinks she’s funny but I’ll be the one laughing when I finally get to do what I’ve been planning. It’s such as shame that you’re choosing a baby over your dear sister.’

However, this time the camera flash is on and the background looks purple.

“God damn it, we’ve been looking inside the wrong colour boxes,” Josie sighs, defeated, as she shows them the image.

“Shit,” Penelope whispers, “Alright, well there’s less purple boxes and we have Hope now so it’ll be faster.”

“See? Aren’t you all glad I came?” Hope beams.

They walk out of the B&B and head towards their car to drive to the docks for the last time. Josie sees a flash of blonde hair on their way there and it looks familiar.

“Did you see that?” Josie says, turning to the other two.

“See what?” Penelope asks.

Josie turns back to where she’d seen the person but they’re gone. “The blonde hair, there was someone with blonde hair and I’ve seen them before.”

“Like… Lizzie?” Hope says.

“I don’t know, maybe! But I don’t think so!” Josie exclaims, not even sure what she saw but the image won’t leave her mind.
“It’s probably just some random, Jo,” Hope offers, “let’s just go to the docks first.”

Josie sighs but nods, pushing the thoughts away for now.

Once they’re at the docks they realise that although there are less purple containers, it would still take them at least a couple of days with the three of them to check them all.

“Crap,” Hope says, seeming to realise why it had been so hard to find Lizzie. The dock was expansive and it was easy to get lost or find yourself checking the same boxes again and again. Josie and Penelope had developed a small system on the second day to account for the ones they had already checked, marking down the faded spray painted numbers which were on the door of each one. “How do you know which one’s you’ve already checked?”

“They have 9-digit numbers on the front,” Penelope says, showing Hope a list on her phone, “we’ve been writing them down.”

“Alright, okay, okay,” Hope exhales, doing some stretches to prepare for what looks like the 50m sprint in the Olympics. “Right, easy, no worries, just a few hundred or so boxes to get through, not a problem.”

“We should get started,” Josie says, the anxiety building up from just standing in the same spot.

“Wait, Jo, can I see all the pictures?” Hope requests, bouncing on the spot like she’s hyping herself up, “I need some motivation.”

Josie looks to Penelope, who just shrugs at Hope’s antics, as per usual.

Josie yields, pulling out her phone and giving it to Hope, hoping it won’t take long.

Hope scrolls through all the 6 photos, going through a face journey for each one. “Oh this bitch, I’ve missed her face...”
“Me too, Hope. But we need to find her and we don’t have much time.” Josie tries to hurry her along but Hope keeps scrolling back over each image again just when they think she’s finished.

“What do these numbers mean?” Hope says mindlessly, as she zooms into one of Lizzie’s silly faces.

“Nothing, Lizzie’s just trying to piss Connor off by pulling-”

“No, I’ve seen this pattern, I just saw this pattern,” Hope closes her eyes, trying to think. “Park! Your phone, show me the list again!”

Penelope quickly pulls up the list and Hope’s right. A fair amount of the numbers start off with the sequence, 15422, the same pattern that Lizzie’s making with her hands, excluding the 1 at the start.

“Shit, how did we miss that?” Josie gasps.

“Mikaelson, I could kiss you right now,” Penelope says, but then both of them pull disgusted faces at the thought. “Anyway, we’ve been receiving the messages separately each day but we haven’t really looked at them all at once. And with the next two photos, we can probably narrow it down.”

The photo after the two peace signs was Lizzie smiling and doing jazz hands, which Josie and Penelope had disregarded as another one of Lizzie’s ways to piss Connor off, at the time. And then the last one was the image they had received that same morning.

“15422102,” Josie whispers. “That only leaves 10 possible boxes… if we can find them.”

“Well what are you two still standing here for! Let’s fucking go!” Hope runs off in some random direction and the two of them are left standing there.

“We can do this, Josie,” Penelope places a hand on Josie’s arm and gives her a light squeeze. “We’ll find her.”

Josie feels the hope seeping back into her and she pulls Penelope into a tight hug. “Thank you.”
Then Josie herself runs off to start searching for the box.

It’s almost dusk and they still haven’t found the right purple shipping container.

They meet up at a point in the middle, all exhausted from walking around for hours. It really shouldn’t be taking them that long, but none of the numbers are matching up and the five that have are completely empty.

“I swear we’ve checked every single purple box here. I’ve even been checking the numbers of other boxes and still nothing,” Hope puffs out, leaning her hands on her knees. “It has to be somewhere else.”

“Where else could it be? Does anywhere else store shipping containers around here?” Penelope asks, somewhat rhetorically.

Hope’s head perks up like she has a sudden idea, “No, but I know a place nearby that uses them.”

Hope quickly stands upright and power walks away, with Josie and Penelope stumbling behind to follow and keep up with her.

They end up at a marketplace around the corner which seems to exclusively sell fish. Hope walks into one of the stores and talks to the person behind the counter, who appears to know her. They nod at her and open the door that lets people through to the back. Josie and Penelope follow her, still unsure what was going on.

The door leads them to a kitchen where chefs are cleaning and descaling fish, none of them looking up to pay them any attention. Hope walks straight to the back to open another door, leading them to an outside storage area of all the shops, right next to the ocean. A long line of shipping containers are stacked close to each other, parallel to the edge of the dock.

Hope spots a purple one at the end of the line and heads towards it.

When they’re just about to reach it, Josie crosses her fingers that the numbers match up.
And they do.

“Oh my god. She’s here, she has to be,” Josie almost squeals.

Hope nods, but it looks like she’ll break down if they open it and it’s just fish. Penelope looks unsure but she’s keeping a hopeful face.

Josie lifts the bar across the door of the container for what feels like the millionth time in the past few days. She twists it and the door pushes ajar.

It’s dark inside the long depth of the box so she turns on her phone’s flashlight. And there, as sure as eggs is eggs, is Lizzie sitting on a chair, with her legs and upper arms tied down.

“Oh hey ladies. Sorry, I’m a bit tied up right now,” Lizzie says, and all Josie can do is laugh in relief as tears form at the edges of her eyes. “Wait, if you’re all here, where’s Lizzy?”

“Don’t worry, she’s safe in Mystic Falls with Nia, her babysitter, and MG,” Josie says as she unties the ropes. Hope rushes over and gives Lizzie a hug while Josie’s unknotting her legs.

“Oh, MG, huh?” Lizzie says, thinking about something.

“You asshole! I can’t believe you got yourself kidnapped!” Hope chastises her.

“Jeez, Mikaelson, worry much?” Lizzie says, still unbothered after having been to prison and then broken out and taken to another state.

“How are you so calm about this, Liz?” Josie finishes off untangling the knots and starts checking Lizzie for any cuts or bruises, not finding any.

“Look, I don’t have time to explain, they could be back any second,” Lizzie starts pushing the ropes off and getting up off the chair.
“They?” Penelope speaks up from the dark spot where she’s standing near them, having been quiet since they found Lizzie.

And of course, they all hear a familiar voice behind them.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t the three muskequeers.” Two figures stand at the door, their silhouettes dark against the dim lights of the shops outside.

Josie moves her flashlight towards the door and Connor squints and steps back at the brightness.

“Oh piss off Connor! You’re literally the worst hostage-taker, and I’ve had plenty in prison!” Lizzie yells.

That slightly concerns Josie but she decides that it’s a topic to be discussed later.

And Josie should be worried about all four of them being locked inside, but all she can think about is the blonde hair again, standing right next to Connor.

“Penelope?”

“Dana?”

Chapter End Notes

i wrote 2 one-shots in the past week so if you want to, check them out!! i think they’re fun

this one’s a 9k highschool au where penelope’s head cheerleader and everyone knows she has a crush on josie

this one’s a short au where they’re just morning joggers and flirt w/ each other lol

chap notes:
- i know i always end chapters with something like ‘idk wtf i’m doing’ but it needs to be said again
- i have no idea what america looks like when taking road trips, so... cows?
- but fun fact: this was originally going to be a road trip au (which probably would’ve been easier smh)
- Hope was gonna go with them in the car initially, but it’s just funnier that she gets there later and gets shit done in like a day
- i’m trying to keep this as light-hearted as possible w/o digressing from the seriousness of kidnapping & trying to take a baby
- but also, ao3 is like… angst city rn. and it’s tough.
- anyway, sam smith’s song only has so many lyrics i can use as chapter titles so i’ll probably wrap up soon!
- also THANK U to the ppl who are just finding this fic & still comment... i love u...

happy international clown week, hope u have a good one :-}
it wasn't enough but you could've had the guts to face me

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“What the fuck?!”

“What are you doing here?”

“What are you doing here? You know Connor?”

“Well, yeah, he’s the friend I was talking about, with the legal issue...” Josie hears Penelope whisper an ‘oh god’ under her breath as she looks up at the ceiling. “Why are you helping a baby thief?”

“Baby thief?!” Lizzie interjects. “She literally came out of my womb!”

“But she’s not yours, is she?” Dana retorts.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Josie asks. “Who else’s could she be?”

“Well, she isn’t his!” Lizzie looks pointedly at Connor.

“Don’t say anything, Lizzie,” Penelope quickly interrupts and Josie shoots her a look of confusion. “Look, Dana, the baby is Lizzie’s and whatever Connor has told you is a lie.”

“You mean the fact that the baby is the heir to an entire drug empire and has the potential to be the most powerful person in all of Virginia?”

Three pairs of eyes move directly to Lizzie, who just shrugs and avoids all eye contact. “I don’t know what she gets up to in her spare time...”

“Whatever, it doesn’t matter who the baby is, she’s a baby, god damn it,” Penelope argues.
“Doesn’t she deserve a nice life with people who love her? And not to be thrown around and used like she’s some piece of property?”

Dana’s face drops slightly for a beat before it hardens once again when Connor speaks up.

“Okay, alright, alright, enough chit-chat. Thank you all for joining us today, it makes it so much easier now that the baby’s alone,” Connor beams, and then turns to the side as if speaking to someone outside the container. “Tie them up, properly this time, and make sure to tape their mouths, I don’t need any attention being brought here.”

They hear what sounds like a van door sliding opening outside and the clacking of plastic.

Five tall men walk in the door with ropes and fold-out chairs in their hands and head towards them. The four of them start backing up deeper into the box and Josie contemplates whether attempting to run would be a good idea. She sees Lizzie whisper something in Hope’s ear and they both pause their movements.

She’s distracted when she sees Penelope trying to struggle against one of them and is pushed against the metal wall of the container. Josie lets out a yelp and instinctively moves towards her, but she’s held back by the man in front of her.

“It’s better if you don’t struggle,” Josie hears from the man who’s tying Penelope down to the chair.

Hope and Lizzie seem to have accepted their fate and are letting themselves be tied up with no argument.

Josie is pushed down into the chair and her hands, arms, and legs are bound against it.

Penelope’s chair is shoved next to hers on the right, Hope on the left, and Lizzie on Hope’s other side.

“You’re making a mistake, Connor. When we get out of here, you’re going straight to jail!” Josie yells.
“Oh, no, not jail,” Connor says sarcastically, rolling his eyes, “Papa will be so disappointed. Anyway, who’s going to rescue you? Hope? Your sister? Your lawyer? Oh wait.” Connor laughs

Josie hadn’t noticed that Dana had left, but now she walks back in the door with a roll of duct tape in hand.

“MG will find us!” Josie exclaims, and maybe it’s a bad idea to let them know someone can find them, but Josie’s running on adrenaline and has about 0.5% control of her words right now.

“Ah, MG, so I was right... you do know who the father is,” Connor says and Josie’s eyes widen as she looks towards Lizzie, the other’s doing the same. A shit-ton of thoughts run through her mind but she doesn’t vocalise them, not wanting to let Connor know that this is brand new information for them.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Josie says with false confidence, “and I know you’re afraid of him.”

“I’m not scared,” Connor says, looking scared. “In fact, this is perfect. I can’t wait to meet him; the notorious drug lord ‘MG’ who has never been seen in broad daylight.” Josie wonders if they’re talking about the same MG who runs a small comic book shop near the local park.

“Just don’t piss your pants like you did in freshman year, Connor!” Hope yells and Connor instantly scowls and makes a frustrated sound.

“Hurry up, Dana,” Connor spits out, choosing to ignore Hope, and walks away from the door. The sound of the sliding car door outside is heard again but the sharp rip of the tape brings Josie back into their current predicament.

Dana starts with Lizzie, probably because she’s the only one talking, mumbling nonsense under her breath. Lizzie’s words speed up as Dana tries to tape her mouth, her swaying head movements making it hard for Dana to aim the piece of tape.

After a few haphazardly-placed strips of tape, Lizzie’s mouth is finally covered and Dana moves on to Hope, who doesn’t put up as much of a fight.

Josie doesn’t see much point in resisting either, seeing as she’s not exactly Dana’s favourite person, so she lets herself be taped.
Dana finally moves on to the only person in the box who could possibly have the smallest chance of convincing her to change her mind.

“Dana, please, don’t do this,” Penelope says softly, looking up at her, eyes slightly pleading. Dana seems conflicted for a brief second, hesitating, before ultimately placing the tape over Penelope’s mouth.

“At least you’ll have your fiancée to keep you company,” Dana responds, though her tone is flat, and Josie doesn’t think it sounds bitter or even evil.

Lizzie makes a sound with the intonation of ‘fiancée?!’ but it goes unacknowledged by the others. They all watch as the door shuts behind Dana and they’re left in the pitch black darkness of the shipping container.

After a few silent moments, Josie hears the mix of a ripping and spitting sound next to her.

“Dana didn’t put on the tape properly.” It’s Penelope’s voice. “I think she’s helping us.”

Lizzie’s mumbled argument can be heard on the other side of Josie and she imagines it’s something along the lines of ‘this is helping us?!’

A second later, Josie feels Penelope’s presence at the side of her face and then a whisper in her ear, “Sorry for this.” Josie doesn’t have time to mumble a reply before Penelope’s lips are on her face. Josie lets out a squeak of surprise and Penelope’s mouth opens slightly as she finds the corner of the duct tape and slowly pulls it off. And it feels mildly erotic, or maybe that’s just Josie.

“Thanks,” Josie whispers, glad that it’s dark so no one can see her heated cheeks.

“No worries.”

Josie turns to her other side and leans forward, “Okay, Hope, don’t freak out.”
Hope freaks out, yanking her head back, but then realises what’s happening and lets Josie pull off the tape, albeit not as gently as Penelope did hers.

“Ouch! Did you have to be so rough?” Hope murmurs as her voice moves away. Then giggling sounds are heard and the slow dragging of multiple strips of duct tape from skin.

There’s a beat of silence as they all sit in the dark, now able to talk. Then,

“MG is the father?!?”

“You two are engaged?!?”

“The baby isn’t yours?!?”

“Lizzy is a drug lord?!?”

Josie, Lizzie, Hope, and Penelope all speak at the same time.

“Alright, okay, okay, we all have a lot of questions, let’s do this one at a time,” Penelope says.

Josie hums in agreement. “Lizzie. Please kindly explain everything that Dana said, please.”

“Fine, jeez, Lizzy’s not exactly mine or whatever,” Lizzie reveals.

“Then whose is she?” Hope asks.

Lizzie sighs. “Okay, long story short, MG might have been looking for someone to be a surrogate for him and his big mafia girlfriend or whatnot, because they didn’t want her to be seen pregnant, in case the baby would become a target later on. So I may have offered to do it, because I’m such an amazing friend, and he may have been offering a lot of money but that’s irrelevant. Anyway, they were planning to raise the baby together once she was born but then halfway through my pregnancy, his girlfriend was killed in an accident, which probably wasn’t an accident at all. MG realised that it was far too dangerous to be raising a baby in his world, and he was freaking out, so I
offered to take in the baby myself and raise her outside of whatever it is he does.” Lizzie exhales. “Are we all happy?”

Josie feels her mind reeling. She didn’t know whether to ask about the whole organised crime thing, or the surrogacy thing, or the money thing, or the death of MG’s girlfriend, or the hundred different other things.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Josie asks.

“Why didn’t your fiancée tell you, huh? She knew,” Lizzie retorts.

“You knew?” Josie turns to Penelope.

“I only knew that the baby wasn’t Lizzie’s, and it wasn’t my secret to tell.” Penelope defends herself. “Besides, Lizzie, you told me not to tell Josie!”

“Whatever, semantics.” Lizzie huffs.

“I don’t think that means what you think it means.”

“Whatever, semantics.”

“Okay, that was better…”

“Guys! Focus!” Josie interrupts. “Now that that’s kind of cleared up, we actually need to find a way to get out of here, Connor is probably on his way back to Mystic Falls right now!”

“He better not fucking touch her!” Hope says, sounding immensely worried.

“I’ll literally kill him if he does,” Lizzie promises. “I mean, not literally, but… literally,” she mutters after.

“I don’t know about you, but my ropes are pretty tight. I don’t think there’s any way I can get out, I can’t even move my chair.” Penelope seems to be attempting so as she speaks. “Even then, the
front’s locked and there’s probably no one around until the morning.”

“We can try… I mean, he didn’t take our phones - that dumbass - so if one of us could get free…”

After what Josie thinks is about half an hour of squirming and yelling, they’re not any closer to getting out. The increasing distress can be felt in the enclosed space with each passing moment. Josie tries not to think about the fact that Connor could be flying back there or probably already has people in Mystic Falls who he could call on.

“We literally need a miracle to happen right now.”

The loud sound of the door suddenly unlocking causes everyone to go silent. It opens and the familiar silhouette of Dana appears.

Lizzie groans audibly, “Not now, Dana!”

“Shut up, Lizzie. Believe it or not, I’m here to help.”

Dana walks over to them and goes to untie Penelope first.

“Where’s Connor? Isn’t he going to wonder where you are?” Penelope asks, pushing the ropes off as the knots loosen.

“I convinced him to wait for MG to arrive, so that he could ambush him or something,” Dana replies, now helping Josie out of the knots. “But he has people back there to do his dirty work so one of you better call MG now to protect that baby.”

“On it.” Penelope grabs her phone out of her pocket and begins dialing.

“Not that I’m complaining, but why are you helping us?” Josie wonders.

“Wow, you must think so lowly of me if you don’t think I’ll help save a baby.”
“Well you did trap us in here, and you are helping Connor steal said baby, so…”

“Ok, whatever, I wasn’t aware of the full story, alright. He had me convinced that he somehow had some relation to the baby, whatever, it’s complicated. And I thought I was just helping an old friend, like when your friend comes to you with a dead body and you help them bury it, or something like that.”

“Right…” Josie’s not convinced by the weird comparison but there’s no point in dwelling over it right now.

“Anyway, I sort of owe Penelope, she’s helped me a lot.”

“Yeah, you and half the population of Mystic Falls it seems…” Josie mumbles under her breath.

“You all need to move fast, Connor has cameras everywhere on this dock and it won’t be long before he knows that I let you free.”

Penelope hangs up the phone then. “The baby will be fine, MG already has people watching the house. Dana, thank you for coming back, but you have to know that we need to put Connor behind bars - it’s for the safety of the child.”

Dana pauses for a moment and sighs, “Yeah, I know... Do what you need to.”

Josie helps untie Hope and Lizzie and they all walk out into the dim street light outside.

“Dana, can I speak with you privately?” Penelope asks. Dana agrees and the two of them walk a few metres away to talk. Josie looks after them before Lizzie steps into her line of sight.

“Josette, I’m still mad at you for not telling me you got engaged.” Lizzie crosses her arms and gives her a disapproving look.

“Liz, she’s not actually my fiancée, it was just a lie we made up to get Connor off our back.” Josie
deflates a little as she turns to look back at Penelope, who’s on the phone now, with Dana speaking to her every so often.

“Oh, I see… but you want her to be,” Lizzie teases, sharing a look with Hope, who is just as amused.

“No I don’t. Shut up!” Josie pushes Lizzie’s shoulder. “No one’s getting married, okay?”

“Yeah, whatever, sis, save it for the wedding.”

Josie rolls her eyes but she ignores it as she sees Penelope and Dana walking back towards them.

“Alright, Dana told me Connor’s location so I’ve called a connection of mine in New Orleans and there’s a warrant out for him.”

“Good,” Josie lets out a breath of relief, “we can finally go home.”

/ 

They decide to stay in the bed & breakfast for the night, with Hope and Lizzie booking their own separate room.

Josie’s exhausted but still tries to cherish the last night that she can cuddle with Penelope, who doesn’t seem to mind at all.

“Is Dana going to be alright?” Josie asks her, almost on the brink of sleep.

“Yeah, hopefully Connor will be arrested before he finds out she helped us,” Penelope replies, just as sleepy. “Also, I told her we weren’t actually engaged.”

Josie furrows her brows. “Oh. Why?”
She feels Penelope’s light laugh as it vibrates off her chest. “Because it’s not true?”

“Oh, yeah, of course. I just mean, I don’t see how it came up in conversation. Unless, you wanted her to know you were single?” Josie, suddenly awake, lifts up her head from Penelope’s chest to look at her.

Penelope smiles up at Josie, tucking a piece of dangling hair behind her ear and leaving her hand there, as always. She simply shrugs. “Not really, I just don’t want to lie to anyone anymore.”

“Right.”

“Besides, you’re a free woman now, you can go find waiter boy, wherever it is he lives off the grid.”

Josie huffs and pokes Penelope lightly in the stomach. “Shut up.”

She rests her head back on Penelope’s shoulder, feeling the light vibrations of chuckles, and it isn’t long before she falls asleep.

/ \/

They wake up to the news of Connor’s arrest and for the first time in a while, Josie feels like she can breathe easy.

Their bags are packed and the car is loaded, ready to head back home.

And the trip home is much rowdier than their silent drive down, with Lizzie yelling ‘deer!’ from the backseat every time they pass one, and Hope unfailingly answering with a ‘yes, honey?’ each time. Hope has also found it necessary to sit in the middle seat, right next to Lizzie, even though they’re the only two in the back and there was plenty of room to spread out.

From the passenger seat, Josie looks over at Penelope as the sun sets on the horizon and a feeling of calmness washes over her. She’s pulled out when Hope and Lizzie start bickering loudly behind them, and she moves her attention to road in front of her instead.
They stop at the same motel as before for the night, but Lizzie asks to room with Josie, so Penelope goes with Hope without any argument.

Josie sits up with Lizzie for hours, finally able to genuinely catch up, with no one else around, no cameras, no nothing. Lizzie tells her about what was happening after and before Lizzy’s birth and Josie wonders how she had missed such a huge part of her sister’s life, caught up in her own job and other business. Josie asks her why she hadn’t told her and Lizzie just shrugs and says it was too dangerous to involve anyone else, after what had happened to Lizzy’s biological mother. And to be fair, Josie hadn’t asked back then either, not knowing that there was something to ask about.

When they make it back home the next evening, they immediately make sure Lizzy is alright and thank Nia incessantly, who is none the wiser to the danger of the potential threat nor the multiple people posted outside keeping watch of the house.

Penelope and Hope both leave to go home shortly after, too exhausted to discuss anything at the moment.

“Lizzie, you know you eventually have to go back to serve the rest of your sentence.”

“Yeah,” Lizzie says, admiring her daughter in her arms, “I just want to spend one night with her before I leave again.”

The next day they decide to all meet in front of MG’s shop, Lizzie not being too fussed about the cops most likely looking for her.

As soon as they all walk in, crossed arms and without the expected excitement of finding Lizzie, MG’s face drops from a bright grin to a guilty, forced smile.

“Oh hey guys! We found her!” MG attempts, though he seems to already know why everyone wasn’t jumping out of their seats with exhilaration.

“MG! You lied to us!”

MG scratches the back of his neck and immediately gives up without a fight, trying to placate
them. “Yes! I’m sorry! I just didn’t want to put anyone in danger, I’m sorry!”

Josie really wonders, once again, if this was the same MG that Connor was talking about. She honestly can’t even imagine him jaywalking, let alone being the boss of an underground organised crime ring. She supposes that’s what makes him so good at what he does.

“I understand, I guess. I’m sorry to hear about your partner…”

MG’s head drops and he nods, “Yeah, I uh, I was devastated…” He furrows his brows and shakes his head a little. “After that, I knew I couldn’t raise a baby in this environment, let alone by myself. But I made sure they both had everything she’d ever need and that they were protected.”

Eventually, they all forgive him - not even genuinely mad in the first place - understanding that he was only trying to protect everyone involved. Though, Josie still didn’t know how to take in the fact that MG was involved with drugs and crime and potentially other illegal activities.

Lizzie decides it’s time to go back to prison once they return back to the house. It’s a quiet drive down to the prison. Hope seems the most reluctant to let her go, saying that she didn’t have to leave so soon, but Lizzie refuses, ominously saying she had unfinished business on the inside.

“I won’t forget you, I’ll write you every day!” Hope yells as Lizzie leaves the car. Josie and Penelope share a look, part amusement and part rolling their eyes at Hope’s dramatics.

Lizzie turns herself in by casually walking back in the gates. They all watch from the car as the guards freak out and immediately go to place her in cuffs, dropping them a few times while Lizzie sighs exasperatedly.

Nevertheless, Penelope finds a way to shorten her sentence, convincing the prison that she had assisted in arresting Connor, who the police had been trailing for a while.

“So, I guess this is it. Connor’s in jail, Lizzie’s out soon, the baby’s safe, Hope’s back on her bullshit.” Penelope crosses her arms and leans against the open doorway. “We did it.”

Josie chuckles, “Yeah, I guess we did huh. Honestly, we couldn’t have done it without you. You have no idea how grateful I am for everything, Penelope.”
Penelope blushes and looks at the floor. “I’m just glad I could help.”

Josie grabs her hand and pulls her in for a hug, exhaling a long-held breath. “Thank you.”

Penelope relaxes into the embrace. “It’s nothing, anyone would’ve done the same.”

Josie doesn’t think that’s true but whatever. “Sure.” She pulls away slightly so they can meet each other’s eyes. “Either way, I’m happy it was you.”

“Me too,” Penelope whispers back, and their faces are close now, very close. Josie could just lean in or something - maybe that wouldn’t be such a bad idea. “I mean, it’s been the weirdest case of my whole career, but I’m glad I got to know you, and I hope we can stay friends.”

Ooft.

“Yeah, friends, same.” Josie gives her a smile, attempting to hide any signs of disappointment, and pulls back.

“I guess I’ll see you around?” Penelope seems like she’s waiting for something more, for Josie to say something, but Josie’s not sure what it is.

“Yeah, I’ll text you soon.”

The next couple of weeks feel slightly off. As if the past few months have been a fever dream that hadn’t actually happened. Josie immediately throws herself back into work - not exactly having much of a choice since she had been away for so long - just like before any of this had happened.

As for Penelope, Josie hadn’t heard much from her, assuming that she’d also be busy with work. It’s not like Josie tried too hard to contact her either. They had their few one-off texts asking how each other were, but it didn’t go very far.

So of course, Josie begins questioning if what she thought was between them was actually real.
After getting some distance, she starts thinking whether her infatuation only stemmed from the immense amount of time they were spending with each other. To be fair, it’s hard not to grow a connection with someone you spend almost every hour of the day with. And between the hugging, cuddling, and feigned kisses, something had definitely latched onto her heart and hadn’t loosened its grip until the source was withdrawn.

But now, she thinks she’s probably over the little, tiny, baby, crush she had on Penelope. Regardless of how many times Lizzie said she was not, which was every time she visited her.

So, she asks Penelope if she’s free on the weekend to meet for lunch. After Penelope accepts, she decides that maybe they really could be friends after all. Josie didn’t have much of a social life outside of Hope, anyway, so it would be nice.

Penelope shows up at her front door the night before they had planned to meet.

It’s lightly sprinkling outside so her hair’s a bit wet.

“Hey, I have something to ask you.”

And Josie’s heart performs a somersault, complete revolution and everything, at the sight and she immediately knows that Lizzie is, very irritatingly, right.

“Penelope? Hi, aren’t we meeting tomorrow?”

“Oh, yeah, we are. I just-” Penelope cuts herself off, as if she’s scared to ask whatever it is she wants to say next. There’s a searching expression in her eyes as she continuously looks between Josie’s.

“Are you alright?” Josie starts feeling slightly anxious, unsure of what Penelope was doing or planning to do.

Penelope bites her lip and closes her eyes, taking in and letting out a deep breath.
“Do you like sushi?” she suddenly blurts out. Josie tries not to laugh by biting her own lips, seeing that Penelope is genuinely having a hard time, of what she is clueless, but it seems serious.

“Um, yeah? I love sushi.” Josie replies, her mouth breaking out into a soft smile.

“Okay. Great. Amazing. Really cool. We should do that. Tomorrow.” It’s so unlike Penelope to stammer like she is right now, but god, it’s so cute, and Josie can’t help but chuckle.

“Is that what you came all the way here, in the rain, to ask?”

Penelope blushes and looks away. “Yep. I’ll see you tomorrow!”

“See you,” Josie yells out as Penelope is already making her way back to her car. It feels like the most unusual encounter Josie has ever had in her life, but it’s really not the weirdest thing that’s happened in the past few weeks, so she just shrugs it off as another one of those things.

When they meet the next day, Penelope seems less nervous and more like her composed and calculated self.

“So… sushi?” Josie pops up beside Penelope, where she had been waiting on the sidewalk in front of a strip of shops.

Penelope turns to face her and gives her a shy grin. “Right, sorry about that - yesterday night - showing up unannounced and everything,” Penelope laughs lightly.

Josie smiles right back. “Don’t even worry about it, I like seeing your face any time of day,” Josie teases, “in a friendly way, of course.”

“Of course,” Penelope agrees, nodding faux-seriously. “Shall we?”

They head to the local sushi restaurant and settle into a casual conversation, catching up on each others lives. It’s nice and easy, but it’s not deep, nor is it as comfortable as it was before, per se. And it doesn’t feel awkward, but there’s something definitely missing.
After they finish eating, Josie asks if Penelope wants to come by to say hi to Lizzy, which she happily accepts.

Nia, who had been babysitting for just the morning, greets them at the door and quickly leaves afterwards.

Penelope takes her coat off, draping it over the back of the couch, and picks up the baby.

“My goodness, you’re so big now!” Penelope tickles Lizzy and the baby starts giggling loudly. Lizzy seems just as excited to see Penelope again, babbling nonsense as if she’s catching Penelope up with all that’s happened in her absence. And Josie watches them, not knowing how much she had missed this until now.

When Lizzy starts involuntarily dozing off, no matter how hard she’s trying to stay awake for Penelope, they decide to let her take an afternoon nap in her cot.

“I should probably go too, lots of work to do at the office,” Penelope tells her as they walk back down the stairs to the front door.

“Oh yeah, of course, we’ll catch up again soon,” Josie tries not to feel disheartened, knowing how busy Penelope is, especially after placing everything on hold to help Lizzy.

They briefly hug, agreeing to message each other to set up another lunch or dinner in the future.

After closing the door, Josie leans back on it, closing her eyes and thinking about what the fuck was going on all of a sudden. How they went from a one night stand, to a lawyer-client relationship, to fiancées, to whatever it was they were now. It’s all so damn confusing and maybe they just needed to sit down and talk about it, but Josie doesn’t even know where or how to start.

To be honest, she’s scared as well. Penelope had rejected her at the start, which to be fair was completely warranted since she didn’t want things to become complicated, so it wasn’t exactly a full rejection. And then when they had returned to Mystic Falls, Penelope had said they should be friends. Which, also to be fair, was completely fine as well.
Everything was fine, really. And that seems to be Josie’s problem with everything. It’s always fine. Lizzie is arrested, and it’s fine, Josie takes in her daughter. Rafael hits on her, and it’s fine, Josie feels bad for turning him down. Connor kidnaps her sister, and it’s fine, well not really, but she doesn’t have much of a choice, so she drops everything to find her.

And Josie doesn’t even know what she wants, honestly, so maybe fine is fine… whatever the fuck that means. Maybe fine is exactly what she needs right now. But it reminds her of a time when things were more than fine for a brief moment. When Lizzie was arrested, and Penelope was the first one there to help her. When Rafael was making her feel uncomfortable, and Penelope tried to allow her to stand up for herself. When Connor was the worst person to exist, and Penelope was there the whole time.

Josie opens her eyes again, shaking her mind out of its tangent, knowing it could go on for days if it wanted to. Realistically, it had only been about a minute, but it always feels like a never-ending rabbit hole.

She sighs and walks over to her couch, deciding that maybe a nap would do her some good.

She sees Penelope’s coat draped over the back and she immediately picks it up and walks back to her front door, to see if Penelope had gotten too far or not.

When she opens it, Penelope is standing right there, looking like she wanted to knock but her hands weren’t raised yet. They stare at each other for a quick second before Penelope says something.

“I forgot something…”

“Yeah, I just saw, I-”

Penelope reaches over but she doesn’t take the jacket. Instead, she gently grabs Josie’s face and pulls her towards her. It takes Josie a split second to react but she immediately falls into the kiss, dropping the coat and wrapping her arms around Penelope, pulling her as close as possible. Penelope sighs at the embrace and runs her hands along Josie’s neck.

Penelope pulls back slowly, eyes closed, smile wide. She looks up at Josie with her eyes crinkled, before bursting out into laughter, muffled when she leans in to bury her face into the crook of Josie’s neck. Josie can’t help but just hold her tighter, catching Penelope’s contagious laugh.
“Oh, yeah, I forgot that I forgot my coat as well.” Penelope seems to have just noticed her jacket on the floor.

Josie pushes back slightly to look at her, both grinning like complete idiots, and pulls her back in for an all-consuming kiss.

And damn, Josie had never felt more fine in her life.

Chapter End Notes

wow, imagine writing the whole story before posting anything and being able to pave over plot holes, truly amazing...

anyway, might round this story off at a nice even 10 chaps, perhaps a small time jump for the last one

i have not read any of the previous chapters again since writing them and i just read an excerpt while my doc was loading and that shit is so ridiculous, i have to laugh. but i’m very excited to read this the whole way through and crack up at discontinuities bc i literally forget what happens as soon as i hit that mf post button.

also sorry for the wait, haven’t been in the best place mentally, but we’re getting better

plus the start of uni has been way busier than normal (if anyone is good at electrical engineering pls hit me up)

twitter is @spitzerspace if u enjoy 1 irrelevant post a week in australian eastern standard time

have a good one, byeeeee
Josie Saltzman was, for the second time, receiving what she was prematurely concluding as the best head of her young adult life when she hears the knock on her front door. The face previously lowered between her legs pops up and stares at her, a crease in their brow.

“Did you hear that?” Penelope quickly wipes her mouth and begins to get up off the bed.

Josie groans from her place on the bed and, once again, gets up to go answer the door. She quickly throws on some clothes and, with as much frustration as she can dramatise, makes her way down the stairs, hearing Penelope’s laughter from her bedroom and the beginning of Lizzy’s wailing.

“I’ll get her!” Penelope yells, just as Josie’s about to walk back up to soothe Lizzy.

Josie gets the biggest sense of déjà vu as she finally reaches the bottom and sees the flashing red and blue lights outside. She thinks of what Lizzie may have possibly done now, or if something had happened to her in prison, but tries to not jump to conclusions so fast.

Really, the past few months had been going too well, from the start of her relationship with Penelope to getting a nice promotion at work, so it only made sense that something bad was about to happen.

Tentatively, Josie opened the door and prepared herself for, maybe not the worst, but a not good situation.

“Are you Josette Saltzman?” It was the same officer from the first night, and honestly, they did not seem to have the greatest recollection of faces nor houses.
“Yes, we’ve met before.” The officer furrows their brow at her and Josie realises that reminding them of the whole baby situation is going to be useless. “Nevermind, what’s going on? Is my sister in trouble again?”

“No, this is actually about Penelope Park. We were informed that we could find her here.”

“I’m Penelope Park, what seems to be the problem?” Josie jumps slightly at Penelope’s sudden presence behind her. Lizzy is gently bundled up in Penelope’s arms, sleeping soundly and blissfully unaware of the current predicament.

“Ma’am, we’re going to need you to come into the station,” the officer gestures back at their car parked outside of Josie’s house.

Josie’s so lost and confused and it must show on her face as she feels Penelope squeeze her arm gently in reassurance.

Penelope asks a few extra questions which Josie doesn’t particularly pay attention to, instead opting to take Lizzy from her arms.

She zones back into the conversation when she hears Penelope say her name.

“Josie, I’m just going to go with the officer, okay? I’ll be back soon,” Penelope reassures her. Josie doesn’t exactly like the idea of Penelope going alone and she feels like she’s just going to stay up, worried about what was happening.

“Can I come?” she asks.

“I don’t think that’s such a great idea, Lizzy should stay at home,” Penelope seems hesitant, but Josie’s not taking no for an answer.

“Penelope, please. You’ve been here for me for so long, let me be here for you now,” Josie coaxes her, and she can already see her resolve dropping immediately. Penelope looks towards the officer for some kind of approval and they simply shrug, not really caring about the whole situation.
“Alright,” Penelope instantly gives in. As they walk to the car, Josie hears a small ‘thank you’ and can’t help but pull her in for a quick kiss, both smiling madly at each other afterwards, before the officer tells them to hurry up.

Josie quickly grabs the baby seat from her car and straps Lizzy in, who’s still sleeping like a - well, a baby.

Once they make it to the station, Penelope is asked to follow the officer down the long hallway while Josie remains at the front reception area, with Lizzy in the portable car seat.

Josie contemplates what kind of legal trouble Penelope could possibly be in. Maybe Hope had been sending her illegal streaming links as well. Maybe Hope ratted her out for eating that grape before they bought it when they all went grocery shopping last week. Maybe Hope had gotten herself into trouble again and dragged her lawyer down with her. Maybe Hope- Josie’s not sure why her mind keeps instantly going to Hope as the source but it won’t stop.

It’s almost an hour later when Penelope comes back out again, dry tears apparent on her face. And Josie immediately thinks of the worse outcome.

“It was Hope, wasn’t it?!” Josie jumps up from her seat to pull Penelope in for a hug.

Penelope leans in before abruptly pulling back, seeming confused about Josie’s sudden statement. “What? Babe, what are talking about?"

Josie figures that it was, in fact, not Hope’s fault.

“Nothing, what’s going on?” Josie asks, concern in her voice.

Penelope looks like she’s about to start tearing up again so Josie wraps her up in her arms once more.

“They’ve found him,” Penelope says softly next to Josie’s ear. Josie doesn’t know what she’s talking about so she pulls back slightly to let them look at each other.
“Who?”

“Pete... my brother,” Penelope has a bittersweet smile, a few tears escaping and running down her face. Josie gasps quietly at the news.

“Penelope, that’s wonderful,” Josie says gently, wiping the tears from Penelope’s face.

“Yeah, it is,” Penelope lets out a small relieved laugh and burrows her face back into Josie’s neck. “It’s so weird, though. They said he just walked into the station a few hours ago and asked for me, giving them my location and everything.”

Penelope’s words suddenly remind Josie of something she did months ago, but she files it away to deal with later. Instead, she rubs Penelope’s back softly and kisses the side of her head. “Yeah, that is weird.”

The police officer comes back out to the front a moment later, a small boy standing next to and hiding slightly behind them. Josie releases her hold on Penelope to let her turn around.

“Thank you for your cooperation, Ms Park, we’ll send in the documents to be formalised but you’re free to take him home.” The officer steps aside and gestures to the boy that he can leave.

The boy hesitates for a second, before running straight into Penelope and wrapping his arms around her waist. Penelope stumbles back a bit from the impact but laughs as she embraces him.

“Pete, I’d like you to meet someone,” Penelope reaches out to grab Josie’s hand and pulls her towards them. “This is Josie, my girlfriend, and her niece, Lizzy,” Penelope points at the car seat on the chair near them, “Josie, this is Pete, my baby brother.”

Josie gives him a shy wave, not sure whether a handshake is appropriate when meeting your girlfriend’s long-lost sibling. “Hi Pete, I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Pete smiles back at her and holds out his hand, still a bit reserved. “Hi Josie, it’s nice to meet you.” Josie supposes that a handshake is appropriate and giggles softly as she shakes his hand.
“Alright,” Penelope says, satisfied with the introduction and visibly exhausted, “let’s go home.”

The officer offers to drive them back to the house, so they head towards their car and load in the baby seat. Pete jumps in next to Lizzy and Penelope closes the door behind him. Before Josie can get in, Penelope pulls her aside just behind the car.

“Hey, thank you for coming with me,” Penelope says, taking both of Josie’s hands in her own, looking up at her with complete fondness. “I can’t believe this is actually real.”

“I’m so happy for you, Pen, and I’m glad he’s safe now too,” Josie squeezes her hands. Penelope squeezes back and leans in to press a soft kiss on Josie’s lips, leaving her in awe, eyes remaining closed as she pulls back.

“I-,” Penelope begins to say something, causing Josie to open her eyes again, but she cuts herself short. From the look in Penelope’s eyes, it seems like she wants to say something important but she quickly shakes it off and looks back up at Josie. “I think it’s best if I take Pete back to my apartment tonight. So he can get adjusted sooner and we can have some time to talk tomorrow.”

“Oh, yeah, of course,” Josie’s slightly disappointed that she won’t get to spend tonight with Penelope, but she agrees that it’s best to allow them the time and space to catch up with each other, happy that they’ve been reunited. Plus, Penelope’s been spending almost every night of the past few months at Josie’s anyway, so what’s a few days of separation. “I’ll be here if you need anything,” Josie gives her a big smile and brings their hands up to place a kiss on the back of Penelope’s.

“I know,” Penelope grins back, “we should probably get in. I think that officer is really tired of the both of us.”

Josie chuckles and nods, letting go of her hands so that they can finally enter the car. Penelope, sitting in the passenger seat, recites her address for the officer and it’s only a few minutes before they arrive. Penelope gets out of the car and opens the door for Pete, who gets out but looks back towards Josie and Lizzy, who both haven’t moved.

“What about Josie?” Pete asks Penelope outside the car. Josie hears Penelope saying something about how she’s going back to her own house.
Pete’s head pops back into the doorway to look at Josie. “You don’t live with PeePee?”

“PeePee?!” Josie bursts out laughing but quickly covers her mouth so that she doesn’t wake Lizzy up.

“Shush, Josie, we’re leaving now!” Penelope gently nudges a confused Pete away from the door. “Pete, we should go.”

Josie feels like she’s going to start crying from laughter but she tries her best to keep it in. “Wait! PeePee! I have so many questions! There’s so much to unpack here!”

“You’re lucky you’re cute,” Penelope ducks in to say, before quickly closing the door and walking away.

Josie wipes at the tears starting to pool in her eyes and settles back down as the officer lets out a (very) audible sigh and begins driving them towards her house. She thanks them once they arrive and they simply wave her off, seeming keen to leave as soon as possible.

Josie places Lizzy into her cot and gets back in bed, only now realising how exhausted she is. But her bed feels so empty without the comforting presence that she’s gotten so used to recently. So she reaches over to grab her phone from the nightstand and types out a short message.

Goodnight, PeePee ❤

She doesn’t expect a reply so quickly, or at all at this hour, but her phone vibrates after a couple of moments.

Shut up, he gave me that nickname when he was a toddler. I’m surprised he even remembers it.

Josie feels bad for teasing her for a bit and thinks about apologising, but then a few seconds later there’s another message.

Night, JoJo ❤
Josie doesn’t see Penelope for the next few days but they message throughout the mornings and call each other every night. It gives her time to think about their situation and also gives her time to pay someone a visit.

“You know, when I asked if your dodgy spy tech could find people, I didn’t mean ‘can your tracking device find someone and then leave them outside the police precinct?’,“ Josie barges into the empty comic store.

“Thanks, MG, I’m so glad I have a friend like you, MG, I really appreciate you finding my girlfriend’s missing brother, MG,” MG rambles on sarcastically for a few more moments before Josie rolls her eyes and nudges him on the shoulder.

“You know I mean all those things too,” Josie says. “Honestly, I can’t thank you enough for everything you’ve done.”

MG smiles and gives her a small shrug. “I promised Lizzie that I’ll always take care of her, which includes you too. Also I owe Peez anyway, and don’t get me started on what her father was up to, it took me a while to even find him. Plus, I can’t just show up at the police station with a missing kid, Josie, even if-”

“Alright, alright, you make a good point. But thank you, really, MG.”

“Anytime.”

“Oh, can you do me a favour and not tell Penelope about this?”

MG looks confused but nods anyway. “Alright, yeah sure. My lips are sealed.” He makes a zipping motion across his mouth and gives her a thumbs up.

“Thanks, I’ll message you soon to catch up!” Josie says as she leaves the store. She hears a distant ‘bye’ as the door closes and she gets in her car to make her way to the supermarket to pick up some groceries. While shopping, she finally makes a decision on an idea that she’s been pondering for
the past few days.

When Josie pulls back into her driveway she sees the person that she was going to message, sitting on her front doorstep. She gets out of her car and walks over to her.

“Hey, I’ve missed you. I was just about to message and ask if you want to come over. I wanted to talk to you about something,” she helps Penelope up and gives her a quick kiss. “Where’s Pete? Is he settling in alright?”

Josie realises that Penelope hasn’t even said anything yet since seeing each other, and she still doesn’t say anything as she pulls Josie in for another kiss, much deeper than the first. Josie’s slightly dazed when Penelope finally pulls away and, not that it wasn’t a great kiss, but she’s really confused. It had only been a couple of days, did Penelope really just miss her that much?

“I just spoke to MG…” Penelope starts, “you did that for me?”

Josie finally figures out what’s going on and, “Jesus Christ, that boy, I swear to god, it’s barely been two hours, how is he like the most powerful person in Mystic Falls, honestly - can’t keep a secret to save his life.”

Penelope laughs at that. “It’s true.”

“Anyway, it was nothing, I just asked for a favour a while ago.” Josie thinks back to about two chapters ago and how MG had barely given her an answer when she had asked. “To be honest, I forgot about it after a while, I didn’t know he kept looking.”

“Still... I wouldn’t have Pete back if it weren’t for you.” Penelope pulls her in for a hug, leaning her head on Josie’s shoulder. “Thank you.”

Josie slowly strokes Penelope’s back as they stand there on her front porch. “And we wouldn’t have Lizzy back if it weren’t for you. We make a great team, don’t we,” Josie teases, and she can feel Penelope rolling her eyes even though she can’t see her face. “Speaking of, where is he? I thought you two would be spending as much time together as you could.”
“Yeah, we are, but I missed you too and wanted to see you, so I asked Hope to hang out with him.”

Josie pulls away at that, alarmed. “But Hope’s with Lizzy!”

“Oh yeah, I know. I think she’s really getting into the whole babysitter game. You have to admit, she’s good with kids,” Penelope shrugs, not really bothered by the fact that Hope Mikaelson was currently responsible for two entire children.

“Yeah, I guess…” Josie supposes it’s not the worst thing in the world, plus it gives her the opportunity to talk to Penelope. “Anyway, I’ve been thinking about something.”

Penelope raises a brow and nods slowly, “what about?”

Josie takes in a deep breath to prepare herself. “You don’t have to say yes or anything, or even make a decision right now… but I was wondering if you wanted to move in with me?” Josie knows her face probably looks like she’s looking for an answer right now, so she tries to keep it neutral. “I mean, you basically live here anyway, you probably have more clothes here than your own apartment, and I have a spare room for Pete, like, it’s a big house with a backyard and I think he’d enjoy all the space, maybe we can get a trampoline or something, kids love those things.”

Penelope has that teasing face that she always makes when Josie starts rambling and it calms her down slightly but also makes her flush from self-consciousness.

“Josie, please take a breath,” Penelope laughs lightly, “I’ll have to think about it…” Josie deflates a little, trying not to show it. “But I think it’s a great idea.”

Josie instantly perks back up, happy that Penelope is genuinely considering it. “Awesome, great, good, take your time, I’ll be here, at my house, where I live.”

Penelope laughs. “In your room? Where you change?”

Josie nods. “Yep.”
“How about we go there now?”

Josie nods harder. “Yep.”

After moving the last of Penelope’s things in, it seems like everything is finally in place.

It’s a routine that Josie would have never thought to have had so early in her life, or ever, but she wouldn’t trade it for anything. From taking turns making meals and dropping the kids off at their newly-enrolled school or daycare, to visiting Lizzie every fortnight or so, who seems to weirdly be having the time of her life in prison.

And so, life goes on, for the most part. They start the day together, enjoying the few minutes of silence before the kids wake up, and end it the same way, after long efforts of getting the kids to sleep. Josie takes them all on park dates on the weekend, and then takes Penelope on Park dates on the occasional night, where the kids get to stay in to watch movies with Hope, and Josie and Penelope come home to find them all knocked out on the couch.

And, of course, they buy a trampoline for the backyard, and Pete loves it.

When Halloween comes around and Penelope sees Pete outside from the kitchen door, jumping on the trampoline, pretending to be shooting webs, she immediately looks to Josie for answers.

“Did you get him the Spider-Man costume?”

“Babe. His name is Pete Park, as if I wouldn’t get him a Spider-Man costume.”

Penelope just chuckles as Josie walks up from behind and wraps her arms her, both fondly watching Pete yelling at Doc Ock on the trampoline.
On Lizzy’s 1st birthday, they plan a surprise for her, wrapped in a large gift box in their backyard. The box shakes throughout the beginning of the party, obviously wanting to be opened sooner rather than later. When Lizzy starts getting curious, they finally unwrap the large ribbon to reveal a slightly disgruntled Lizzie from inside it.

“Yeah, I don’t know why I thought it’d be a good idea to put myself in a box,” Lizzie brushes off the non-existent dust from her clothes and immediately beams when she sees Lizzy. The toddler has the same reaction, stumbling to walk as fast as she can towards her mother. When Lizzie picks her up, they immediately start chatting to each other, as if having a perfectly sensible conversation.

Lizzy pulls at her mother’s clothes and blabs out a few words, seeming confused about the lack of solid primary colour that she’s so used to now, and Lizzie rolls her eyes. ‘Girl, don’t even ask, it’s a long story. I’ll tell you about it later.” The baby lets out an ‘ah’ of understanding and blabs on about another topic.

With Lizzie now finished her sentence, Josie no longer has to take care of Lizzy and, once again, there’s an empty room in the house. Not that she’s not thrilled that Lizzy is back with her mother and that her sister is no longer in prison, but she’ll definitely miss the baby’s presence, another constant that she had gotten accustomed to. Pete seems to be taking it harder, really having created a strong friendship with Lizzy, as if she were his own baby sibling. But Josie and Penelope constantly remind him that he can visit her whenever he wanted to, and that they’ll come over for dinner every so often.

Hope starts to spend more time at Lizzie’s now, in fact, she always seems to be there whenever Josie goes over for a visit. Josie just chalks it up to Hope really enjoying spending time with Lizzy, which Hope also agreed with when Josie had asked her, though she was holding a laugh back about something, whatever it was.

Nothing changes too drastically. The three of them spend nights together watching movies or helping Pete out with his homework. They enjoy the peaceful mornings without Lizzy whining to get out of her cot. They enjoy picnics in the park without Lizzy scrambling away every five seconds to pat the dogs. And most of all, they enjoy getting to swear more liberally, when Pete’s not around, of course.
When Penelope comes home from work one night, looking mentally muddled, Josie starts to worry. Penelope doesn’t respond much at first, clearly extremely confused about whatever it was that had happened.

“It’s my dad,” Penelope furrows her brows and shakes her head, “he called me and asked if we could meet.”

“Oh,” is all Josie can respond with.

“Yeah…”

“Is this about Pete?” Josie looks over to the boy in the living room, laughing while watching SpongeBob on the television.

“I think so… he said something about wanting us to be a family again.” Penelope looks like she doesn’t believe that at all, but Josie doesn’t feel like it’s her place to share her opinion at this moment.

“Are you thinking of meeting with him?” Josie asks tentatively.

“I’m not sure yet, I just need some time to think,” Penelope sighs.

“Of course,” Josie pulls her in for a full-bodied hug, “it’s a big decision.”

Josie finishes off the dinner she was preparing before Penelope had arrived home and tries to distract her by asking Pete questions about school while they eat. When they settle down for a movie, which Josie hopes will take Penelope’s mind off things, she sees her relax a bit, but every so often she looks over to Pete and lets out a soft sigh.

Penelope goes to meet her dad the next week and she comes home even more torn and frazzled about the dilemma.

“He wants us to move in with him,” Penelope finally says after they’ve settled in bed and turned off the lights, “says Pete deserves to grow up with a family.”
“He has a family,” Josie whispers.

“I know, that’s what I said,” Penelope sighs, “but he thinks Pete should have a father figure around - not that he was around much before anyway, Pete told me about how he was rarely ever there, and not that I believe everyone needs a father figure - but I don’t know, he promised that he’s changed, and maybe he’s right…”

“If you really feel that way…” Josie takes in a breath and says words that she doesn’t want to but possibly needs to, “then maybe it’s not such a bad idea.”

In the dim light, Penelope looks at her, searching for something in her eyes.

“The thing is… is that he lives on the other side of the country,” Penelope says softly, gauging Josie’s reaction.

“Oh.” Josie wants to cry just at the thought of Penelope and Pete moving that far away, even if they were still in the same country.

“Yeah…” Penelope gives her the most bittersweet smile.

And Josie doesn’t think she can say a single word without potentially choking up, so she instead pulls Penelope into her and hopes that she understands what she’s trying to express. If Penelope feels the tears falling down onto her, she doesn’t mention it.

/ 

Penelope takes the next week to mull over the decision. She confides with Pete, asking about his opinion; he seems mostly indifferent, fine with whatever Penelope chooses to do. She doesn’t confide with Hope, but of course Hope gives her intricate and unashamed opinion about how bad of an idea it was, how Penelope's father wasn't a good person, and that they shouldn’t do it.

Josie tries to be as supportive as possible, making sure that her own feelings don’t interfere with Penelope’s decision. She tells her about how, if she chooses to leave, that they can always visit each other over the holidays, that they’ll call every night, that it’d be totally alright. Though, she
knows it’s obvious that she doesn’t want Penelope to leave. But she doesn’t feel like she has any right to ask Penelope to stay. They had been dating for barely a year, but she really doesn’t want to lose what they have, even if she keeps promising herself that a long-distance relationship will work, because they can... But she’ll miss her.

After taking a few more days to think, Penelope decides that she’s going to leave.

She tells Josie that it’s just for a year, to see how things go. She tells Josie that the law firm over there is larger, how she’ll be able to help more people. She tells Josie that the school is bigger, that Pete can make more friends, that more activities are available. She tells her that it’s not really that far and that they’ll be back for a visit before she even knows it. And Josie hears it all, but her heart is still breaking apart. It feels too fast, too sudden, untimely. Nevertheless, she supports Penelope’s decision, just like she said she would.

They’re not moving until the end of the school term so Josie takes that time to appreciate and cherish every second they have left together. She tries not to think about all the small things she’ll miss, like simply waking up next to Penelope and having breakfast and dinner all together, but she does anyway and it hurts every time.

But, for the most part, it’s business as usual.

/ 

When the first box is packed, Josie feels her heart break all over again.

There’s not really much to pack on Penelope’s side, but Pete has made his presence very clear in the house. From the decorations that he made for Halloween and Christmas that are still hanging around the hallways, to the artworks he likes to make and put on the fridge and all around the rest of the house, including one framed and hanging in Josie and Penelope’s bedroom.

Josie helps Penelope pack all her clothes and lawyer things into the boxes, having to take a breath each time she has to close and tape one up. She asks if Penelope wants to take all her plants with her as well - the ones that the three of them had taken out a whole weekend to name and give colourful pot labels to - but Penelope says that it’s fine and that she’ll buy new ones. She asks if Penelope wants to take her large collection of old books - the ones that she takes to the park every week to read - but Penelope says that there's not as much space at their new place in the city and that she'll be back anyway.
When the last of the boxes are packed, Josie feels a sense of reality hit her hard. Even though she had known they would be moving out for a long while, it hasn’t really truly settled in until now. She lets herself cry quietly that night, after making sure Penelope had fallen asleep.

In the few days before they leave, Josie really tries her best to keep it together. It’s not like the world was ending, or even anything genuinely terrible was happening. She would just miss them both a lot, as she’s repeated to herself multiple times. It was completely rational to feel sad about it.

Their things are sent to be shipped over, so that it’ll all be there before they arrive in a couple of days. Josie takes them on one last picnic in the park, knowing that it’ll be one of the things she’ll miss the most. She sits back and enjoys the rare sunny weather, and Penelope’s arms, and pretends to read a book while really watching Pete play fetch with the dogs and Penelope actually reading a book.

Penelope hadn’t seemed too fussed about the whole thing. She had expressed that she’ll miss things here and there, and that she’ll miss Josie a lot. But other than that, she seems kind of excited to be moving to a bigger city, and Josie’s happy for her.

When they arrive home, Penelope says she’s going to take a shower, so Josie takes the opportunity to speak to Pete alone.

She asks him how he’s feeling about the whole move, knowing it can be scary moving to a new city and new school. He’s mostly unbothered by it all, which Josie is glad to hear. She tells him that she’s sure he’ll make some great new friends and really love the big parks and dogs they have there. She tells him about how much she’s enjoyed meeting him and getting to know him in the past few months, and that she’ll miss him. She tells him about how much she loves his sister, how much she loves him too. She tells him about how she’ll visit as much as possible and that he’s welcome back any time, that there’ll always be a spare room in the house for him. He nods through most of it, sharing his own sentiments about how he’s really enjoyed living here as well, much better than where was before. How he’ll miss the dog park and their movie nights. How he’ll miss Josie picking him up from school and chatting about their days on the way home.

They share a heartfelt hug after wiping a few stray tears away, and then Josie puts on a movie while she starts preparing dinner.

She starts thinking about it all again, not that she really ever stopped. Under other circumstances,
maybe she would even drop everything to move with Penelope. But, in reality, everything was here - her sister, her niece, her job, her whatever Hope is. She never doubted or questioned Penelope’s decision for a second, knowing that Penelope’s probably thought it over ten times as much as she has, and that she’d never do anything without having good reason to. Regardless, it was a situation that Josie will have to pull through. And maybe Penelope will be back in a year, but a lot can change in a year. But Josie would try her best to be resilient, at least until after Penelope left.

Penelope’s especially teary that night as they settle in bed, and Josie thinks that it’s all starting to settle in that she’s really leaving Mystic Falls, so she comforts her and stays strong for her.

“You know, it’s not *that* great here - the facilities are shit, there’s never any sun, Hope’s here, there’s only like one ice cream shop… I think I saw someone take a literal shit on someone else’s lawn the other day… or maybe it was their own lawn…” Josie wonders.

Penelope laughs, choking up a bit. “Yeah…” she agrees, moving closer to Josie “…but you’re here.”

“Are you just adding to my list of reasons to leave?” Josie teases, giving Penelope a cheeky grin.

“Shut up, why are you like this?” Penelope nudges her. But she’s laughing, and that’s all that matters.

“Like what?” Josie retorts, even though she knows it’s a rhetorical question.

“So supportive and understanding with me leaving,” Penelope says anyway.

Josie smiles and looks up into Penelope’s eyes, pausing for a moment. She shrugs slightly. “Because I love you.”

And, well, that probably wasn’t the best idea, as it seems like Penelope absolutely loses any strength she had left to hold back her emotions. But Josie lets her cry it out, telling her that they’ll see each other soon, and holds her as close, and as long, as possible.
She wakes up the next morning and Penelope’s not there.

If Josie ever knew the appropriate time to panic, now would be it.

And she knows Penelope would never leave without saying goodbye, right?

So, she calms her racing heart and goes to check Pete’s room to see if he’s there.

When she finds his door open and room empty, she forces herself to calmly make her way downstairs.

The house feels so empty without all of Penelope’s things hanging around, even if there wasn’t much anyway.

But no one’s around and Josie starts to hear the alarm bells ringing in her head again.

She doesn’t even know where to begin looking for them, but calling Penelope was probably a good start. So she heads back upstairs to get her phone.

She sees a couple of missed calls but no voicemail or messages. She tries calling her back but it immediately says that she’s currently unavailable.

And, really, Josie wasn’t planning on breaking down until the whole airport scene, but now could be a good time too.

But then she hears the beeping sound coming from her driveway and she quickly stumbles back downstairs to see what it is.

She’s met with a large moving truck, reversing into her driveway.

Her missing girlfriend gets out of the truck and walks over to the rear to open the back door, not noticing Josie at the open front door of the house.
“Penelope?” Penelope turns around at that, giving Josie an nonchalant expression of acknowledgement akin to an ‘oh, hey’. “What are you doing?”

“Josie…” Penelope looks defeated, but not exactly sad, “we can’t move.”

“What? Why? Did something happen to your dad? Was there a problem with the moving company?” Josie finds herself in the biggest state of confusion, looking back at the truck with all their things packed neatly inside.

“No, no, nothing like that. We just can’t do it,” Penelope shrugs, as if it’s just that simple. “Well, Pete sort of got cold feet and he only told me last night, so I called the moving company and they drove back most of the way, but I had to go pick up the truck early this morning ‘cause they needed the staff for some urgent customer or something.”

Josie remembers her conversation with Pete from earlier last night, not having meant to give him cold feet, and she feels a bit bad.

“Oh, okay,” she says slowly, still disoriented and surprised at the turn of events. “Wait,” Josie suddenly registers the current situation, “you’re not leaving?”

Penelope walks up to her, cups Josie’s face with both her hands, and smiles. “No, we’re not leaving.”

“Pen…” Josie whispers, searching Penelope’s face for any sign of a joke, then searches around the place for any Punk’d cameras, then mentally checks that it’s not the 1st of April on that current day.

“JoJo, I’m not kidding,” Penelope tries to snap Josie back into the moment.

“Oh my god!” Josie practically squeals, giving Penelope the biggest hug she can. She feels the vibrations of Penelope’s laugh as she hugs back, and it’s all she needs right now.

But then she remembers something and pulls away slightly.
“Wait, but what about your dad? Will he be angry? Will he try to sue for custody or something like that?” Josie’s having really bad flashbacks right now.

Penelope gives her a reassuring smile and squeezes her arm. “No, don’t worry. He’s not exactly on the best side of the law, so I don’t think he’ll do that. I’ll make sure of it.”

“You were going to let Pete live with a criminal?!” Josie whisper shouts, making sure that Pete doesn’t hear, in case he’s around somewhere.

“It’s all financial stuff, no murder or drugs…” Penelope shrugs but looks a bit guilty regardless.

“Still…” Josie crosses her arms in disapproval.

“Alright, the main point is that we’re not moving. Let’s focus on that!” Penelope tries, and obviously Josie gives in, happy about the news. Pete then gets out of the truck, looking like he had just woken up from a nap, and immediately waves at Josie, yelling to her about how they’re staying.

Turns out that Pete had woken up early in the morning when he heard Penelope leaving and wanted to tag along too. Josie gives him a hug and drags them both by the hand into the house for breakfast.

Josie helps them unpack for the rest of the day, blasting music throughout the house to make it more fun, which matched her excitement of the news. When Penelope’s upstairs unpacking her closet, Josie tells Pete about how she’s sorry for giving him cold feet.

“How did you know?” Pete asks, clearly confused.

“PeePee told me,” Josie replies, still not over that nickname.

“But I didn’t tell her that,” Pete says as he puts up one of his artworks back onto the fridge.
“Oh.” Now Josie’s the one that’s confused. Penelope had told her that it was Pete who had wanted to stay, and she wasn’t exactly lying, since it was true, but Pete was going to let them move even if he was beginning to have doubts.

She confronts Penelope that night after bidding Pete a goodnight and, after much prodding, Penelope eventually gives in and tells her the truth.

“It was me.”

“It was you?”

“I got cold feet.”

“You got cold feet?”

“Are you just going to repeat everything I say?”

Josie smiles. “...you got cold feet?” she repeats, softer, just to make sure.

“Freezing,” Penelope whispers.

She tells Josie that she had overheard her conversation with Pete, and how it broke her heart. It broke her heart hearing about how much Josie cared about them both and how much Pete enjoyed it in Mystic Falls. It broke her heart thinking about how much she was going to miss Josie.

“Why didn’t you just say so?” Josie gently grabs both of Penelope’s hands.

Penelope shrugs, “I didn’t want you to feel bad for knowing that you were the reason I couldn’t leave.” Josie knows that she would have definitely felt bad if Penelope had stayed for her, but she’s still going to try to deny it- “And don’t even try to deny it, JoJo.” ‘Try’ being the operative word, Josie supposes.

Josie sighs, still unsure. “I just don’t want this to be something you regret later on…”
There have been enough plot lines about people holding something against someone for Josie to know that it could easily be thrown back in her face in the future. Though, she has a feeling that Penelope would never throw this in her face.

Penelope also seems to understand why Josie’s apprehensive, as she’s quiet for a moment, looking like she’s thoroughly contemplating something.

“JoJo, remember that time at Kaleb’s restaurant, before we started dating,” Penelope prompts.

Josie’s not sure where she’s going with this but she does remember it, considering it was one of her favourite nights with Penelope. “Yes…” she replies slowly.

“Well, I want to cash in that favour you owe me,” Penelope smiles softly, brushing a strand of hair back behind Josie’s ear, “I want you to trust that I’ll never hold this against you, that this is my choice and I’ll never regret it.”

And it’s sort of a big favour to ask; the future is ever so uncertain. But with the way Penelope’s looking at her right now, it’s also sort of impossible not to straight-up sign the documents that designate her as the sole trustee of everything inside her chest.

God damn it, that was a low blow.

“Okay, fine, I guess you can stay here for a few nights or whatever,” Josie teases, rolling her eyes sarcastically, “I probably have a spare room you can use or something. I mean, I’ll have to cancel the hookers but…”

Josie trails off when she realises that Penelope doesn’t care about her joke and is just grinning madly up at her.

“What? You didn’t like my joke or…?” Josie prods, raising a brow. “What if I really did hire someone? Would that be crazy?” Josie tries to get a reaction out of Penelope but she doesn’t budge. “Alright, spill, what’s the deal with you, smileypants...”

Penelope keeps staring at her for a while, fond grin unwavering. She finally sighs, as if coming to
some conclusion of sorts, and bites her bottom lip. She gently cups Josie’s face once again.

“I’m so in love with you, Josette Saltzman.”

And Josie’s heart just wants to crawl out and jump into Penelope’s arms, just to be closer to Penelope’s. And she can’t help the goofy grin that seems to be permanently stuck on her face.

“Are you sure?” Josie teases, “even after the bad joke I just made when you were being super serious?”

Penelope laughs, “how do you know it’s not because of your bad joke?”

“Shush, it better not be,” Josie pokes her ribs, causing Penelope to laugh even harder, and she all but tackles her down onto their bed, both bubbling with laughter, happy to be home again.

/

And, for the third time this chapter, life goes the fuck on.

Pete graduates from primary school, happier than ever to have the four parental figures, and Hope, in his life. Lizzy starts to form sentences, so everyone starts actually understanding what she and Lizzie are chatting about. Hope moves in with Lizzie, telling Josie that she simply thinks it’ll be fun to have a roommate. Penelope starts a legal program with MG, which focusses on finding missing children and helping those who can’t afford to fight custody cases.

And Josie finally asks Lizzie, once again, about the thought process behind her daughter’s name - to which Lizzie simply replies, “Josette… you are aware that our mother’s name was literally Josette, right?”

(and really... it’s not that crazy, in fact, it’s kind of sweet, in a Lizzie way).

So, after 10 damn chapters, with Josie having a baby suddenly show up at her house and then
Josie Saltzman supposes that it’s safe to say that she finally knows what it’s like to get off with Penelope Park.

Chapter End Notes

uhhhh love that unnecessary drama, aka the whole fic

if ur currently thinking, “did they really just end the fic like that?” don’t worry, i am too

i read the first chap again for the |parallels|, and the tense usage, oh honey, what did i do
(not that it’s much better now lol)

anyway, we made it gays!! thanks for sticking around. this is officially the last chapter but i’m gonna kick out a little something later, if anyone’s still around by then. it’ll be a little epilogue/prologue/recount of sorts, but all from Lizzie’s pov, so if u think Josie’s pov has been wild…….hmm…
regardless, here’s a long ass note that u should not feel obligated to read at all, just my thoughts on the whole thing:

I want to start off by saying a really huge fucking thank you for reading this far. Thanks for putting up with my awful humour, non-american spelling, the writing structure & plot that is being held together with duct tape, I had to google what a common noun was the other day, etc etc. To be really honest, I haven’t written fiction since I was maybe 10 and I read about 0.3 published books every year (not that I don’t like them, I just have a hard time reading things), so it’s been a learning curve, but it’s been super fun.

And I know it’s not exactly a meaningful fic, but I feel like some of you had a laugh or two, so I’m happy for that!! Obviously I had second thoughts after each chapter, who doesn’t, but really, all the nice comments and reactions were.. really really sweet :) so thank you.

I think I’ll be retiring from writing for now, it’s been a nice little short preoccupation, but it’s also a bit exhausting. To the people who are actually in this field: you’re really amazing, love your work, keep it up. (and if you’re not in this field and still write: you’re really amazing, love your work, keep it up.)
I’m not sure if I’ll write more in the future but hope to see you around if I do :-)
I mean, I’ll probably get bored in the summer break and start some shit (or finish, e.g. i have a neighbours au that’s been sitting in my drafts for a couple months now, whoops) but who knows? not me, as always.

Anyway, the main reason I started this story was because there was like about 1 fic updating a day back then (and they were angsty!). But after posting my last chapter, I was already at the bottom of the tag page by the end of that day, so that was very cool. I’m sure it’ll pick up again with season 2 coming up, so that’s pretty nice.
Ok that’s all I have to say :) if you read all that, you’re automatically in my top 3 people in life, sorry bout it

//

TLDR: thanks! hope u had a good time :)

let me know ur thoughts about the ending, u can be as mean as u want, i’m pretty mean to myself too

but if u have any questions or whatnot, hit me up on twitter or curiouscat @spitzerspace, i’m always happy to chat

that’s all from me, stream tegan and sara’s new record, it’s very cool, check out my other stuff if u enjoy gay, if you’re watching season 2, uhh..hope it’s/is gay?, alright have a good one!!

(also, all the title’s are from Sam Smith’s song, just in case you didn’t know, anyway it’s a very good song, please don’t think of this fic when it comes up on shuffle - i do, and that’s my own damn fault)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!