

Chasing Forever Down – Bonus scene, Reed’s POV

“He’s still not answering.” I lock my phone and lean back on the couch.

It’s typical of A.J. not to answer. He never wants anyone to know where he goes, what he does, or who he’s with. Normally, it doesn’t bother me, but tonight, the panic has settled into my chest and feels like a whale waiting to launch itself out of the ocean.

“See if he’ll answer for you,” I say.

Alston tosses his phone across the couch to me. “Call him,” he says before tearing the plastic wrap off his new X-box game.

His lack of concern bugs the hell out of me. I select A.J.’s name in his contacts and listen to it ring and ring and ring. When the robotic voicemail lady tells me that he’s unavailable, I hang up. I lean over to hand Alston’s phone back to him.

“Stop stressing. He’ll be home eventually.” Alston walks over to the X-box and pops in his new game. He tosses a controller to me, but there’s no way I can concentrate.

“Maybe I should call Vin,” I suggest, even though I know what Alston is going to say. *You’re overreacting. You’re making something out of nothing. This isn’t anything we haven’t dealt with before.*

But I feel like it is.

“Do not,” Alston says, turning around and emphasizing his words. “Vin’s a sleeping dragon. You don’t wake him up unless you need him to burn down a village, and we’re not at that point. We haven’t even unleashed A.J. yet. Don’t get Vin worked up over nothing. I can’t deal with him.”

He’s right, to an extent. Vin doesn’t need to enter panic mode until there’s a real reason to panic. I don’t want to be on the receiving end of Vin’s wrath either. But at the same time, I don’t want the ‘why didn’t you come to me sooner?’ lecture. You can’t really win with Vin Brooks.

“Are you really not worried about it?” I ask. “She’s from North Carolina. People don’t randomly choose Crescent Cove as a vacation spot. No one has ever heard of this town, and surfing isn’t exactly popular on the east coast.”

Alston stands in the middle of the living room, staring at me like he’s sick of this conversation already. “Okay, Reed. There’s this thing that I’m sure you’ve heard of,” he says. “It’s called a coincidence, and believe it or not, those happen more often than you’d think.”

He's hopeless. I believe in coincidences, but I also believe in facts. Haley wasn't blabbing about how hot Colby is, like a lot of girls do, and she didn't seem to be after his money, like some girls are. She wasn't a California girl who'd seen him at an event or in a magazine. Something else is driving her, and I don't think she'll fall for our usual tricks.

"Okay, fine," I surrender. "We'll wait and see how it goes with A.J., and if Vin has to run her off, we'll leave it to him. But you don't need to encourage Linzi."

He settles into the corner of the couch, eyes focused on the game logo on the TV screen. "You don't need to worry about what I do with Linzi," he says, choosing the one-player option and continues to ignore me.

"Alston, seriously," I plead. "I get that you're figuring things out, and you want to be sure, but when you drag other people into it and risk their feelings, that's not okay."

"Stop!" he shouts at me. He turns and faces me, glaring at me like A.J. looks at law enforcement. "I'm not dragging anyone into anything. I didn't tell the girl I was going to marry her or even date her. We're just hanging out. I'm not playing games with people, so don't act like I am."

I take a deep breath and glance at my phone, willing A.J. with my mind to call and interrupt the tension in the room. When my phone doesn't ring, I look back at Alston.

"I'm sorry," I say, even though it won't do any good. "Bad word choice on my part. I just want you to know it's okay to be yourself. Nothing will change here if or when you decide to...make changes. I'm okay with it. A.J. is okay with anything. We're still going to be your friends, no matter who you date. I just feel like you owe it to yourself to be happy."

He pauses his game. "I get that, okay? And I appreciate it. I do. But I owe it to my parents to be one-hundred percent sure before I tell them anything," he says. "They've given me everything. I don't want to wreck their world until I'm sure it's worth wrecking. Linzi is pretty, and she seems fun. If I can't like her, I can't like any girl, but I need to make sure. Now are you going to play or not?"

He holds up a game controller and exits, swapping over to two-player mode on the screen. I surrender and take the control.

It's nearly two hours later when the kitchen door slams, rattling the window pane above the sink. A.J. walks over to the refrigerator, retrieves a beer, and strolls into the living room.

“Where the hell have you been all night?” Alston asks. He pauses the game and gives A.J. his full attention. “Are you too good to return texts and calls now?”

A.J. tosses his head back, chugging his fresh Corona like he’s been out in the desert and would drink piss if that’s all he had. He swallows and stares at the bottle before he answers with, “Phone is dead.”

“Where were you?” Alston drills him again.

I’m glad Alston doesn’t cut A.J. much slack. He can get away with interrogating and hassling him. I can’t pull off the attitude like Alston can. A.J. lets it slide with Alston, but he makes fun of me for days if I even attempt to get smart with him. I sit back and let Alston do all the talking now.

“Jail, if you must know,” A.J. says. He takes another swig. “Vin got me out. I’m really gonna ask them to put a name plate on the bars. Alexander James Gonzalez, cell 7B. I deserve that much with as many times as I’ve been in it. Pittman needs to hit his arrest quota already and fuck off. Ain’t no one got time for this.”

I lean forward. “Pittman *again*?” I’ve lost count of how many times he’s hauled A.J. in over the last year. It’s like Pittman got his badge and went straight for A.J.’s freedom.

A.J. nods. “Hell yeah. Who else would haul me in for ripping up election signs?”

Alston falls back against the couch dramatically, rolling his eyes like a junior high diva. “Are you kidding me? He seriously arrested you for taking down election signs?”

“Vandalizing government property,” A.J. clarifies. “That’s what he wrote on the paperwork. It was all those conservative fuckers who posted signs around Colby’s property. Colby ain’t feeling that shit, and neither am I. So I did something about it.”

Alston stands up and walks over to the chair where A.J. lounges. He takes the beer bottle away and tells A.J. to listen to what I have to say. Great. Not only is A.J. pissed and now beer-less, he’s about to have to sit through the worst ‘we have a job’ lecture I’ll ever give him.

“Aw, hell.” A.J. groans. “Get on it with, Strick. I know – I’ve gotta act like a wild ass fool and scare some chicks off because Colby Taylor is hot and whatever fucking shit. Say it so I can get drunk already.”

A.J. pretends to give a damn while I give him the rundown of what happened tonight. He side-eyes Alston when I mention his flirtation with Linzi, but A.J. doesn’t press the issue like I

did. At least A.J. upholds the “live and let live” motto he’s placed on us regarding himself. He never pushes.

“I have a bad feeling this time,” I admit. “They’re from North Carolina, and Haley’s demeanor isn’t what we normally encounter. I think she knows more, but I don’t know what. So you really need to scare her. Pull out all your tricks. Be careful. Don’t do anything that could land you back in 7B. But you have to scare her away.”

A.J. reaches out and grabs his beer back from Alston. “Got it, Strick,” he says. He takes another long swig. “Alston sweet talks the friend. You pretend you’re working. I freak her out to the point that she realizes even Colby Taylor isn’t worth this.”

“This conversation never happened,” I remind him. “When you walk into the store tomorrow, pretend like you just got bailed out, like you’re fresh out of the cell. Don’t let her know you slept in your own bed tonight.”

A.J. tosses his head back and cackles, like a loopy witch doctor. “Don’t worry, Strick. I got this,” he says. “Have a little faith. She’ll never see the back of the jet ski, and Vin will never lay eyes on her.”