



Fast Lane

Author: *Stephanie Nichole*

Category: Romance

Description: Kosi Scott has always had all the answers. She picks a path and stays on it but when everything in her life goes flying off course she's left floundering in the world. Now, it seems her career driven attitude actually cost her what she wants most. In a desperate attempt she takes a job with the one person that she last wanted to spend time with...Roscoe. Roscoe Langston is the definition of a free spirit. He doesn't take anything seriously. Roscoe is more than happy to sit back and let the cards fall as they may. The only thing he has in his life is Mushu, his orange Tabby cat. Kosi has always gotten under his skin though not because she's gorgeous, which she is, but because her need to control everything annoys him. What happens when they are forced together day in and day out? Can Roscoe show Kosi there is more to life than work? Can Kosi make Roscoe see what's been right in front of him for years?

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Prologue

Kosi

When I pull up to the two-bedroom house that I share with my longtime boyfriend, Colby, in the suburb-like neighborhood, all the lights are still on. It's the only house on the street with the lights still on at this time of night. My eyes feel like sandbags. I'm exhausted. As I pull my BMW into the driveway, I see boxes sitting in the back of Colby's Chevy Truck. It's not unusual to see boxes in the bed of his truck. Colby is in construction, so he often hauls things to and from the work site with him, but it is strange that he left them in his truck. Normally, he tucks them away inside the garage overnight just to be safe. Our neighborhood has always been safe with no real issues but this is Los Angeles so you can never be too sure.

As I step out of the car I pull my Jimmy Choo heels off my feet. I swear they sigh in relief. Every part of me is anxious to get inside and pull off my pencil skirt, blouse, and blazer and change into the most comfortable pair of pj's I own. A bubble bath doesn't sound too bad right now either. Barefoot, I cut through the green grass of our front yard to get to the front door. The cool, damp grass soothes my aching feet.

I make my way up the three steps to the red front door and slip my key inside, but to my surprise it's unlocked. Nerves suddenly flare to life in my body. Nothing is adding up. The boxes in Colby's truck, the lights still being on even though it's after midnight, and now the door's unlocked. I place my purse and heels down on the ground and get the pepper spray on my defense keychain ready. Quietly I make my way into the house. The living room is empty so I tip toe my way to the dining room. Colby sits there looking worn out and frustrated. A meal sits on the plates on the

beautifully set dining room table. The candlesticks in the middle are still burning, wax dripping down onto the tablecloth below. I forgot... again. Colby had asked if we could set up a date night last week. I swear I put it in my planner but I don't remember seeing it this morning.

"You scared the hell out of me," I comment as I step around.

Colby looks up, clearly not amused. "Nice of you to join me, Kosi."

I sigh and rub on my left temple. "I'm sorry. I forgot about date night."

He looks so defeated right now that it breaks my heart. His large shoulders rise and fall with a shrug. "What else is new?"

"Colby... please just don't do this right now." My voice is irritated. It seems like this is all we do these days. Argue over how demanding my job is. Argue over how I'm never at home, I always miss date night and other family functions. I always end up apologizing but I never feel like I should have to. I love my job. Yes it's demanding, but I'm damn good at it. The money makes it worth the time I miss out on. I can't help it if my job is more demanding than Colby's. I'm currently a marketing executive for the third largest distribution corporation in the United States. It's not easy to get that close to the top and it takes a lot of hard work to get there and stay.

"Okay, when should I do this?" he asks.

I walk into the natural wood kitchen and open the fridge to grab a coconut water out. After taking a long sip I turn back around to face him. "It's one night. Why are you acting like this?" I ask. Guilt lashes through me. It's not just one night. Our relationship has been like this through the last year—ever since I graduated college and took the job at Curve Tech. It was my dream job but I'm beginning to wonder at what price.

“One night? Are you kidding me? It’s every damn night, Kosi. I come home to an empty house. I go to bed and it’s empty. On my days off I’m on my own. You never make it for any of our plans. It’s not just date night. It’s family dinners and dance recitals. It’s everything, Kosi.” Colby stands up and runs a frustrated hand through his hair; the red hair that I used to find so endearing. It was so soft I could run my fingers through it for hours, but now I can’t remember when was the last time I did that. Colby is tall and lean, he has pale skin with a few freckles across his nose, and the kindest honey-colored eyes you can find. Right now I can’t even bring myself to meet those eyes. They are so full of hurt.

I sigh and rest my palms against the kitchen counter. “I’m not going to apologize for my job being demanding. You know how hard I worked to get here.”

“I’ve never asked you to apologize, Kosi. I just don’t see a point in keeping up a charade. We aren’t together... not really so what’s the point?”

My head whips up. Blonde hair flying in the movement, coming loose from the chignon I have it tied in. “What? What are you trying to say?”

“I’m saying that I’m moving out. Those boxes in my truck are some of my things. I’ll get the rest later.”

I move around the counter towards him, but he steps back. “Is this because I won’t say I’m sorry?”

He shakes his head. “No, of course not. I know how hard you’ve worked for this job. You deserve it. I’m so damn proud of you, Kosi, but I have more of a relationship with your assistant and your email than I do you. Sometimes I call your cell phone and just listen to your voicemail just to hear your voice. I’m tired of pretending and I’m tired of missing you. It shouldn’t be like this.”

“Colby... I love you.” The words are true but he’s not wrong... my actions don’t show that anymore.

A sadness floods into those kind honey-colored eyes. He nods his head slowly as if he’s accepting his fate. “I know you do, and I love you, but you love your job more and that’s okay.”

Colby turns around and walks out of the room. I hear him place my shoes and purse in the entrance of the house because that’s exactly who he is. So kind and caring. The door shuts and I feel my heart shatter. My eyes blur with the tears building. The food on the plates is cold, just like my heart. I was so foolish to think I could have it all—no one can have it all. Colby is right. I do love my job more. So from now on, that’s all I’m focusing on. The hell with the rest of it.

One

Roscoe

It’s late, or early depending on how you look at it. It’s close to two in the morning. Friday nights often end this way. Bowie, Laney (or Lane as she likes to be called still), and some of the other James brothers are sitting around a table in the bar. JamesTown, the bar the James brothers own, has pretty much emptied out at this time. Most Friday nights are when the local street races of Los Angeles take place. Pedal to the Metal, as we like to call them. The James brothers are known for being the kings of the streets and for good reason. All five of them are basically unbeatable behind the wheel of a car. It’s a natural talent, something they probably inherited from their father Ronald. A love for cars and 80’s rock music.

Things have changed a lot over the last few years for them though. Bowie James, the next to oldest brother of the five, is my best friend. The girl he loved showed back up a few years ago after ten years of absence. I wasn’t sure if Bowie would ever let her

back in but he surprised us all when he actually let his guard down pretty quickly. Hollis had run away pretty young after tragedy struck her family. We all understood her reasons why but it was hard to see Bowie in his downward spiral. Talk about a rebel without a cause... that was him. Now, they're married and parents. For the first time in years, Bowie actually seems happy.

Lane is the third part of our triangle. She's been in our little group since elementary school when some boys were picking on her because she had short hair. Bowie and I saw her trying not to cry and that was the end of that. We ended up making the bullies cry and Lane smiled, and we all three became inseparable. Out of the three of us, she's the hardest one to get past her walls. Her past is a little complicated and she holds it close to her. Lane never lets herself get too attached. She had a serious boyfriend once, but ever since they broke up she's been flying solo.

Then there's me... well what can I say about myself? I like adventure. I'm spontaneous. I hate making plans. Throw something on me at the last minute and I thrive. My orange Tabby cat, Mushu, is the bomb. I'd do anything for him. He randomly showed up at the skydiving school I run, Free Fall, and unlike the other strays I see around there he lets me pet and hold him. So I took him home, named him after the best Disney character in existence, and the rest is history. I love Disney movies and I'm not ashamed to admit it. Disney is all that. On the other side of things, I'm a go with the flow type of guy. Things rarely get to me and I rarely take anything serious. Like the fact I just lost a thousand dollars in a race... it should bother me, but it doesn't.

Ace James, along with his best friend Jaxx Scott, are also sitting with us. We're literally talking about the good old days. Reliving the stories from our youth, and to be honest, some of the things we did make me wonder how we've lived this long. "I remember Bowie and Roscoe trying to sneak into the house. I'm not sure how they thought that was going to work with Roscoe unable to walk; you know broken leg and all."

“Hey, I was jumping around one footed pretty damn good from what I remember,” I defend myself with a laugh.

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The entire table erupts into laughter. Bowie's phone rings and he steps away to answer it. "Yeah, you were but I'm not sure how the two of you thought that was going to work when sneaking into our tiny house. I mean come on!" Ace slaps a hand on the table. Jaxx starts to choke on the sip of water he just took.

"I'm sure the two of you and Pierce have some stories too. Let's hear those," I tell Ace and Jaxx.

Jaxx shakes his head. "Oh we do. Plenty of them, but we were smart enough not to get caught doing the dumb shit we came up with."

Ace and Jaxx exchange a look. Ace shrugs his shoulders. "Well most of the time anyways."

Lane nods from her seat next to me. "I think it's time I call it a night boys."

"I'll follow you." I start to stand up. The idea of Lane being out this late in a town the size of Los Angeles just doesn't make me feel too great, but she places her hands on my shoulders before my ass barely makes it off the chair.

"No, you won't. I'm a big girl and I don't need a chaperone." Lane turns to leave.

"Well, at least let me know you made it home safely?" I ask to her retreating figure.

Lane stops and spins around, her copper chin length bob hair cut shimmers under the dim lights of the bar. Lane has gone through a lot of phases in her life. However, being a biker babe stuck. The Poisionly Perfects is an all-female biker gang that Lane

leads. Lane is tall and slender, with short hair that is constantly changing colors, striking autumn brown eyes and high cheekbones. She always wears jeans and usually leather and lace. Her ears are lined in diamond studs. “You know my grampy would send out a search party if I didn’t show up.” Lane has been raised by her grandfather ever since her parents got killed in a house fire. Lane still lives with him and they help take care of each other.

I nod because there is absolutely no sense in arguing with her over this. If you look up the definition of independence I promise her picture is next to it. She can take care of herself but I will always see her like the little sister I never had. Bowie returns to the table. “I should head home too. That was Hollis.”

“Everything okay?” Ace asks.

Bowie nods. My brother from another mother is in desperate need of a haircut. His brown hair has fallen down and covers his blue eyes. Ace and Bowie look similar to one another except that Ace is covered in colorful ink from the neck down, sports some snakebite piercings, as well as gaged ears and occasionally wears eyeliner. Ace owns a string of Inkredible tattoo shops along the coast of California and won his season on the tattoo competition show Inked Up. Bowie has a few tattoos, but nothing compared to Ace, and both of them are tall, lean, and have dark hair with blue eyes. “Yeah she just woke up and realized I wasn’t home yet and wanted to make sure I was okay.” I make a whipping sound and the guys all laugh. Bowie wraps an arm around my neck and rubs his knuckles into my scalp. Once he’s done he stands back up. “One of these days you’re going to find the one that makes it worth being whipped.”

I smirk. “Doubtful.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” Ace adds.

Jaxx shakes his head. “Let’s face it I was ready to get married the moment I laid eyes on Kenndrix so I can’t understand what took you all so long to join that club.”

“I’m a lone wolf and I like it that way. I get to do what I want, when I want, and how I want. There’s no one to answer to but Mushu.” I stand up. “I need a release before we head out.” I make my way down the hallway that leads to the bathrooms. The brothers just had JamesTown redone. Drake James, Axell’s son, had his company do the remodel. The original distressed cement flooring now looks like it matches the rest of the place. Charcoal gray washed bricks make up the walls. The bar is along the back wall with every kind of alcohol you can imagine. The bar is long with charcoal gray brick on the bottom, a wooden top with a glass overlay to protect the wood. The stools are silver and black metal with charcoal gray seating. All of the tables are also silver and black iron with a wood top and the glass top to protect the wood, and the chairs match the bar stools. The jukebox was restored and pushed into the same corner, next to the stage where local bands still come and play a few nights a week. The recessed lighting gives it the typical bar feel without it being too dark. Drake and his company really did a great job. After I’m done I head back out, but the guys are already gone so I head out the door. Bowie is leaning against the wall, smoking a cigarette waiting for me.

“Are you good?” he asks, and I nod my head in reply. Ace is standing next to his Dodge Challenger Hellcat and Jaxx is sitting on his Energica Ego 45 Limited Edition which makes my heart race. I’d almost kill to get on the back of that baby.

After Bowie locks up, we make our way across the parking lot to his 67 Ford Mustang Fastback Pro Street. Another car I wouldn’t mind slipping behind the wheel of. Although I do love my modified Chevy Camaro SS. Aside from Mushu, it’s my favorite thing in the world and the only girl I need. For whatever reason I drop my head back and howl into the dark and quiet night. The guys laugh as we all head our separate ways for the night.

Five Finger Death Punch comes blaring through my speakers as I pull out onto the street. Traffic is light as I make my way towards my apartment. My fingers drum to the rhythm of the music and my head bangs when it gets heavier. My dirty blonde hair flying all over the place. It's just me, myself, and I, exactly how I like it.

I pull into the parking lot and grab the first parking spot I find and head up to the third floor where my apartment is. It's not much but it's all mine. When I enter, the silence hits me. I lock up and make my way to my bedroom. Mushu is curled up on the end of the bed, sound asleep. After a quick shower I crawl into my cold bed. Just before my eyes fall shut I have a moment where I think it might not be so bad to have someone to come home to.

Two

Kosi

My bedroom door is thrown open, slamming against the wall. If I wasn't already awake I might be a little pissed. Instead, I've been awake for hours watching the ceiling fan make lazy rotations around and around. I had been lying on my back, awake, for hours now. Counting the rotations, watching as the light from the rising sun started to peek through the room, creating shadows on the cream colored walls. No matter how tired I felt, I could never fall asleep, at least not for more than a couple of hours. It was frustrating to say the least but I guess given the state of my life it made sense.

It's only been six months since I let Colby walk away and out of my life. Six months changed everything. I haven't seen or spoken to Colby since that night. The next day, when I had gotten home from work close to ten o'clock that night, he was gone. Every last trace of him in the house was gone. The garage was clear, the backyard was absent of everything that belonged to him. Our bedroom had been changed to my bedroom. His closet was empty. Nothing was stacked up around his sink in our

bathroom. All of it wiped away as if he never existed. As if we never existed in the same place. It made me sad. I probably would have cried but I was stressed and exhausted and didn't have it in me so I had ignored all of it.

After that, the hits just kept coming. The company I worked for took a nosedive and plummeted straight into drowning. Stocks crashed, and before we knew it, the entire company was in the fast lane of a free fall. There was no saving it. Cuts started happening and to my surprise I was on the chopping block—after everything I had done for the company.

That's how I found myself here. Living as a roommate with Baylor Anderson. Baylor is best friends to Summer Beckham James. Summer married the youngest James brother, Jovi. Since my brother Jaxx has always been like part of their family, Baylor was quick to offer up the spare bedroom she had in her apartment when my house went into foreclosure. It was a blessing, but it was a hard hit to my pride, that's for sure.

Giving up my career was the hardest thing for me to do. For as long as I can remember my career defined me as a person. I worked double time to graduate early and to get where I was within the company just to lose it all. Now, I'm a waitress at a local restaurant. Not exactly what I had in mind.

Baylor stands in the doorway with a look of shock on her face. Her long red hair piled high on top of her head in a ponytail that makes her look like a cheerleader. Baylor is tall and lean with hazel eyes and fiery red hair. Freckles dance across the bridge of her nose. She's quick witted, sarcastic, and smart as a whip. "Have you seen this shit?" she asks.

Considering I haven't got out of bed yet I would think the answer to her question would be obvious. "No. What is it?" I ask her as I sit up in bed, leaning back against the headboard.

“This,” she says, pointing to something in the newspaper and stalking into my room like a woman on a mission.

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Once she's close enough, she extends the newspaper to me. I take it and scan the area until I see what Baylor was pointing at. In the middle of page seven is the engagement announcements. Sitting there front and center is a face that is as familiar as my own. Colby. My blood runs cold and my lungs constrict. Surely, this is a mistake. Maybe, it's actually his brother and they printed the names wrong. I'm grasping at straws because I know it's him. I'd know that face anywhere. Colby Cate and Alyssa VanCant are proud to announce their engagement, the headline reads. A bubbly brunette sits next to Colby in the picture. Her smile is large and plastered on for the picture. Six months was all it took for him to completely erase me. To propose to someone else. It makes me wonder if there wasn't more to our breakup than just my career driven personality like he claimed.

Colby has never been one to do anything rashly. He was a planner and thought every last possibility through before making a decision. So, I can't imagine that it's only been a six month relationship and suddenly he's engaged to be married. It just doesn't add up. A pang twists my gut painfully but I raise my eyes to the ceiling and watch the fan continue to rotate around and around. I almost feel like that's my life now. Stuck in a constant spin cycle of nothingness.

"I can't believe he's engaged!" Baylor is fuming from where she paces next to my queen-size bed.

Tossing the newspaper aside I push the feelings of hurt and betrayal back down. I'll deal with it some other time. I shrug my shoulders. "Why not? He's been single and free to do what he wants for a while now."

"Six freaking months. Considering how Colby operates that doesn't seem like nearly

enough time. I don't trust this."

Baylor is thinking the exact same thing that I am but it doesn't matter now. What's done is done. "It doesn't matter. There's no sense in getting worked up about it."

Baylor flops back on the bed near my feet. "How can you say that? It's a disgrace!"

That's the thing about Baylor: she will go to bat for you at the drop of a hat. If you're on her good side she'll do anything for you. If you're on her bad side then it sucks to be you basically. "Because regardless, he clearly didn't want to be with me anymore and now we're not. He's clearly found someone that makes him happy. I'm good, so what's the point of getting upset?"

Baylor props herself up on an elbow and turns towards me. "Are you though?" she asks. My eyebrows pull together in puzzlement. "Good. Are you good?"

"As good as I can be given the situation." There's no point in letting her see how much that announcement actually hurt me. No good will come from it. "I do wish I had my job back."

She leans over and pats my hand. "I know. I wish you did too because I know how much you loved your job. How about I go cook us some breakfast?"

I nod my head and Baylor jumps off the bed, taking the newspaper with her. Once the door is closed I let a few stray tears fall before trying to find the calm within me. When I moved into Baylor's apartment, I tried to redo my room to give me a sense of calm in the midst of my chaos. The cream and ocean blue colored theme usually does the trick. The smell of bacon makes its way through the closed door, pulling me from my bed with the promise of crispy, salty goodness. Heading to the closet, I grab a pair of denim cutoffs and a Queen t-shirt before running a brush through my blonde hair.

Looking in the mirror, I don't recognize the girl staring back at me. I should have been up before the sun came up. Dressed to perfection, on my fourth cup of coffee and making my way through the corporate ladder. Everything about my life now just feels wrong. I sigh and leave my room because there's no point in dwelling.

When I reach the kitchen Baylor turns to me from where she stands in front of the stove. "What's on your agenda today?"

"Same as always. Apply for any and every job I can before I have to go waitress later tonight."

Baylor gives me a look of sympathy and it makes me squirm. I always hate the sympathetic looks. "You know I can always ask if there's anything at the paper."

I shake my head. Baylor was an English teacher before switching her job to become a full-time reporter for one of the local papers. Nothing about that world is in my wheelhouse. "I'll figure it out. Don't worry about me." Waitressing isn't really in my wheelhouse either. I break and pay for more dishes than I serve.

"If you change your mind you know where to ask." I nod and eat my bacon while trying to decide where to start my search today.

Four

Kosi

As Baylor and I finish up breakfast I hear my phone ringing from my room. I take off in a jog for it just in case it's a job opportunity. To my surprise it's my brother, Jaxx. I have two older brothers, Rome who left home right after high school, moved up to Napa Valley where he now works on one of the top vineyards and Jaxx. Jaxx is a big thing in Hollywood, well more behind the scenes. He's a stuntman and has been a

part of some of the biggest blockbuster movies in the last five years. He even started his own stunt business where he helps link up stuntmen and women for jobs. I keep in touch with both of my brothers often but I'm shocked that Jaxx is calling so early. I know he's been working long hours on his current job. I swipe the screen and put the phone next to my ear. "Hey bro," I answer the phone with, mostly because I know he hates being called bro.

He sighs heavily and I have to stifle the laughter that threatens to come from me. "Damn it Kosi. You know I hate that shit."

This time I can't fight back the laughter. "I know, which is why I can't resist." I take a few moments to laugh in his silence.

Eventually, Jaxx clears his throat and I calm down my laughter. "Are you done now?"

"I can try," I tell him as I take a seat in the chair in front of my desk/vanity. "What's up?"

"Do you still need to make extra cash?"

That seems like it should be a rhetorical question but I don't say that. "Yes, always." It's not that I need extra cash, but I lived in a different tax bracket for so long that adjusting is hard. Plus, I don't want to use a ton of my savings to cover what I do need now so extra cash is always a plus.

"Are you working today?" he asks.

"Not until this evening, why?"

"Bowie called me to see if you might want an extra gig today to make a little extra

cash.”

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Bowie James is a radio DJ at one of the local radio stations that plays 80's rock music. I'm not sure what he'd need from me today but I'm happy to help him. "Yes, I'll take it. When and where?" Jaxx goes silent, and for a moment I think that maybe our call has gotten disconnected. "Jaxx?"

"Yeah, I'm just shocked you didn't ask about what it was first. Are you financially doing okay? Because you know I'm more than glad to help you out."

The same offer every time we talk and while I love him for the offer I hate feeling like a charity case. "No, I don't need help. Financially, I'm okay. Extra cash never hurt anyone though."

"True. Okay, I'll text you the address and it's basically now or as soon as you can get there kind of thing," he explains.

I look in the mirror. I don't look the greatest but I doubt that really matters. It's nothing, some dry shampoo, a swipe of mascara, eyeliner and highlighter can't help. "I can be out the door in about fifteen minutes."

"Perfect. I'll let him know and text you the address."

"Thanks, Jaxx," I reply.

He sighs again and I know he wants to help me more than I allow him but it's better this way. "Anytime, Kosi."

We hang up the phone and I quickly change into a pair of denim capris, royal blue V-

neck t-shirt, and my Vans before dashing into the bathroom to dry shampoo my hair then back to my room to add the few makeup items I think are key. I grab my purse and check to make sure I have my keys before rushing out the door.

“Whoa, where are you going?” Baylor calls out.

I stop and spin around. “Jaxx called and got me a day gig with Bowie to earn a little extra cash but he needs me as soon as possible.”

“Oh good, well have fun,” she calls out as I scurry out the door. The sun is bright but I forgot my sunglasses. I curse internally as I head down the steps of the apartment complex to the parking lot below. My BMW is long gone and sitting in its place is a blue Ford Fusion. It’s not the best but it’s not the worst either. I’m lucky to even have a vehicle and it’s dependable and good on gas.

When I get inside my car I grab my extra pair of sunglasses that my best friend Toby sent me from England. He’s studying abroad for a year while working on his Ph.D. I slip them on and start the engine. Music comes blaring through the speakers and I instantly cover my ears, then realize I need my hands to turn it down. “Shhhh... that is aggressive and unnecessary. I’m not the same girl I was last night when I got off from work.” Yes, I talk to my car as if it can understand me.

After copying the address that Jaxx sent me via text into the Maps app on my phone, I pause. The address is just outside of town which is odd. Maybe the radio station is opening up a new location or something. I pull out of the parking lot and turn up the music. Pussycat Dolls were and always will be one of my favorites. I’m dancing and singing along while following the directions that the app is giving me.

It isn’t until I turn off the highway that I realize where I’m headed. Slamming on my brakes I put the car in park on the side road. “You’ve got to be kidding me,” I mumble to myself. Free Fall Skydiving School. Which should actually be known as

the most annoying human to spend the day with, Roscoe Langston. Quickly I dial Jaxx and the ringing of his cell phone takes over the speakers, replacing the music. He doesn't answer. I contemplate what to do, but at the end of the day I could use the money, so I set my feelings aside and make my way towards the school.

The two-story warehouse type building comes into view. It could really use a pick-me-up. The appearance is super out of date. I remember coming out here once upon a time with Jaxx and it looks exactly the same as it did years ago. The place has potential, but clearly, no one is concerned about its appeal. I sit in the car, switching the song to Rain City Drive because I need something to psych me out before dealing with Mr. I can't take anything serious.

Three

Roscoe

Something tickles my nose as I try to fall back asleep. I don't need to look to know it's Mushu's orange fluffy tail swiping across my face. He wants attention and if I'm asleep I can't give it to him, something he learned pretty early on. Most cats are independent and only come to you when they want something, but not Mushu. I often say he's a dog trapped in a cat's body. Mushu is always right there by me. The moment I get home he's there to greet me. He's never been like most cats.

I swat his tail away from my face and feel him move from my chest where he was sitting on the bed, next to me. I roll over and drape an arm over him. His warmth is welcoming. I snuggle into his fur. "Good morning to you too. I need at least five more minutes of sleep."

Mushu purrs in contentment beside me. My eyelids grow heavy and the next thing I know I'm waking up to the sound of my alarm buzzing into the otherwise silent room. I roll over and groan. Getting up and ready for the day is the last thing I want

to do but it must be done. As I sit up and scrub my hands over my face in attempt to wake myself up. Slowly, I pull myself out of bed and head to my bathroom where I turn on the shower, as hot as it can go, and let it warm up while I brush my teeth. By the time I climb into the shower it's scalding. My skin screams in protest but it wakes me up, which is what I was trying to do.

After the shower I get dressed in some jeans, t-shirt, and tennis shoes before heading into the kitchen where I find Mushu lounging on the white tiled floor in the sunlight next to his food bowl. I grab him his breakfast before I make a quick protein shake for me. I'm out the door in under ten minutes. I decide to ride one of my motorcycles today as I head to Free Fall, the skydiving school I work at.

Free Fall is outside of Los Angeles about ten miles, down a dirt road off the highway. I don't live too far from the skydiving school, but luckily there isn't a lot of traffic today. It's a beautiful day out. The sun is shining, there's a nice breeze but nothing extreme. It's a perfect day for a skydive.

I pull up to the large two-story warehouse style building. White with red painted words 'Free Fall' over the front door. Farther out there is another building where the two airplanes we use for skydiving are kept. I park around the side and head in. The place is dead quiet except for the phone that keeps ringing off the hook. I head towards the front where Annie should be but there's no one in sight. Quickly, I jog over and answer the phone but by the time I reach it the caller must have given up because it's dead. "Annie?" I call out multiple times, none of them receive a reply so I decide to head out to the airplanes. I'm sure Wyatt, the mechanic, is in there and maybe he can tell me where Annie is.

Making my way over the rocky terrain between the two buildings, I pull out my cell phone to make sure I haven't missed anything important but I don't have any missed notifications. When I reach the second building I open the doors and step inside. "Wyatt?"

Wyatt appears from behind a door. His long curly brown hair is hanging loose around his shoulders. He's got a full-fledged beard instead of his normal five o'clock shadow. His blue coveralls are on but the top half is tied around his trimmed waist. His white muscle shirt is stained with grease and dirt but I know it works for him with the ladies. "What's up boss?" he asks.

I shake my head. I hate being called boss and he knows it but he chooses to ignore it. "Have you seen Annie?"

Wyatt shakes his head. "Not today. She wasn't here when I got here but I just figured she was running late. Is she still not here?"

"No, the front is completely empty. The phone was ringing like crazy but she's nowhere to be seen."

"She's flaky as hell," Wyatt comments.

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He's not wrong. She is a mess. The girl doesn't have a single organizational skill to put to use. Most days she can barely manage to get here and when she does she looks like she just rolled out of bed and drove straight here. "I know but I was hoping that might change."

"Wishful thinking, boss."

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "Wyatt..."

He holds up his hands in his surrender. "I know, I know, you don't like being called that but I still don't know why. The shoe fits."

"It doesn't," I reply, shaking my head. "I have a reputation to uphold."

Wyatt shakes his head. "Whatever you say man. We do need a new receptionist."

I know he's right but letting someone go is not my strong area of expertise. "What if Annie starts crying?"

His head falls back and he laughs out loud. It carries throughout the empty space. "You can't worry about that. It just has to be done."

"We have a private lesson today, right?" I ask.

"Yeah, I think in a couple of hours." Wyatt heads across to one of the two airplanes and slides under the machine.

I turn around and head back out to the main building. Grabbing my cell phone I quickly dial Lane. “Hey, what’s up?”

“Are you free this morning?” I ask her without saying hello.

She laughs. “Annie didn’t show up again?”

I sigh. “Damn it, no.”

“You know I never mind helping you out but I have to take my grandpa to the doctor this morning for his checkup so I can’t today.” Her voice is apologetic.

Disappointment fills me. Lane is always so great with the people. They love her but she does have a life. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll figure something out.”

“What if you try Bowie and see if Hollis can come in?”

That’s a suggestion I hadn’t thought about but it could work. “Thanks. I’ll give him a call. Let me know how grandpa’s doctor’s appointment goes.”

We disconnect the call and I quickly call Bowie. After explaining the situation he told me not to worry that he’d get someone here to help me out for the day. I breathe a sigh of relief before I head inside and start to look over some of the paperwork and get everything ready for the private lesson.

A little while later I hear the front door open. Assuming it’s Hollis I jump to my feet and go out to meet her but what I see isn’t Hollis James, Bowie’s wife, but Kosi Scott aka the last person I wanted to see.

Five

Kosi

After the song ends, I force myself out of my car and into the building. I swear it feels like I stepped into the 1970's. It's almost like a time warp, which of course makes me think of Rocky Horror Picture Show and I start humming the classic song. Roscoe appears from around the corner. "Time Warp?" he asks, his eyebrows raised.

I feel my own shoot up to my hairline. "You know the song?"

"Well I don't live under a rock."

"I just didn't realize you had decent taste in movies," I comment. His head cocks to the side and his hazel blue eyes zero in on me and it's like I forget to breathe. It's completely unfair how infuriating he is yet he's built like a Greek God. Tall, lean, and muscular, square jaw that is forever covered in a five o'clock shadow. Tanned skin and sun-kissed dirty blonde hair. Intense eyes and the perfectly plush lips, the kind of lips that most of Los Angeles pays for but he was naturally blessed with his. Monotone colored ink covers one of his arms. It's just enough to put off a bad boy aura.

He smirks, it's his signature move, and yes, it's probably dropped a lot of panties in his days but not mine. It makes mine tighten around my hips because Roscoe gets under my damn skin like no other. "I have good taste in everything, doll face. You would know that if you weren't so uptight."

My jaw hits the floor. I'd say literally if it were possible. Instantly, my arms cross over my chest and defense mode is activated. "I am not uptight."

I watch as his head falls back in laughter, the way his Adams apple moves along his neck. "I'm pretty sure your picture is next to the definition of uptight."

A growl escapes and I watch his eyes widen with humor. “Don’t you dare laugh. I am not uptight.”

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Roscoe's perfectly straight, white teeth sink into his bottom lip—fighting back his laughter. “Whatever you say, doll face. What are you doing here anyways? I'm pretty sure skydiving is not on your bucket list.”

Scoffing, I shake my head. “Definitely not. I'm here because Bowie called Jaxx who called me about making some extra cash.”

“You agreed to work with me for the day?” I hear the surprise in his voice.

I sigh. “Yeah, I didn't know it was for you but I'm sure you know my situation and I could use the extra cash so here I am. Beggars can't exactly be choosers.”

“Kosi Scott, you are a lot of things but a beggar is not one of them, but I do need help around here today.”

My head bobs in agreement. “Point me in the right direction, tell me what you need and I'll get it done.”

Roscoe studies me for a moment before nodding his head. It looks like we're both going to accept this newfound fate of ours. “Follow me.” I follow behind Roscoe as he leads me to behind the counter. I take in the surroundings but it's all bad. Orange shag carpet, wood paneling on the walls, cracked and yellowed tile, and a stale, musty smell. The lighting is even dim and yellowed. When we get around the counter I see an old fashioned landline phone, tan with tall yellowed buttons. No computer sits on the counter but there is a large desk calendar as well as a date book lying there. “So why were you humming Time Warp?” Now it's my turn to bite my bottom lip to keep something mean from slipping off my tongue. Roscoe has the tendency of making me

do that. Then again I've never been very good at keeping my opinion to myself anyways. My silence causes him to turn around. One look at my face has one of his hands coming up to scratch the scruff on his jaw. "Just say it."

"What?" Caught off guard by his comment.

He shakes his head causing a few strands of hair to fall over his forehead. Normally, Roscoe wears a rolled bandana tied around his head but it's missing today. "You've got this look."

"What look?"

His deep chuckle fills the quiet of the room. "That signature I have something to say but I don't want to say it look."

Shaking my head I deny his comment. "I don't have a look like that."

"Oh you do. I didn't think you did, because for as long as I've known you I've never known you as someone to hold back on what they think, but it's definitely there right now so you might as well say it."

"You don't know me that well."

That smirk appears again and instantly my skin rolls with irritation. "Oh but I do. You're easy to read."

My eyes roll. "Whatever. This place is a damn time warp. It's like stepping back into the Brady Bunch or something. Would it kill you to update this place?"

"That bad?" he asks with a chuckle.

I think my eyes nearly fall out of my head. “I’m surprised people walk in here and somehow still manage to trust that the airplanes they will be jumping out of aren’t ancient or going to fall out of the sky.”

Now he looks offended. “The planes are new and completely kept up.”

“Maybe, but this is the first thing your customers see. This is the original selling point. From a marketing standpoint it’s just bad.”

Roscoe pinches the bridge of his nose. “I’m not saying you’re wrong, but the owner doesn’t want to spend money on this part of the business. He thinks the planes and the jumping gear are the most important parts.”

I nod my head in understanding. “He’s not wrong. Those are the most important parts because they have to do with safety but given that he focuses so much on keeping those things up to par, it’s a shame that the first impression is this.” I motion towards the room around us. “I mean you don’t even have a new phone or a computer.”

“Let me show you what you’ll be doing today,” he says as he turns towards the desk. Roscoe’s entire demeanor has changed and I almost feel bad for what I said but it’s also true. He explains how to answer the phone and make appointments and shows me the schedule for classes and whatnot. I take a seat in the squeaky, metal chair and stare at the calendar as he leaves. He opens the door but then stops and turns towards me. “Thank you for coming on such short notice,” he tells me before disappearing. I don’t even have time to reply before the door shuts. Once again, my mouth falls open because Roscoe has never said thank you to me before. I guess there’s a first time for everything.

Six

Roscoe

The day went by faster than I thought. After Kosi came in to watch the desk area, I was able to get back out to the airplanes and the training center to get set up for the people coming in today. I love days like this. There's nothing like watching people get ready to face a fear or the joy on their faces as they look forward to their first jump. I love being a part of this journey. After working at Free Fall, I totally understand why teachers love what they do.

Once the people for the class arrive, I get to work. It goes well and pretty smoothly. Since this was the first of eight classes there was no jumping today but it's the first step towards that. My stomach growls and I decide to go order some food. "Wyatt," I call out. He appears from under one of the airplanes. "I'm going to head up to the main office and order us some food. Any requests?"

He laughs and shakes his head. "Nope, you know me. As long as it's edible I'll eat it."

"Sounds good," I reply with a chuckle. I head across the field towards the main building of Free Fall. When I enter I'm shocked to hear music playing lightly. As I head towards the main part of the building I'm shocked to see Kosi, out of her seat, cleaning the windows and glass front door as she dances along to Fall Out Boy. For a moment I just stand back and watch her. She's pulled her hair down and I watch as the lights above make her hair glisten. Kosi shakes her hips, using the spray bottle in her hands as a microphone every now and then. I bite back the laughter that threatens to interrupt her.

Kosi Scott is a lot of things. Gorgeous is on the top of that list followed by freaking smart as hell. I've never seen her like this though. While Kosi has always been sarcastic, which I normally chalk up to her high intelligence, I never imagined she could have so much fun. Kosi and fun just don't seem like they go in the same sentence. She's always been so laser focused on whatever her plan or goal was that letting loose and having fun just never seemed like something she would be into. I'm

shocked to see her with her hair down, so-to-speak. It's a fantastic look on her and one I wish she'd do more often. She spins around, noticing me for the first time. Suddenly, she yelps, drops the spray bottle which busts as it hits the floor, causing Kosi to jump back before the liquid gets on her Vans. "What the hell, Roscoe?" An annoyed look crosses her face. I do laugh out loud this time.

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I push away from the door jamb I was leaning against as I watched her put on a show. “Don’t stop on my behalf. I was actually rather enjoying it.”

She rolls her eyes and scoffs. “Of course you were but hate to break it to you, Roscoe, this is not Red Hot.”

Red Hot is a local club... it’s kind of hard to explain but some nights it’s a strip club. Even the waitresses wear next to nothing. “I would never put you and Red Hot in the same sentence, Kosi.”

“Sure you wouldn’t.” She grabs a roll of paper towels and bends down to start cleaning up the liquid that escaped the bottle she dropped.

Her words sting slightly. “Look I know you don’t like me but I’m not that big of an ass. I’d never place a girl like you in Red Hot. And when I made that comment that wasn’t what I was thinking either.”

Kosi looks up. Uncertainty covers her face. Her hazel eyes hold my own captive. “I never said I didn’t like you.”

My head falls back in laughter. “You don’t have to say that, Kosi. I can tell.”

She shakes her head and stands up. “Roscoe, you frustrate me. I never said I didn’t like you.”

“Isn’t that the same thing?” I ask as I cross the room and head towards the closet tucked away in the corner. Grabbing the mop, I wait for her answer.

“No, it’s not at all the same thing.”

I walk back to her and begin to mop up the liquid on the floor. She looks at the mop then me. “Why do I frustrate you?”

Kosi shakes her head and the smell of cherry blossom fills the small space between us. It smells like heaven on her. “I don’t think we should go there.”

My smirk falls into place. “I think we should. Maybe I could fix the situation if I knew what I did wrong.”

She sighs. “That’s the thing, Roscoe, you don’t do anything wrong. It’s just the way you’re wired—your carefree and do what you want attitude. I’m the opposite and that’s all there is to it. It’s like oil and water with us.”

As I stand there, staring at her baby doll-like face and listening to her sweet voice, my head gets a little foggy. To be honest, it always has been around her, but I knew she was so far out of my league. I’ve never considered anything with her. She’ll forever be my friend’s little sister. “It doesn’t have to be.”

Kosi rolls her eyes. “It does but it’s okay.” I watch as her cheeks flush and teeth sink into her pouty bottom lip. After a moment of both of us not moving, and just breathing in the air around us—that seems to have an odd tension between us—she asks, “So how was the class?”

With her words she takes some steps back and the trance of the moment is broken. “It was good. Wyatt and I are starving and I’m sure you’re hungry too. I was going to order some pizza and wings from Wings and Things. Any requests?” For a moment she looks uncomfortable and starts to shake her head. As she does I remember her money and job situation. “My treat, Kosi.”

“That’s not necessary, Roscoe.” The phone begins to ring and she makes her way back around the desk. I was only asking to be polite. Kosi loves deep dish pizza with black olives, onion, and green chilis. While she’s on the phone I take a look around the place. The office area looks ten times better. Kosi must have spent all day cleaning in here. After I finish mopping the floor and Kosi books a person for a beginner’s class, I grab my phone and place my order through the Wings and Things app. We finish up at the same time.

“You did a lot of cleaning in here today.”

Kosi shrugs. “It needed it. No offense, and I wasn’t super busy and I didn’t see any sense in sitting around here doing nothing.”

“You get paid for nothing,” I counter.

She nods her head. “Maybe, but I didn’t bring my book with me so I wanted to feel like I did something useful.”

“Lunch should be here shortly.”

“Roscoe...”

I hold my hand up to stop her lecture. “It’s the least I can do. This is just a temporary job for you and you already did so much more than my actual receptionist, who by the way has yet to show up or call. You deserve lunch.”

“Whatever you say,” she says, and goes back to writing the appointment on the desk calendar. Her words from earlier about this area being the first impression comes back to mind. I walk over to the desk and smile down at her. She looks up and eyebrows pinch together. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Earlier, when you were talking about this area needing a pick-me-up...” my words trail off.

Kosi nods her head slowly. “Yeah?”

“Could you make a list of things you noticed that might help it? It’s just a bunch of guys around here and we aren’t known for noticing these types of things. Plus aren’t you some big wig marketing person?” I give her the best smile and eyebrow wag I can.

She laughs. “Marketing executive, and yes I was that person, but I haven’t been in the last few months.” For a moment, silence settles between us. “I’ll make a list though.”

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“Perfect. Can you give me a call when the food gets here?” She nods her head and I make my way back out of the building. When I reach the back door I stop and turn back towards her. “Thank you, Kosi.” She seems shocked but I rush out the door before the moment is gone.

Seven

Kosi

The food arrives and I call Roscoe to let him know. A few minutes later Roscoe and Wyatt both show up, rushing through the back door. Apparently, they were hungry. I can't help laughing at them. Roscoe grabs some paper plates from a room I haven't been into and reappears, giving us each one. When he opens the pizza box I'm shocked to see it's my favorite pizza toppings. I expected something basic like pepperoni. For a moment I just stare at the box. Hardly anyone remembers my favorite pizza. “I know you have to be hungry so grab you some pizza,” Roscoe encourages me.

I lean forward and grab a piece but there's a weird, warm sensation in the middle of my chest. It's caught me off guard. I eat quietly listening to Wyatt and Roscoe talk about something for one of the planes. After lunch is done the guys head back outside. I sit for a moment letting the pizza digest and search for a scrap piece of paper. As I look around the room my mind starts to build with the potential it has. I quickly start to jot down what needs the most attention. The list just doesn't seem like enough so I grab another piece of paper and add a small sketch of what the area could look like with a few updates. I sit back and double check the list and sketch. Fully satisfied with them, I stand up and gather the trash. I'm not sure where the dumpsters

are so I sit the trash bag by the back door then I finish up cleaning.

Roscoe has another class to teach and then we should all be done for the day. Throughout the afternoon I make a few more appointments. Roscoe comes back in, looking a little tired, just before I need to leave. “I bagged up the trash but I wasn’t sure where the dumpster was so I just left it by the back door.”

He smiles and I swear those twelve year old butterflies return into my stomach. Once upon a time I was hopelessly in love with him. It was ages ago but I did spend my time practicing his name and drawing hearts around it. Then again I also used to be in love with Nick Lachey. People grow up. Things change. The butterflies, though, blind side me. “Thanks. I’ll make sure it gets disposed of but you didn’t have to do that.” Roscoe looks around. “Did you do more cleaning?”

My shoulders shrug. “I just finished cleaning up. Most of it was already done. I also made the list you asked for.” Leaning forward I pick up the pieces of paper and hand them to him. The entire time I’m hyper aware of his eyes on me. The heat from his eyes causes heat to rise into my cheeks.

Roscoe takes the papers and looks down at them. His eyes widen a fraction before he looks back up at me. “Did you draw this?”

This is embarrassing. At the time when I was drawing the sketch it seemed like a good idea but now I’m not so sure. Insecurity rages into my mind and I look down. “It was just for fun. You can ignore it.”

He shakes his head vigorously. “This is good... like really good.”

“Oh.”

“Kosi, this is really, really good. Did you ever consider doing this for a career?”

Roscoe asks. His voice is full of curiosity. At first I want to give him the prepared story I tell everyone when I get asked about my career but for some reason I can't seem to lie to him right now.

I nod my head slowly. "I did actually. It was all I wanted to do when I was growing up. For years I jumped between fashion design and interior design. I even applied to some fashion institutes during my senior year of high school."

Roscoe looks really shocked but seems to recover pretty quickly. "How in the hell did you end up in marketing? Being one of those corporate types. This is clearly your passion."

Here's where the conversation tends to get uncomfortable for me. "You've met my father. You've seen how he treats Rome and Jaxx. I didn't want to disappoint him so I followed what he wanted for me."

"Kosi..." he says on a sigh.

I shake my head. "Don't say my name like that. I don't fully regret that decision. I liked marketing. I was great at it and I still got a little design in my life from it. Plus, my relationship with him isn't strained like it is with my brothers. I'm thankful for that."

"I get that. I'm not judging you for your decision. Also, I don't doubt you rocked that job. It's just who you are." At his compliment I feel the blush rush to my cheeks. "It's just... I hate the idea of you not doing what you want. This is amazing and in my opinion what you should be doing."

Roscoe's words actually mean a lot to me. More than he could possibly know. I shrug my shoulders, the weight of sadness and disappointment settling on them once again. "Instead, I'm neither a designer nor in marketing now... I'm a waitress. I'm a

waitress who barely makes ends meet because I'm scared to touch my savings account."

"Kosi," Roscoe says again.

I shake my head trying to shake away the pity party I was throwing for myself. When I look up I see his eyes and the pity that is reflected in them and I cringe. That's the look I hate. I got that look so many times after Colby and I broke up and then just a few months later when I got laid off from my job. That look is one I don't handle well anymore. "It's not a big deal."

He looks uncertain, but before we can get any deeper into the subject or end up fighting about it I grab my purse. "Where are you going?"

"I have to get to my other job," I tell him with a small smile.

"Well, let me pay you real quick." Roscoe turns and heads into another part of the building when he comes back out he has his wallet in his hand. I shake my head and move towards the front door. I wanted to earn some extra money but this just seems wrong now. "Kosi?"

My hand is resting on the door handle and I look over my shoulder at him. "Don't worry about it. I actually had a lot of fun and you got me lunch. We'll call it even."

"That wasn't the deal, Kosi."

I shrug my shoulders. "It is now." Pulling open the door I rush out of it. When I get into my car my heart is racing. Something shifted for me today when it comes to Roscoe. The shift can bring nothing good.

Eight

Roscoe

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Kosi stays on my mind over the next few days. I'm not sure why and it's frustrating me. I've never been one to dwell over a girl. My personality gets bored with most things quickly. I'm also pretty guarded. Growing up I saw how bad relationships could be. I envied the family that Bowie grew up in. Ronald and Annie James were the epitome of love. My parents were the polar opposites. So when it comes to any kind of romantic relationship I normally just avoid them at all costs. I'm not saying I want a romantic relationship with Kosi Scott—I still can't stand her and I'm sure the feeling is still mutual.

It's just that Kosi is smart and what she said about the appearance of Free Fall isn't wrong. Did it sting to hear that, most definitely, but it was still pretty damn accurate. The last few nights I have spent a few hours online looking for someone to come in and redecorate the place but the truth is everyone I have found is way out of my budget. No one knows I recently took out a loan to purchase Free Fall. Mac wanted out. He was ready to retire. I had been with him the longest so he confided in me. Mac had a few offers but no one could guarantee that Free Fall would remain the same. The idea of the skydiving school suddenly disappearing made me a little desperate and the next thing I knew I applied for a loan and bought the school from Mac. I'm still learning the ropes on running the place. I don't come from money and with just buying the school I'm a little low on cash.

Mushu rubs against my legs and I pick him up, pressing a kiss to the top of his head as he purrs. There's a knock on the door and I check the time before getting off the couch to answer it. Bowie James stands on the other side. He holds up a six pack of glass bottle Cola. "I got the night off."

I chuckle. Bowie is the third of five brothers. His reputation was always that he was a

hot-headed flirt. Bowie is no stranger to spending the night in jail after letting his fists do his talking. The entire time I've known him he's only ever had one thing to keep him level-headed... Hollis. Hollis was his high school girlfriend but after a huge tragedy in her life, she ran away. Bowie was heartbroken of course and he became wilder by the day. Then ten years after she left, Hollis reappeared. They finally got their second chance, but even that had obstacles that they managed to overcome. Now, they're married with three kids. It still makes me want to laugh, though, when I think about Bowie as a dad. He's a great father so don't get me wrong, it's just I've always seen him as one way and suddenly he's not that version anymore. I step aside from the door, pulling it open all the way. "Then come on in."

Bowie enters with a heavy thud of his boots that I'm sure the neighbors below don't appreciate. No matter how much Bowie changes, though, some things remain the same. His baby blue eyes that made all the girls swoon still swim with mischief. The signature dark brown James hair has always been cut short and spiked in every direction. A few tattoos litter his body and I'm not sure I've ever seen him without his black combat boots. Bowie takes a seat on my tan couch while placing the six pack of Cola on the white top coffee table in front of him. "Hollis and some of the girls decided to do a movie night with the kids." By some of the girls, Bowie is referring to his brothers' wives or fiancés, Sadie, Londynn, Kynlee, and Summer.

"Sounds like a nice night off. You want to watch a movie?" I offer as I sit Mushu on the floor before heading towards the couch.

"Yeah, let's watch a good slasher movie. All I ever see these days is cartoons full of love songs. Let's order a pizza too," Bowie adds.

I pat my pockets for my cell phone. Bowie watches me. "It must be in my room."

"That would explain why you didn't reply when I texted." I head into my room and find my cell phone lying in the middle of my unmade bed. After grabbing it, I head

back to my living room where I see Bowie studying the screen of my laptop. When I take a seat on the couch he looks over at me. “What’s that all about?” he asks while nodding his head towards the computer.

For a moment I hesitate before reminding myself that he is my best friend and it would be nice to get someone else’s opinion on the state of Free Fall. Especially since Kosi’s words have been on repeat in my head. “I bought Free Fall, but the other day Kosi came in last minute to help out when Annie didn’t show up and she was telling me how the first impression doesn’t give off the right vibe. So, I was looking for someone to give it a facelift so-to-speak but they’re all out of my price range.” After my confession I take a much needed deep breath. When I look in Bowie’s direction he looks confused, eyes wide.

“I’m not sure where to start.”

I shrug my shoulders and open the app on my phone to order some pizza. “From the beginning I would guess.”

Bowie nods his head, I notice from the corner of my eye. “Kosi Scott came to help you out for the day?”

My head falls back against the couch as the phone slips into my lap from my hands. “Out of all of that, Kosi is the part you caught?”

He chuckles. “No, I caught a lot of shit. That’s just the most shocking considering that you two don’t really get along.”

“We still don’t,” I admit. “But apparently she needs the money bad enough to come help me out for the day.”

Bowie raises his eyebrows. “Or... Jaxx didn’t tell her it was for you when he first

offered her the job for the day.”

That thought hadn't occurred to me but it actually made sense. Bowie gets up from the couch and makes his way over to the TV stand that sits below my flat screen hanging on the wall. The TV stand houses all of my movie obsessions which include all things horror and of course, Disney. Judge me if you must but Disney will forever be one of my favorites. I have every movie they've ever made. Bowie grabs the remote to my Blu-ray player and picks a disc from the movies. He pauses the movie once he sits back down. Mushu jumps onto the couch between the two of us and stretches back out. “That's probably what happened.”

“So, you bought Free Fall? Why am I just now finding out about this?” Bowie asks.

Guilt seizes my body for a moment. Bowie and Lane have always been my best friends. Keeping something as big as buying a skydiving school isn't something I would normally keep from them but I had my reasons. I shrug my shoulders. “I was worried about jinxing the process. To be honest I didn't expect to even be approved for a loan large enough to actually purchase it from Mac. That was sheer luck.”

“No. That was work and determination. I know you have a lot of self-doubts but ,Roscoe man, you work your ass off. I would have been happy to help you out in any way I could have if I had known you were buying the school.” Bowie looks slightly hurt but not angry which means this is something that our friendship will survive. “So, this whole first impression thing really has you on a tailspin doesn't it?”

I sit back against the couch one more time and Mushu moves to my lap. Sighing heavily, “Yeah, it does. At first I thought it was just Kosi, well, being Kosi but then after she left I just stood there and looked around and she's right. I hate to admit that. It might literally kill a piece of myself but it's true. The planes and jumping equipment are in excellent condition but you see the office first and it's like stepping back into some John Hughes film. 80s all the way. So, now I'd like to give it a little

pick-me-up but everything is so damn expensive.”

There’s a knock on the door and Bowie gets up without a moment of hesitation. That’s the way our friendship is. We’re more like family than friends. I wouldn’t trade it for anything. He collects the pizza before walking into my small kitchen just off the living room and grabbing some paper plates. “I have an idea to help you with that problem but I’m pretty sure you aren’t going to like it. Hell, to be honest, you’re probably going to hate it.”

After moving Mushu back to the middle of the couch I sit up and collect some pizza. “Let’s hear it.”

“You could always ask Kosi. I mean with her being out of the big money now I think she’d want the money and if I remember correctly once upon a time that’s exactly what she wanted to be.” Bowie takes a bite of his pizza. Silence falls between us. Uncertainty is all I feel. I do know Kosi wanted to do interior design or something along that line of work originally, she told me as much the day she worked at Free Fall for Annie. However, the idea of asking her and actually having to deal with her on a regular basis doesn’t exactly scream fun to me. I grab a glass bottle of Cola and pop the top. After taking a big swig, letting the carbonation tingle my tongue—I don’t know what it is but a glass bottle just makes everything taste better. “Do you remember when we used to get these glass bottle sodas and pretend they were beer?”

Bowie laughs, the corners of his eyes crinkling. “Hell yeah, I do. We thought we were so cool. Lane is the only one who had any sense. She would always call us dumb and roll her eyes.” The memories from easier days floods back to me. “Nice try on changing the subject but at least consider asking Kosi.”

I nod my head. “I will.” Reaching over I grab the remote and start the movie. “So which one did you pick?”

“The best... Scream, of course,” Bowie tells me with a wink. We sit back, eat pizza, drink Cola, and watch our favorite scary movie until it ends and Bowie leaves. Then it’s just Mushu and I again and I’m left with the lingering question of... should I ask Kosi or not?

Nine

Kosi

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:56 am

It's a beautiful day in Los Angeles. The kind that I love and somehow, by the grace of God, I managed to get the entire day and night off. It's a rare occurrence these days. I'm used to working just about twenty-four seven but it's different when you're doing something that feels fulfilling versus working as a waitress. Some people probably love being a waitress but it's not for me. I'm pretty sure I mess up more than I get right and the only reason I still have the job is because Catron, the manager, feels sorry for me. As much as I'm wanting to enjoy the day off, Baylor woke me up way earlier than I would have liked. Going on just a few hours of sleep is never a good idea for me. I had barely gotten home a little after three, and at eight this morning she was bouncing into my room announcing plans for our day. My only plan had been to sleep until noon then get up and watch *Supernatural* for as long as humanly possible before going back online and looking for a job in my actual field of work. Instead, I rolled out of bed, took a quick shower, and got dressed. When I come out of my bedroom Baylor is waiting for me. Her purse sits beside her on the island in the kitchen where she is perched on one of the bar stools, flipping through a gossip magazine. When she realizes I'm finally ready, she huffs, rolls her eyes, and tosses the magazine onto the counter. "It's about time. I could have starved to death by now, you do realize this, don't you?" she asks dramatically. Baylor is smart, funny, sarcastic, and slightly dramatic, in case you were wondering.

I shrug my shoulders. "You seem pretty alive to me."

Baylor glares at me. "How rude." She winks at me before turning around to grab her purse and keys. "Let's get out of here before brunch becomes lunch."

As we head out of the door I decide to bite the dust and embarrass myself. "Where are you planning on going for brunch?"

Her tan wedge-heeled foot pauses on the staircase. “Why?”

My eyes dart around and study everything but her. “I just wanted to know how much money I should bring.”

“None. Today is my treat.” Baylor turns around and places her sunglasses over her eyes.

I sigh as the embarrassment sets in. This is the one thing I’ve never wanted. I’ve never wanted charity or for people to feel like they had to take care of me in any form. “I have the money, I just need to move it to a different account.” That’s not a lie. I have money saved but it’s in my savings account and not my regular account and I like to be prepared ahead of time. “That’s not necessary.”

Baylor doesn’t answer until we’re in the parking lot and have reached her Jeep. She stops and moves her sunglasses to sit on top of her head. “I know but days like this used to be common for me. It was always Summer and I, but now she’s married and pregnant and I’m so happy for her but I miss having a girl’s day. So, I figured you and I could give it a try. Please, just humor me.”

Sighing, I nod my head and we climb into her Jeep. As we pull onto the street I ask Baylor, “So, what’s the plan for today?”

“First of all, food because I’m starving.”

I laugh. “Yeah, we established that part.”

“Then the spa for massages, facials, manicures, and pedicures... all the good stuff. After that I figured we could do a little shopping before grabbing some tacos from Rico’s and heading home to binge watch some Hallmark movies,” she explains with a shrug. A very little known fact about Baylor is that she’s actually a hopeless romantic

and loves all things Hallmark. If there is a number one fan... it's her.

"Sounds like a great plan." I sit back in my seat and try to relax. Baylor turns up the music. My Chemical Romance comes through the speakers. I bite back my laughter. The other thing about Baylor, and it's probably a more well known fact, is that she loves early 2000s rock. Especially emo rock. Before I know it we are driving around in circles. Baylor reaches forward and turns the music down. "What are you doing?" I ask.

"Brunch is supposed to be Croissants a Million but they moved locations this week and I can't see the street signs," she explains.

My eyebrows pull together. "And turning down the music helps you see better?"

She comes up to a four way stop and looks over at me, sticking her tongue out. "Yes, apparently it does." Baylor tosses her hands in the air like she gives up. We bust out laughing and we continue to look for Croissants a Million for the next ten minutes. Finally, the sunshine yellow food truck comes into sight. Baylor cheers in victory. Croissants a Million is so underrated in this area. They have amazing food. Everything is in or on a Croissant and the croissants are to die for. Fresh, warm, and flaky. Just thinking about it makes my stomach growl. Baylor grabs a parking space a few blocks down and we make our way up to the line. "So, how was work?" Baylor asks as we wait.

I shrug my shoulders. My normal response these days. "It was okay. Busy as usual. A few guys had to get removed by the bouncers."

"Really? Why?"

"Just getting too rowdy and handsy with the girls." The line moves and we shuffle with it. Baylor's long red hair dances in the California breeze. Her cuffed denim

shorts are slightly distressed paired with a pair of sandals and a light blue halter top. Her fair skin looks even paler in the sunlight. “You remembered to put on sunscreen right?”

Baylor laughs. “With skin this light it’s the first thing that goes on.”

“Touché. So, how’s school?” Baylor is a teacher at one of the most elusive private schools in Los Angeles.

“About the same as always. Most of the students are so entitled by their parents’ absence that they expect everything to be handed to them in this world. When I don’t do that they throw a fit for a while but eventually get over it and buckle down and do the work that needs to be done.” We reach the window and place our order before taking our number and moving to the other side of the truck where most of the people are waiting.

Her job sounds even more stressful than the one I got laid off from. “So, why do they feel so entitled?”

Baylor takes a deep breath. “Well, really it’s just that most of their parents have highly demanding careers and the children are often cast aside. Then the parents start to give them material things to make up for their absence. Eventually, the children start to normalize materialistic things as the things that matter.”

My head is spinning with all this information. Baylor and I have been friends for a while and she saved me when she let me roommate with her after I had to let go of my house, but now that I think about it we don’t really know each other all that well. “I would have never guessed. So, are all the students like that?”

She shakes her head. “No, not all. We do have some scholarship students that are amazing and some of the celebrity students do fine too. It all depends. I have a new

student who just transferred and he's been great."

Something about the way her face changes when she brings up the new student makes me curious but I don't want to pry. "Is he a new student to the school or just to your class?"

"The school, the city... all of it. His parents got killed in a car accident so he had to move here to live with his uncle who seems a little lost but he's trying," Baylor explains. Her eyes are a little dreamy looking so I can't help but wonder. I don't bring it up again and soon enough we get our order, we sit at one of the picnic tables along with a couple and enjoy our brunch.

After brunch we make our way to the spa. On the way, Baylor's phone rings through the Bluetooth in the car. Summer's name is dancing on the screen. Baylor answers, "Hey, doll face!"

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Summer laughs. Summer James is married to the youngest James brother, Jovi. They're expecting a baby soon too if I'm not mistaken. "Hi Bay. What are you up to?" Baylor goes on to tell Summer about our plans for the day. "Sounds like the good ole' days."

"What are you up to?" Baylor asks.

"I'm so glad you asked. So, Londynn's mom decided she wanted to host a huge sleepover for all of the kids so all of us are going to Pedal to the Metal tonight. You have to come. You too, Kosi," Summer says.

Baylor laughs. "As if we'd be anywhere else. We'll see you tonight!" Summer and Baylor disconnect the call and Baylor turns to me as we park in the lot for the spa. "Looks like we definitely have to go shopping now. We can't wear just any old thing to Pedal to the Metal."

I slip out of the Jeep. Pedal to the Metal is the local street races. The James brothers are notorious there too. Pretty much undefeatable. I don't get to go often but I'm excited to see them all in action tonight. Plus, there's a good chance I'll get to visit with Jaxx and Kenndrix too. Maybe, today will be a good day after all.

Ten

Roscoe

I'm closing up Free Fall for the day when the front door rattles, like someone is trying to open a locked door. As I head for the front of the office the person outside

starts banging on the door. “Roscoe! It’s us!” Jogging forward I pull the door open and see Bowie, his wife Hollis, and Lane.

My eyebrows pull together in question. “What are you guys doing here?” I ask, glancing at my watch to see the time. It’s not super late but late enough that Bowie and Hollis should be home with their kids.

Bowie smirks. “Pedal to the Metal.”

My mouth falls open. It’s been a hell of a long time since Bowie graced the streets of Los Angeles at a Pedal to the Metal. Lane laughs and nudges past me as she enters the office area. “Don’t look so shocked, Ros.”

“I am shocked,” I admit. “When was the last time Bowie went to a local street race?”

Silence falls between the four of us. All of us are trying to figure out the time frame. Hollis clears her throat. “Almost a year. “

Lane lets out a low whistle from where she stands. Currently, she’s leaning back against the counter, elbows resting on the top. Her long legs look as if they could go on for days in her frayed, denim cutoffs with the black fishnet stockings on under. Her glittery black combat boots have red shoelaces tonight to match the red sheer shirt she has on with a black tube top underneath. Her signature platinum blonde hair is long gone and in its place is a fire engine red. The pixie cut she had a few years ago has also vanished. Now, it’s an asymmetrical bob. “I never thought I’d see the day where Bowie would stay away from the street races that long!” Lane blows a bubble in bright red cinnamon flavored gum and lets it pop.

Bowie shrugs. “Things change once you settle down. There’s no place I’d rather be than at home with Hollis and the kids... except for tonight.”

Hollis laughs. "I fully support this, though."

"Speaking of kids, where are they?" I ask. My eyes dart around to make sure I didn't miss my adopted nieces and nephew.

The smile that graces Hollis' face is so full of love and peace. It makes me happy to see her in this state. I still remember when we first met her. She was a far cry from where she is now. Somehow, Bowie and Hollis found each other and beat the odds. "Londynn's mom actually wanted to have a huge sleepover for all of the kids. So, they're all over at her house. She went all out too. Bouncy house and all sorts of things."

"Those kids are going to love that," I say.

Lane laughs. "Kids? Hell, we would all love that," Lane adds. She's right. That would be something that her, Bowie, and I would go for in a heartbeat. Every year we all go to the carnival along with Hollis and their kids and I swear the three of us have more fun than the kids do. We all nod in agreement.

"So, if all the kids are there for the night does that mean a James family reunion at Pedal to the Metal?" I ask.

Bowie wags his eyebrows up and down and his grin grows. "That's exactly what it means. So, close up here and let's get down there. You're racing too."

After I cut off all the lights and lock everything up we head out to our cars. Bowie and I walk side by side. The sun set a long time ago. My stomach growls in hunger but I choose to ignore it. "You know I haven't raced in a long time, right?"

He chuckles. "Neither have I, but damn it feels good to know that's all about to change, doesn't it?"

Bowie walks ahead of me so he can open the car door for Hollis. As exciting as racing again sounds, it also makes me a little nervous. Racing is like gambling, at least for me it is. I don't have the James blood so I'm not destined to win every time I slide behind the wheel of a car. Normally, I'm a carefree, throw caution to the wind kind of guy but considering that I bought a skydiving school and it needs a facelift... well that changes things. Losing money I could use for Free Fall just seems wrong to me.

Bowie and Hollis lead Lane and I to the spot where the races are being held this week. As we drive down the street it's easy to spot the line of James brothers cars as well as all of their closest friends. Apparently, we're some of the last ones to arrive. I grab the parking spot next to Lane and climb out of the car. We all make our way towards our group of friends and instantly my eyes are drawn to the sun-kissed blonde with honey-colored eyes standing next to Baylor, laughing so carefree. Kosi looks completely different than what I'm used to. Her blonde hair is curled in long ringlets, half of it pulled away from her face. The eye makeup is heavy tonight but it only makes her eyes stand out even more. The nude lip keeps her still looking simple. She has a pair of gold hoops on with a triple layer necklace that only makes the low cut, black tank top more noticeable. Her jeans sit low on her hips and hug her like perfection. The last piece is the pair of gold wedges on her feet. Once again, I'm reminded that Kosi has always been beautiful. It's our personalities that seem to clash.

Bowie nudges my arm. "Are you going to ask her?"

When I glance over at him, he's eyeing me expectantly. I shrug my shoulders. "I just don't know how well that would work out. It's no secret that the two of us really don't get along."

"That's true but she might have a different tune if it's to do something like redecorating the school. I know we discussed this already but I still think you should

give it a try.” Bowie is trying to encourage me. I appreciate it. I’m just not sure about it.

I give him a smile. “I’ll think about it.” We make our way to the group. As we approach, everyone greets one another. “Where’s Ralph?” I ask. Ralph is the guy that normally runs the Pedal to the Metal but I don’t spot him or his car anywhere.

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Baylor's mouth falls open. "Oh, that's right none of you have been to one of these in a while. Ralph moved. He took a job somewhere in the Midwest. Decker runs the races now," she says, motioning with her head towards a guy standing across the street. After catching up some more on life and whatnot, the group disperses. The girls hang back together as the guys and Lane make our way over to Decker to buy into the races.

Decker is a tall, lean, kind of nerdy looking guy with glasses and a nose ring. His hair is ashy blonde and curly. He looks more Abercrombie than anything to be honest. "The James brothers and their crew. I'm honored."

Ace smirks. "You should be." By looking at the James brothers, Ace James, second to youngest, looks the most intimidating. Covered in colorful ink from the neck down with piercing blue eyes that are always lined with black, snake bite lip piercings and a don't mess with me attitude, he comes across unapproachable. He's also slightly cocky but he can back it up. However, he's not the most hot-headed one. That's still Bowie.

Decker chuckles. "Please, tell me you are here to race?"

Axell, the oldest of the brothers and more of a father figure sometimes, replies, "Yes, we are all here to race tonight." Axell, like all of his brothers, has dark brown hair, mostly shaved on the side, and slicked back on top. He's tall with a few tattoos. Axell is definitely the strong silent type but maybe most noticeable are his eyes. Axell has a rare eye disease that causes his eyes to be two different colors. One is hazel while the other is half hazel, half blue.

I watch as Decker's eyes light up with eagerness. "This is great!" Decker produces a pocket book and pen from his back pocket and starts writing down the line up. Bowie looks over at me and Lane, laughing and rolling his eyes. When I said the James brothers were kind of royalty in the street world... I wasn't kidding.

Eleven

Kosi

I haven't been to the local street races in years. The past few years I've been too busy with work to even think about something like this. So, it's been since college. However, I knew I couldn't miss tonight. When Summer had called to tell Baylor about all the James brothers going to be here tonight, it became a can't miss event. Then Kenndrix, my brother's fiancé, called and told me that Jaxx was going to race. I decided it was time to make an appearance. Baylor and I spent the rest of the afternoon primping at the spa before stopping into one of the local fashion boutiques, Lace and Grace. There we found some new things to wear tonight. After we grabbed some tacos for a late lunch we went home and got ready for tonight.

As we're standing around talking, Bowie and his wife Hollis pull up. I'm not shocked to see Bowie's two best friends Lane and Roscoe with him. However, I am a little shocked at my body's reaction to seeing Roscoe again. It's been days since I filled in at Free Fall but it's not like Roscoe and I have ever talked on a regular basis. We've rarely seen each other, and when we do it's never been pleasant. There was just something different about him that day at the skydiving school. I can't put my finger on it, but it's kept Roscoe on my mind since that day.

Tonight, as he approached the group I could feel his eyes on me and I can't help but wonder if he felt a shift too. Roscoe doesn't speak to me as he joins the group. Then again, I make no move to speak to him either. We stand in the group, avoiding each other as normal but a part of me wishes we weren't avoiding each other. Eventually, the

guys head over to greet Decker and buy into the races. Us girls hang back and continue girl talk. Kenndrix smiles at me. "I love your shoes."

Kenndrix is gorgeous. She always has been. Average height, curves for days, bright green eyes and long dark brown hair. She's a screenplay writer and my brother is a stuntman. They've been together for years, except for a few years that they were actually broke up. No matter what, though, my brother has always been in love with her. I'm so glad they're finally engaged. "Thanks, Kenndrix. They were a great find today at Lace and Grace."

"I've heard so much about that boutique," she adds. Kynlee, Kenndrix's best friend and wife to Ace James, joins us. Kynlee and Kenndrix look similar when it comes to their long dark hair, but Kynlee's eyes are stormy gray and she's petite.

"Which boutique?" Kynlee asks.

"Lace and Grace," Kenndrix answers while I check my phone that is vibrating in my pocket.

"Oh, I love that place." Kynlee nods her head in approval.

Kenndrix looks a little shocked when I look up at her. "When did you go there?"

Kynlee shrugs her shoulders. "When you and Jaxx were in Paris getting engaged. We'll go tomorrow." Kynlee sticks her tongue out at Kenndrix, and we all laugh. After that, we line up and watch the guys head to their cars and drive off so that they can be put in the order they are racing.

It's a perfect night in Los Angeles. The sky is as clear as it gets in this part of the world. Moonlight shines on the asphalt of the street along with the streetlights overhead. If you listen closely, you can hear the ocean waves crashing into the shore.

A slight thump from the music coming from the cars at the start line mixes with the muted chatter of the crowd. Both sides of the streets are lined with people from all walks of life. The groups of people line the street for as far as the eye can see. There's a slight humid breeze out here bringing the smell of the salty ocean with it. Car engines rev and it's almost as if you can feel the anticipation of the night all the way down to your bones.

Race after race I watch the cars speed by. Flying away from the start line and out of my view before reappearing in what feels like mere seconds and crossing the finish line at speeds that are far beyond my comprehension. It amazes me just like it always has.

So far, all of the races are won by our group. As if anyone here on the crowded streets had any doubts about the James brothers winning. Some of their friends lose, but Jaxx wins. Roscoe pulls up to the start line, and for whatever reason, my heart jumps into my throat. He revs the engine of his car, and even from here, I'm pretty sure I can make out the smirk on his face. Baylor turns to me as Jovi returns to the group dragging Summer's attention away from her. "So, are we ever going to talk about Colby getting engaged?"

Her question feels like it comes out of left field. I feel my eyes bulge out in shock. "What?"

Baylor sighs and turns to face me with a shake of her head and roll of her eyes. "You know exactly what I'm talking about. You've been avoiding it."

"I have not." My tone is super defensive which makes sense because I'm totally lying and I'm not good at it. Truth is, I don't want to say anything about the Colby engagement situation. I feel like everyone expects some sort of reaction out of me but I don't have one. I just feel... confused by it all to be honest.

“Yes, you have. I was just wondering if maybe being out here tonight had made you want to talk about it,” Baylor explains. I shake my head and she accepts that answer. “Okay, well, I’m here if that changes.”

That’s the best thing about Baylor, she doesn’t hover over you, trying to get you to talk. She’s fine to let you be. At some point, while talking to Baylor and being lost in thought, Roscoe’s race already started. I stand along the street and wait to see who crosses the finish line first. Roscoe’s bright orange Challenger comes into view but the navy blue Skyline is right on his bumper. I watch as the two of them fight for the lead. At what seems like the last moment, the Skyline overtakes Roscoe, but in one last blast of speed, perfectly timed, Roscoe crosses the finish line first, securing his win. My lungs deflate. I didn’t even realize I had been holding my breath. The crowd swarms forward to congratulate Roscoe and the rest of our group. I hang back and let the swell of pride fill my heart.

Later, after everyone has collected their winnings and the crowds have started to disperse, Jagger announces that everyone is welcome to come to JamesTown for some victory drinks. Another place I haven’t been into in a while. Baylor looks over at me, eyebrows raised in a silent question, and I nod my head yes. We head back to Baylor’s Jeep and climb inside. She’s quiet but turns up the music. Uncomfortable by Halestorm is playing and it makes me think about my life, where I was and where I am now. When we arrive at JamesTown it’s already packed. Everyone from the races have already gotten here as well as Sons of Sin, a local motorcycle club that Drake James, Axell James’ son, is a member of. Sons of Sin isn’t your typical motorcycle club. They actually stay out of trouble and do a lot to try and help out the community that we live in. Los Angeles is a big place but this little portion of it really admires the path Sons of Sin are on now.

The moment we enter the bar you can feel the excitement and celebration. It’s almost as if you can see it in the air. Everyone is eating, drinking, singing along, or dancing. Carefree and having a good time—two things I know little about. Leif, one of Jovi

James' best friends, appears next to Baylor. He's always had a thing for her. The thing is he isn't her type and he's younger than her which automatically knocks him off the list in her eyes. "May I get you ladies a drink?" he asks.

Baylor smiles and wraps an arm around his waist. "Yes, you can but I'll go with you. Go find us a seat," Baylor tells me before she disappears into the crowd with Leif.

As I scan the bar, I spot Jaxx and make my way over to him. However, as I cross the bar I swear I can feel eyes on me. When Jaxx notices me he jumps up from his seat and pulls me in for a hug. "I'm so glad you made it!"

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“Me too. I was just lucky it was my night off,” I tell him as he leads me to his table where Kenndrix, Kynlee, Ace, Bowie, Hollis, Lane, and Roscoe are all sitting. “Wow, you’ve got a packed table already. I can sit somewhere else.”

“Don’t be silly there’s plenty of room,” Hollis tells me.

I give her a smile. “Thank you but I’ve got Baylor and Leif too I think.”

Jaxx shakes his head. “Have a seat. I’m sure they’ll go sit with Jovi and Summer.” After I think about it, he’s probably right so I join them at the table.

A few moments later, Baylor reappears with a drink in each hand. She pouts. “You stole my girl,” she tells Jaxx.

He smirks at her. “I’m pretty sure she was mine first.”

“True,” she admits. “But she was mine tonight.”

“Aww Bay, we’ll squeeze another chair in for you,” Ace offers.

Baylor shakes her head and joins me. “I can sit here.” Baylor takes half the chair and so do I. At first, it’s funny then my butt starts to ache and go to sleep. I’m starting to get frustrated sitting like this when the table starts discussing life, currently my least favorite thing to talk about. As they go around and discuss how fabulous everything is for them, I continue to drink, throwing myself a silent pity party. I don’t drink often so it hits me pretty quickly.

The next thing I know If It Makes You Happy by Sheryl Crow comes on and I'm out of my seat, slightly wobbly. I make my way to the makeshift dance floor, singing completely off tune and dancing. Sober me would be embarrassed by this skeptical, but right now I don't care. It feels like fun so I'm going to go with it. Before I know it, Kynlee is on the floor with me along with Onyx who is one of the Street Kings and Arbor who usually runs with the Sons of Sin. Somewhere in the middle of the song we end up on the bar top along with Baylor. For the first time in a long time, the smile on my face isn't forced.

Twelve

Roscoe

I watch as Kosi dances on the bar, singing at the top of her lungs and I can't get over how different she seems now from the girl I've always known. This Kosi is not in control and worrying about being perfect all the time. This Kosi seems carefree and fun. Her blonde hair glistens under the muted lights. Her and Baylor twirl around, and when she stumbles, I'm glad Jaxx is there to catch her. Kosi on the other hand just laughs about it.

A few songs later and the girls have been talked down from their Coyote Ugly moment and are back in their seats. Kosi has the giggles and can't seem to stop them. It's the first time I've taken a moment to appreciate how good her laugh is. We all hang around for a little while longer before Jaxx gives his keys to Kenndrix who will follow him to Baylor's apartment. He's going to drive Kosi and Baylor home since they've both had a few too many.

As I head back to my car, I can't help but wonder if maybe Bowie isn't right. Maybe I should just ask Kosi if she'd be willing to facelift Free Fall for me. I mean, what's the worst she could do... say no? If she does, then oh well. I move on and find someone else for the job. No big deal, right? The thing is... what if she says yes? Can

Kosi and I really manage to work in the same area for multiple days in a row without one of us ending up needing a funeral? That's the part that still seems uncertain to me and has me more than a little worried.

On the drive home I try to weigh the pros and cons, but to be honest, when I finally pull into my apartment's parking lot I'm still not sure what the best decision is. I'll have to figure it out tomorrow because I'm exhausted tonight. On the bright side, I did win the race and the money so that was good. As soon as I open my front door Mushu is right there, rubbing in and out of my legs in a figure eight motion. I pick him up and yawn which causes him to put his paw in my mouth—something he has always done, ever since he was a kitten. After shutting and locking the door I move to the bedroom where I take a quick shower before opening the sliding glass door that leads to the small balcony off my room. I make sure the sliding screen door is locked before climbing into bed. The humid breeze mixed with the cooler air of the ceiling fan and a purring Mushu beside me has me out quickly.

The sun blares through the window waking me up at the crack of dawn. I haven't been asleep nearly long enough, so I get out of bed and shut the door and blinds before climbing back into the bed. Mushu circles around on the mattress before finding a spot to settle into. Before I know it, we're both waking up much later. Today is always a slow day at Free Fall so it's one of those days where we basically just go in whenever, clean and maintain things. No classes or jumps today. I stretch my muscles while lying on my back staring at the ceiling fan. My room is a mixture of horror movie and music posters along with a lot of green, my favorite color. Mushu stirs beside me.

As I lay there, I go back to weighing my options of whether I should ask Kosi or not. It shouldn't be this complicated. I mean it's not life or death, but it feels like it. Finally, I sit up in the bed, rub Mushu's belly, and make a decision. Once I get out of

bed I quickly get dressed and head out of my apartment. I stop by a coffee and pastry truck on the way to my destination. After I grab what I need, I continue on. Music blaring, windows down, breeze in my hair. Soon enough I'm turning into the last place I expected.

I march upstairs and hope that Kosi is actually home. After ringing the doorbell, Baylor answers a few moments later. To say she looks shocked would be an understatement. "Roscoe, what are you doing here?" she asks.

"I was hoping to talk with Kosi. Is she around?"

Baylor shakes her head. "You actually just missed her. She left for work about ten minutes ago. I'm sorry."

I try to wave my hand in dismissal but remember I can't because of the bag full of pastries and the drink carrier with coffee. "It's okay. She wasn't expecting me. Do you want something to drink and a pastry? I bought you one."

Her eyes light up. "I'd love some. You are a lifesaver, Roscoe." Baylor steps aside, opening the door wider. "Come on in."

I do and make my way to the kitchen island. After giving her the coffee and a pastry I take a seat. "Do you know how long Kosi is working today?"

Baylor shakes her head. "I don't. She normally only has an eight-hour shift but usually ends up staying longer because someone is always calling in and she's a workaholic. Do you work today?"

I shake my head. "No, it's always the day the school has been closed but it's weird now that I think about it. I mean it's the weekend. We should be busy... maybe I should rethink the operating hours."

“Maybe,” Baylor agrees, nodding her head. “So, you need to talk to Kosi?”

“Yeah, and trust me I know it’s crazy.”

She shrugs her shoulders. “Crazier things have happened.”

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“Do you think I should try to text her, or should I just swing by the food joint?” I ask.

Baylor holds up one finger telling me to hold on while she disappears down the hallway and reappears with a post-it note that has a phone number on it. “I’d text first and go from there. That’s her number in case you didn’t have it.”

“Thanks. You’ve been a huge help,” I tell her as I stand up taking my coffee with me. “Enjoy the other coffee and pastry, Bay.”

“I will, and good luck with Kosi.”

I chuckle. “Thanks. Somehow, I think I’ll need it,” I tell her from over my shoulder.

As soon as I get back to my car, I pull my phone out of my back pocket and open the texting app. I quickly type in Kosi’s number

Roscoe:Hey Kosi. It’s Roscoe. Baylor gave me your number. I really need to talk to you.

Then I wait... and wait... and wait. I drive out to Free Fall and clean up some of the grounds before heading upstairs to look at scheduling. I check my phone periodically, but Kosi never replies.

Thirteen

Kosi

The reflection of myself in the mirror is the last thing I ever expected myself to look at. My hair and makeup are fine with me, but the outfit is just the requirement for Rowdy's. Rowdy's is a western themed BBQ restaurant and bar. We literally have to dress like Daisy Duke from the Dukes of Hazzard, and to be perfectly honest, I wasn't even sure who that was. So basically cowboy boots, cut off denim shorts, and a western style shirt that is sleeveless and tied up so that my midriff shows. It's a little much if you ask me, but it's a job. From the money on my paycheck to the tips I make, it helps to keep me from dipping into my savings account.

When I pull up into Rowdy's parking lot I groan. It's going to be a long, busy day. The parking lot is packed! Then again, it is college game day and Rowdy's does have multiple TVs set up. To be honest, the place is kind of a mixture of everything. I guess sports bar can be added to the list. Rowdy's definitely sticks out in Los Angeles. It's built to look like a log cabin with a bright red front door. Inside there are deer heads and whatnot mounted on the walls along with the TVs. The decor is dark and rich with woods and fabrics. Every table is covered in those red and white vinyl tablecloths that you used to see for picnics. Along the left side of the building is the bar. It takes up the entire wall and houses every whiskey, bourbon, and beer known to mankind I feel like.

As I'm heading across the parking lot, a group of people come out and the loud country music follows them. Once I step inside, the smells of smoked and barbequed meat fill the area. I do have to admit that it smells really good. The hostess greets me as I head into the back to clock in and toss my purse into my employee locker.

A few hours later and I'm exhausted. I've been running all over the place since the moment I stepped out to serve. My feet are screaming in these cowboy boots. With work being so packed, I haven't had time to take a break. It isn't until a familiar face walks through the door that I remember my phone vibrating in my back pocket hours ago. I had pulled it out and glanced at it, but I didn't have time to respond. Plus, I wasn't sure what to make of the text. I couldn't figure out what Roscoe could

possibly have to talk to me about. I'm pretty sure I'm the last person he would want to talk to. Now, here he is. He walks in and instantly I can see his eyes scanning the area.

It must be foreign to him. That's not too shocking. When I first came in to apply, I wasn't sure what to make of it either. Rowdy's is so different from any place I've ever stepped into. However, I do envy Roscoe one thing. After taking in the restaurant and bar his entire body visibly relaxes. He has this amazing talent of just being able to fit in wherever he's at. This place isn't his scene but you'd never know that. Roscoe always makes it look super easy. He should stick out like a sore thumb in his ripped and distressed jeans, brown combat-like boots, and camouflage t-shirt with an olive-green bandana rolled and tied around his head, helping to keep his sun-bleached hair out of his face. Sara, the hostess, is basically drooling. When he turns to her it only gets worse. I watch as he gives her his signature smirk before I roll my eyes and make my way to the bar.

Why is he here? When I turn back around with my tray full of drinks, there he is, sitting in my section at a table. All by himself. Internally, I cringe. This is the last thing I wanted to deal with today. After dropping off the drinks, I head to Roscoe's table. "Welcome to Rowdy's. I'm Kosi and I'll be your server."

Roscoe's hazel eyes travel up and down my body. It literally feels like an inspection. I bite my tongue because I'm at work but threatening him with bodily harm doesn't seem like a bad idea. Ideally, I'd like to tell him exactly where to stick his eyes, but I don't. "You look different."

I scoff and roll my eyes. "I'm sure I do."

He smirks, then brings his bottom lip between his teeth. The reaction my body has to that simple gesture almost makes me want to vomit. Roscoe is the last person on this Earth I should be attracted to. I've literally passed the Roscoe phase of my life so

what the hell is wrong with me? I must just be lonely or hearing about Colby's engagement has really thrown me for a loop. "I didn't expect it."

"You didn't expect the uniform? I don't buy that, Roscoe. Everyone on this side of town knows exactly what Rowdy's is. It's basically a remake of the movie Coyote Ugly with a Dukes of Hazard inspired outfit." I tap the cap of the pen against the pad of paper we use to take orders anxiously.

"I've never seen the movie."

I almost swallow the gum in my mouth. Ever since getting laid off from my marketing executive job, I've taken up the bad habit of chewing gum. For all my life I've been lucky and never suffered from anxiety and now I almost feel like that's all I have. The fruity flavored gum helps keep it at bay for me. "You've never seen Coyote Ugly?" I never expected that. I thought all teenage boys of that generation had seen that movie.

Roscoe shakes his head. "Nope."

Shaking my head, I reply, "Well, you aren't missing much but this is basically a version of it. Anyways, are you planning on ordering something or are you just going to discuss pop culture with me? Because if you're not ordering, I have a job to get back to."

"Wow," he says as he releases a low whistle. "Working Kosi is no fun."

My eyes narrow into a glare and I can feel the looks of disgust form on my face. "In what world did Roscoe find me fun?"

"Point taken." He pauses and looks away. When he looks back, his eyes seem kinder. "I needed to talk to you. Did you get my text?"

“Yes, I did. But as you can see, I’m a bit busy at the moment,” I tell him as I motion around the room.

Roscoe scans the room. I know I’m falling behind on my tables. The more useless time I spend here with him, the less my tips will be. “Won’t you be getting off soon?”

Exasperated, I shake my head. “No, not likely. I was supposed to be off work two hours ago, but once again we’re shorthanded so I’ll probably be here until closing, so I can't talk right now. Are you going to order something or what?”

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“Beer, whatever is on tap. For starters that is.”

I give him a thumbs up and walk away. As I scan the area, I see at least four tables that need attention, so instead of going to get Roscoe’s beer right away, I turn and head to the tables to take care of them first. He made me fall behind so he can wait. The odds of him tipping me are slim to none anyways.

Fourteen

Roscoe

As I enter Rowdy’s, I literally feel like I stepped out of California and into Texas. This is the last place I expect Kosi Scott to work. She was always such a perfectionist and so freaking smart. Being a waitress just sits wrong with me. My eyes instantly find her as I wait for the hostess to seat me. When I lean into the girl named Sara, I purposefully ask to be seated in Kosi’s section. Sara is completely flustered and trips over her own feet at least two times. The second time I catch her by the elbow so she doesn’t hit the ground and her cheeks grow an even darker shade of red, which I didn’t think was possible.

Once I’m seated, my eyes find Kosi once again. She looks amazing even if I’ve never in my life seen her dressed like this. Then again it was never her looks that were the problem for us. Her toned, tanned legs look amazing in the cut off denim shorts she has on. They are slightly distressed, frayed around her thighs and so short the pockets hang out from under them. I’ve never been one to think cowboy boots are sexy, but on Kosi, that’s a different story. The tied up red plaid shirt should definitely be illegal. Her abdomen is showing and a tiny belly button ring glistens under the lights.

It shocks me because Kosi has never struck me as one for body piercings, but she has convinced me that the belly button ring is my new favorite. As she approaches me, I see she has enough cleavage to keep them coming in. Her long blonde hair hangs in loose curls once again with half the front in some kind of braid, twist thing. Kosi has on more makeup like she did last night at the races. I am fully convinced that I don't even need a menu right now because Kosi is reason enough to be here.

When Kosi is standing in front of me, I can see how exhausted she is. She hides it well but it's hidden in her eyes, and I've also known her long enough to know that the smile on her face is a forced one, it's still beautiful but it's not real. A new set of determination fills me. When she says she'll probably be here until closing I'm half tempted to take the pen and pad and start helping her take orders, but I resist and just order a beer. If she's not leaving until closing, neither am I. I need to talk to her now more than ever.

I have to laugh to myself quietly. She is purposefully making me wait while she tends to other tables. No matter what, she is always feisty. Eventually, she brings me the beer. "So, are you ready to order?"

Surely, she knows I haven't even opened the menu. "What's the best appetizer?"

For a moment she thinks. "The sampler."

"What comes on it?"

Kosi groans. "You know the answer to that question is actually in the menu if you'd read it."

I take a sip of the beer before sitting back in the chair. "Where's the fun in that?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. My mistake. I assumed you could read." she gives an award-winning

performance at acting as if she is sorry. “The sampler includes the Texas toothpicks, BBQ queso and homemade chips, and fried pickles.”

My nose scrunches up. “Fried pickles?”

“Yes, fried pickles. They’re a thing.” She tosses her hands in the air in frustration. “Do you want the sampler or not?”

I smirk. “I’m still deciding.”

“Well, decide faster.”

“Kosi, this isn’t a decision to be taken lightly.”

She scoffs. “Oh, ordering food isn’t a decision to be taken lightly but what women you spend time with is a rash decision?”

Kosi just gave me the perfect way to get under her skin. “Are you jealous?”

“Yeah, that’s it,” she replies while rolling her eyes. “Do you want the sampler?”

“I have another question.”

Her head falls back and she groans. “If I wanted to be quizzed on the menu I’d ask my boss to do so, not you.”

“I’ll quiz you... but not on the menu.” I wag my eyebrows up and down at her. A look of disgust crosses her face.

Kosi turns away from me announcing, “You’re having the sampler.”

I chuckle to myself as I sit there. Slowly sipping my beer, I take in some of the football games playing on one of the TVs. I'm not much for football but it's something to watch until Kosi comes back. As soon as that thought pops into my head she reappears from behind some wooden swinging doors that remind me of the ones you used to see in old western saloon movies. She's completely oblivious to how all of the eyes gravitate towards her as she enters the dining area. After dropping off two checks and grabbing drink orders from a few more, she heads to the bar. While she waits, I watch as she sways her hips to the music playing. A heat forms over my skin and suddenly it feels like I need a drink of ice cold water.

After she drops off the drinks she catches my eye. Kosi makes her way towards me. "Are you okay? You don't look so good."

I nod my head. "I think I just need some water. I'm not sure what happened."

She holds up one finger. "Hold on, I'll grab some water." A few moments later she returns with a glass of ice cold water and I quickly grab it from her and start gulping it down. Her hand comes to wrap around mine and I lower the glass of water. "Easy Roscoe. You're going to make yourself sick if you drink that water too quickly."

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Kosi's right but I can't tell her that. My body starts to cool down and thankfully the air conditioning kicks on. It should be my saving grace, but suddenly the sweetest floral scent fills the air, which is odd considering we're in a BBQ joint. Then I notice Kosi's blonde locks moving from the air conditioner that she must be standing in the path of. My body begins to heat again and the glass of water in my hand feels suddenly much heavier. Her hand is still wrapped around mine. Kosi's small, slender fingers wrap around my roughed skin. Her perfectly pale pink painted nails glisten under the light. My hand drops to the table, sitting the glass on top of the tablecloth. Kosi's hand falls away. "That's better. Thank you so much."

She smiles, "Good. I'll go check on your sampler. Maybe you're a little hungry too."

Once she's out of sight I try to figure out what that was all about, but I can't come up with anything. Kosi reappears with a rather large plate on her tray. As she approaches, I take in all of the food. My eyes grow ten times their normal size. "Are you kidding me?"

"What?"

I shake my head. "That's a lot of food."

Kosi laughs. "It is but that's why it's called the sampler." She places the plate in front of me and I have to admit it smells amazing. Everything looks perfectly golden from the frying process, and the handful of sauces for each appetizer look interesting. "Do you want another beer or maybe some sweet tea? The tea is kind of a staple around here."

Taking a moment to think about it, I finally decide to take a tea. When she returns I ask, “So, what is your favorite thing on this plate?”

Without any hesitation she replies, “Fried pickles.” Kosi smirks at me in a silent dare to try one. I grab one, never breaking eye contact with her. I’m just about to toss it into my mouth when she says, “Don’t forget the ranch dressing.” Two things should be known about me. One, I don’t like anything sour, so pickles are never for me. Two, I despise ranch. And yes, I know that’s an unpopular opinion these days. However, I never back down from a challenge so I dip the fried pickle into the ranch and toss it back. Instantly, the acidic vinegar taste coats my mouth followed by the curdled milk taste of ranch dressing. I chew quickly and swallow. “Do you want the tea now?”

I yank the tea from her hand and take a large gulp, only to be hit with the overwhelming taste of sugar. “What the hell, are you trying to kill me?”

Her head falls back in laughter. “What do you mean?”

“First, that horrible sour pickle dipped into that god awful dressing. Then this... it tastes like a bag of sugar.”

She shrugs her slender shoulders. “That’s the south for you,” with that comment she turns around and walks away. The rest of the night I sit in my seat, drink a few beers and some water. The tea grows on me. I end up ordering a pulled pork BBQ sandwich plate, and after that, dessert. It’s close to closing time when I finally finish with the deep fried ice cream. Eventually, I pay the check, tip Kosi, and head outside to wait.

Fifteen

Kosi

One moment I'm out on the floor attempting to ignore the heat from Roscoe's stare, and the next I head into the back to check on an order. When I come back out, he's gone. The brown leather folder with the steer head engraved on it with rope-looking lettering that says "Rowdy's" is lying on the table. His check paid in full and a tip that is way too much. I scan the area for him but I find him nowhere.

The rest of the night kind of goes by in a blur, and by the time we close up and clean it's late. A good hour after Roscoe left, I'm one of the last ones out. My feet are screaming, my back and shoulders sore, and I feel like I can barely keep my eyes open. It's funny how I could spend from sunup to sundown daily in my office going over marketing strategies and feel nothing but energized, but leaving Rowdy's I feel like I actually got run over by a semi-truck. A stifled yawn escapes me as I make my way to my car.

My eyes dart around the darkened parking lot. I really hate being on the closing shift. Half of the parking lot lights are out so there is just too much darkness to be comfortable. Rowdy's isn't located in a bad part of town but I'm not completely sure any part of town is a good part anymore. As I make my way across the lot I hear movement behind me. My hand locks around the pepper spray that Jaxx insisted I carry with me a few months ago. Right now I'm thankful for it. I'm sure I'm being paranoid. It's probably just a cat or something.

Just to be safe, though, my feet pick up their pace a little faster. The unmistakable sound of a light thud of a boot comes up behind me so I speed up. My heart slams in my chest. I unlock the car then spin around my hand aimed in the direction of where the sound came from. I spray and he ducks... thankfully. "Shit, Kosi! You almost put my eyes out with that stuff."

I drop my hand, my entire body is shaking. "Well, you shouldn't be sneaking up on someone in a darkened parking lot. Make yourself known."

He looks at me like I've lost my mind. "Make myself known?" he asks.

My head bobs up and down. "Yeah! Like... I don't know, speak or something."

"And that wouldn't have scared you?" His eyebrows pull together.

I sigh. "Yes, probably, but at least I wouldn't have wasted perfectly good pepper spray on you."

Roscoe's head falls back in laughter. "Is there such a thing as good pepper spray?"

"Shut up! You're lucky it wasn't a gun in my hand," I tell him as I spin around and stomp towards my car. Am I being overly dramatic? Yes, but I have a right to be. He literally nearly killed me from a heart attack. Laughter fills the parking lot and when I spin around Roscoe is bent over, hands on his knees, dying from laughter. I know he's laughing at me even if I'm not sure for what reason. Irritation fills my blood and my eyes narrow into a glare. "What is so funny?"

He can't seem to catch his breath so I have to wait for him to calm down. "You... and... a... gun," he explains in between gasps of air. When he stands up his eyes glisten under the parking lot light that is working, wet from moisture caused by laughing too hard. Roscoe wraps an arm around his ribs and rubs like he caused a cramp by the scene he just put on.

I roll my eyes and shake my head. "I don't know what is so funny about that. In this day and age you can never be too safe." Spinning back around, I head towards my car.

"Kosi, wait, I'm sorry." His voice actually sounds sincere, so I stop moving but I don't turn back around to face him. "I won't disagree with you. I constantly remind Riverlyn to be safe and watch her surroundings."

Riverlyn. I often forget that Roscoe has a younger sister. She's a bit of a handful but gorgeous of course. It's always just been him, Riverlyn, and their dad. Their mother passed away giving birth to Riverlyn. There's at least ten years between Roscoe and Riverlyn so it isn't something I think about often when it comes to Roscoe, not that I think about Roscoe a lot either. "Why are you still here, Roscoe?" I ask. My voice sounds as exhausted as I feel. I hate that everyone around me can so easily tell how I'm feeling but I've never been a good actress or liar.

"I needed to talk to you but I didn't want to get you in trouble while you were on shift. There was only so long I could sit in there and wait so I've just been hanging out here until you got off." I look over my shoulder and Roscoe is standing there looking a little bashful with his hands shoved into the front pockets of his jeans.

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Confusion wraps around my brain as I slowly turn back around to face him. “That was over an hour ago.” Even though I didn’t ask it as a question, Roscoe still nods his head. “What could be so important to talk to me about?”

“I need your help. Ever since you told me about Free Fall and the inside of the school being the first impression that anyone gets of us, I haven’t been able to not think about it. I looked around for interior designers but the ones that actually have good ideas are way out of my budget and the ones I can afford... well, let’s just say they’d be more qualified to design a strip club than a skydiving school,” he explains.

Silence suddenly falls between us. I wait for him to say something more but he doesn’t, he just looks at me expectantly. “Okay... what does that have to do with me?”

Roscoe starts to look nervous. It’s a new look for him and it totally throws me off. “I was thinking that maybe I could hire you. I’d pay you, of course, but it can’t be a ton.”

The idea of getting to do a design project sends a sudden bolt of energy within my soul. Exhaustion melts away. I haven’t felt this excited about anything in months. I can’t help the way my mind takes off and begins spinning in a thousand different directions. Somewhere, though, my reality slams into me, like a high-speed car slamming into a brick wall. “I’m not an interior designer.”

He shrugs his shoulders. “Maybe not in the technical terms, but what you came up with was perfect and that was just a quick idea. I can only imagine how amazing it would come out if you actually had the time to put into it.”

I don't think he realizes how much those few words mean to me. There aren't many people who have been in my corner with blind faith, so the fact that he is means a lot. "And the owner of Free Fall is okay with this?"

There's a moment of hesitation and Roscoe looks really uncomfortable before he nods his head. "Yeah, he thinks it'll be great for business."

Most of the time Roscoe and I can barely stand to be in the same room together, so it seems a little crazy to consider this opportunity. But a part of me really wants it, so I set my differences with Roscoe aside and tell him, "I fully accept then."

The smile on his face is large and could light up this entire parking lot. Who needs the lights fixed when Roscoe smiles at you like that? A thousand watts of cocky, happy, knee weakening, and handsome. Quickly, I look away. "Great, come by whenever you can. I'm there every day for the rest of this week."

"I'll come by tomorrow." We stand there staring at each other—a couple of feet away from one another. Neither of us moves until Roscoe starts to move towards me. I'm not sure why but I hold my breath as his hazel eyes hold on to mine. However, he surprises me when he moves around me. When I turn around he's got my car door open and waiting for me. I don't fight the smile that comes over my face. As I walk past him I can't ignore the lime and ocean scent coming off Roscoe. "Thank you."

"Of course. Be safe getting home," he tells me before he shuts the door. After locking them, I start the car and pull out of the parking lot. As I look in my rearview mirror, I notice Roscoe leaving the parking lot as well. Tonight definitely didn't go like I expected but it was good, I know that much.

Sixteen

Roscoe

Today has been total crap! Everything has gone wrong from beginning to end. I walk into the office and slam the back door. I hear a startled squeak when I do. When I look up, I see Kosi standing there with Mushu in her arms. He looks very comfortable, and for a moment I'm pretty sure my heart stutters in my chest at the image. "I'm sorry," I finally manage to bite out.

Kosi shrugs her shoulders. "Bad day?"

I run my fingers through my hair roughly and in frustration before I take a seat. "You could say that again."

"You do know it's not the door's fault though, right?"

When I look up at Kosi, she's scratching Mushu's chin, her perfectly shaped eyebrows nearly lost in her hair with how high they are raised. "Oh really? I didn't know that. I thought the door caused all the issues in my world currently. Thank you for informing me of that intriguing information."

"Geez, easy with the sarcasm." She kisses Mushu on the head while he purrs away.

I sigh heavily. "I'm sorry. That was a little harsh and definitely unnecessary."

Kosi's mouth falls open. "Wait, did the Roscoe Langston just apologize? That has got to be some world news right there."

"I've apologized before." My arms cross over my chest and I notice the way her eyes follow the movement. If I didn't know Kosi Scott better, I'd think she was checking me out. Short lived fantasy because I do know Kosi and I know she doesn't check out anyone—even if all eyes land on her when she enters a room.

She laughs but it's slightly sarcastic. "Really? Did hell freeze over?"

“Ha ha,” I tell her. “I don’t know, you’d have to let me know if your throne got cold.”

“Did you just insinuate that I’m the queen of hell?” Her blue eyes watch me carefully. Most people would back down now but that’s never been our forte.

I smirk and lean in towards her. The floral scent of her skin engulfs me and makes my blood boil on a new level. I bite back the groan that builds in my chest. “If the crown fits, sweetheart.” When I pull away I wink at her. For a moment we just stand there, neither of us moving, just watching the other, waiting to pounce like hunter prey. Finally, I give up because let’s face it I’m not a patient man. “Why don’t you have a seat?” I tell her as I move around the office desk where I stashed the paperwork with the budget for the facelift and what I can pay her this morning when I first got here.

Kosi remains standing and when I look up at her I raise my eyebrows in question. “Oh, I don’t know if I can sit on something besides my throne.”

Touché. Point for Kosi Scott if anyone is keeping score. It’s been too long running for me to keep up with at this point in my life. “Would it help if I got Wyatt to come and feed you some grapes while he fans you, your majesty?”

“Well, we were talking about the queen of hell here, not Cleopatra, but okay.” I take a moment to appreciate the royal blue sundress she has on. Her legs are long, lean, and perfectly tanned. The nude wedges she has on compliment the dress well. Her hair is down and straight today, and makeup light. The denim jacket she has on is distressed and the sleeves are rolled up to her elbows.

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I chuckle. “My apologies.”

Finally, she sits down with Mushu in her lap. “When did you get a cat in here? He wasn't here the other day when I worked.”

“I’ve had him since he was a kitten, but he was sick this morning, so I had to take him to the vet and that took forever so I had to bring him here. I had a class but then more than half the class canceled so I rushed for no apparent reason,” I explain.

“He was sick? He seems fine now.”

I nod my head. “Yeah he ate something that had upset his stomach.”

“What’s his name?” she asks. “Oh never mind. I see the collar now.” I watch as her eyebrows pull together in confusion as she reads his name. “Mushu?” She looks up at me expectantly. I just nod my head. “What the hell kind of name is Mushu?”

To say I’m stunned is an understatement. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, where in the world did you come up with that name? Were you drunk or maybe you swallowed too much ocean water while surfing?”

“You’re kidding right?” I ask because she has to be kidding.

She gives me a dumb as rocks look. “Do I look like I’m kidding?”

I smirk. “I don’t know. You’ve always got a resting bitch face.” She glares at me. I

raise my hands in surrender. “Okay, that was too far. You seriously don’t know where the name Mushu comes from?”

Kosi huffs. “Do you think I enjoy asking questions I already know the answer to?”

“It’s from Mulan. You know, the Disney movie. He’s an orange dragon in the movie.”

She shrugs her shoulders. “I’ve never seen it.” My head hits the desk. I count to ten before I look back up. In the meantime, she talks to my cat. “I think I killed your daddy. I’m sorry but you can come and live with Baylor and me and we’ll give you a good name. It’ll be so much more fun for you.”

When I sit back up I grab a pen and write a new bullet on the contract. I slide the contract over to her. “If you can leave my cat alone for a minute. Here’s the contract. That’s the budget for the facelift. That’s what you’ll get paid,” I tell her as I point to the numbers.

Of course, her eyes skim over the document but land on the part I just wrote in. “What’s that?”

“Part of the contract.”

“We will have a movie night and Kosi Scott will watch Mulan. That’s not a valid point in this contract.” Her eyes meet mine.

Thinking of how to explain this to her, I take a moment. “It is valid. It’s very valid. We can’t work together if you haven’t seen Mulan. It’s a Disney must.”

Kosi rolls her eyes. “Fine. I don’t know what the big deal is but okay. I didn’t peg you as a Disney or cat man anyways.”

“I’m highly offended by that but also happy to surprise you.” Kosi signs the contract. Mushu purrs in her lap and I feel something in my gut. Something that tells me this is going to be the end of one thing and the beginning of another.

Seventeen

Kosi

After meeting with Roscoe and officially taking the job to facelift Free Fall Skydiving school. I head over to see my brother Jaxx and his fiancé Kenndrix. It's a beautiful day out so I roll the windows down, turn up the music, and slowly make my way to the gated community they now call home. Jaxx’s house is a good drive away from mine. With the careers that he and Kenndrix have, living in the more exclusive part of Los Angeles is kind of a must. Despite the fact that they both work behind the scenes more than in the spotlight, the two of them are still often in the tabloids. Hollywood loves them as a power couple. They often get recognized when out together or even individually. It’s strange but I guess that’s life.

On the way to their house, I stop by one of my favorite drink trucks. It feels like a Red Bull kind of day. I got up early after getting off late to meet up with Roscoe. I’m working a double again today. Closing is always a late one. I’m dreading it but there’s not much else I can do about it. Drink Up has a steady line but I decide to go ahead and sit and wait. Eventually, I get the three drinks I ordered and head back towards my original destination.

I pull up to my brother’s house. It’s different from the one he used to have, but once he proposed to Kenndrix they agreed to find a house together. She sold her condo and moved in with Jaxx in his house until they found the one they agreed on. As I approach their house I can’t help but remember when a home like this felt like just a step away from where I used to be. The house is a two-story, khaki with gray undertone bricked house with white trim and shutters. A bay window in the main

living room, three car garage, and brick driveway are also visible. The lawn is green with grass and trees and I can't help but get a little excited to think that one day there is going to be some little mini-me's of my brother or sister-in-law to be running around out here.

As I park in front of one of the garage doors, the front door opens. Jaxx walks out to me, looking casual in his khaki shorts and navy blue t-shirt. He meets me at my car and takes the drink carrier from me. "You look good, Sis."

I laugh and make a show of looking him up and down. "And you look comfortable." I specifically eye the pair of flip flops on his feet. It's not often I see my brother looking so casual and I can probably count on one hand how often I've seen him in flip flops.

He shrugs his shoulders before running a hand through his now caramel blonde hair. Jaxx and I are both naturally blonde but for a couple of years his hair was dyed chocolate brown for roles he was in. Being a stuntman meant he needed to look like the actor. I never fully got used to the change of color but this transition color is really odd to me. "I am comfortable. Having some time off allows me to look like this for a bit so no judgment."

My hands fly up in a surrender motion. "I wasn't judging. I promise. The flip flops just threw me off."

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“Kenndrix bought them for me. I used to try and run out to get something from the yard or to let Charlie out at night and I’d come out barefoot. A few months ago I did that and stepped on a nail. I have no clue where it came from, but we spent the rest of the night at the emergency room, so she now refuses to let me outside barefoot. The flip flops are quick and easy,” he explains as we head inside.

The inside of the house is just as inviting as the outside. Warm browns mixed with pristine whites welcome me, along with the smell of homemade chocolate chip cookies. My stomach rumbles. Kenndrix makes the best cookies ever. “Please, tell me that smell is Kenndrix.”

Jaxx wags his eyebrows up and down. “Of course, it is. She loves when we have announced company because then she gets to plan and bake things fresh. Otherwise, she just bakes and it gets eaten whenever... usually by me.”

We both laugh. As we enter the kitchen Kenndrix turns around to greet us. “You two are just in time. I just pulled out this batch so they should be cool enough to eat in about twenty minutes.” Kenndrix is dressed in a salmon colored short romper with a purple apron on. She’s barefoot and her long chocolate brown hair is piled on top of her head in a messy bun. Her oversized white framed glasses are perched on her nose and her face is free of makeup, except for some mascara and eyeliner.

Jaxx places the drink carrier on the counter and I quickly disperse the drinks. We exchange a look and grab a cookie from the cooling rack on the counter while Kenndrix’s back is to us. Both of us take the biggest bite imaginable but the heat of the cookie from the oven hits us immediately because our eyes bug out, and suddenly we are opening and closing our mouths, fanning in front of them while trying to chew

like a mad man. My tongue feels like fire is sitting on top of it.

When Kenndrix turns around to see what all the commotion is, she just shakes her head. Finally, we manage to swallow the cookies. Jaxx complains, “That was hot.”

“I plainly said twenty minutes,” Kenndrix tells us, her hands on her hips. She looks and sounds just like a mom.

Jaxx and I exchange a look before giving Kenndrix our best puppy eyes. “Yeah, you did... but your cookies are always the best. We couldn’t wait.”

I watch, slightly in envy, as Jaxx walks around the kitchen island and slips his arms around her waist from behind. She nuzzles into him. “They were hot but still so good.”

Kenndrix shakes her head and laughs at us. “You two are so related.”

After the cookies have officially cooled we head outside with their dog, Charlie, and take a seat on the lounge section of the backyard, next to the pool. “So, how’s work going?” Kenndrix asks.

Shrugging my shoulders, I begin to chew slower on the piece of cookie in my mouth. Finally, I have to answer. “It’s been busy. We’re short staffed so lots of doubles.” Work is my least favorite subject since I feel like such a failure in that area of my life these days.

“Are you still upset that I didn’t tell you that job the other day was for Roscoe?” Jaxx asks. His voice sounds wary.

“No,” I tell him while shaking my head. “It actually worked out really well. Free Fall is in desperate need of a facelift. The inside of the office area really. I mentioned it to

Roscoe and even drew a quick little design with what it could look like. I guess he showed it to the owner and he hired me to do the facelift.”

A huge smile breaks out over Jaxx’s face. “What? That’s amazing, Kosi. I’m so happy for you.”

“Yeah, that’s exciting,” Kenndrix chimes in.

“It is,” I agree. My head nods up and down for a few.

Maybe too long considering Jaxx asks, “What’s wrong?”

I sigh. “You know Dad is going to hate the idea.”

Jaxx sits back and drapes an arm around Kenndrix’s shoulders. I watch as his fingers draw slow, lazy circles around her bicep. A pang of missing that hits me in the gut. It’s moments like this when I miss Colby. “You’re right, but it’s also your life. Dad will never agree with anything if we aren’t following the path he wants for us, but that doesn’t mean you have to follow it. As a kid, and for pretty much all your life, until it came time to major in something, you wanted to be an interior designer. You were a natural for it too. You and Kenndrix knocked this place out of the park. Look, I get that you had a lot of pressure on you to follow his path because Rome and I didn’t do what was expected of us. Everything fell on your shoulders. The last great hope, and I know you hate to let people down, especially Dad. I’m sorry for that but it’s time for you to do what you want to do.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“It doesn’t have to be that hard either. Dad will get past it. Taking this job is a step in the right direction for you and that’s all that matters,” Jaxx adds. I nod my head and then we sit back and catch up on everything else. When I check the time I realize I

need to go so I can get to work. As I make my way home to change before work, Jaxx's words run round and round in my head. The idea of disappointing my father sits in my gut uneasily, but Jaxx isn't wrong. This is a chance and I have to take it.

Eighteen

Roscoe

When I wake up there is a text blinking on my phone. I'm shocked to see Kosi's name on it. Apparently, she's coming by the school today. It's been three days since I saw or heard from her. The school has been pretty busy and I'm still trying to find a replacement for Annie, who never showed back up for work after the day Kosi filled in for her. Plus, Mushu has been sick. After he ate something that got him sick, I had to take him back to the vet. Turns out he also had an infection, so I've been giving him his medicine. He hates it, but it's necessary. Every day I bring him to the school with me too, just to be safe and so I can keep an eye on him. I roll over and find him snuggled up in bed. I leave him be while I get ready for the day.

Before we leave the apartment, I give Mushu his dose of medicine and put him on his cat leash. We head down to my car. On the way to Free Fall, we stop for some breakfast and coffee. I get extra just in case Kosi happens to show up early. To my surprise when I pull

up to the school, she's already sitting there waiting for me. As I get out of my car, so does she. "Morning."

"Hey," she greets me. She looks tired and I wonder how much she's been working these past three days. Kosi's blond hair is piled on top of her head. Her Rolling Stones t-shirt and denim shorts with red Converse is definitely dressed down for her. She has no makeup on except for some mascara but the dark circles under her eyes are what I can't stop staring at. "Oh, you have Mushu!"

I nod my head. “Yeah, turns out he didn’t just eat something. He’s got an infection, too, so he’s on medicine and I bring him with me while I work to keep an eye on him.”

“Oh, that’s so awesome that the owner lets you do that.” Quickly, I avert my eyes. I don’t know why it’s such a big deal to me if people know I own Free Fall. It shouldn’t be. I should be proud, but a part of me worries that I won’t be able to keep it open. The more people that know I own it—if it fails—then the more people know I failed too. It’s not something I want to deal with so I’m just keeping it quiet. I scratch at the back of my neck before I look back up at Kosi. She has a curious look on her face. “Yeah, I am. He’s great.”

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“May I grab him for you?” Kosi asks. I nod my head and she opens the door. Mushu instantly goes for her. She picks him up and baby talks to him. “He has a leash?”

“Yeah, he likes to go for walks but I’m always worried he’ll get away so I ordered him a leash.” I explain as I grab the drink carrier and bag of food. “I have extra breakfast. I wasn’t sure what time you’d come by but I thought you might be hungry.”

Her eyes light up. “Starved!”

Kosi turns back around and jostles Mushu in her arms for a moment. He meows in protest. She’s leaning into her car, clearly trying to reach something. “What are you doing?” I ask.

“Trying to reach my laptop. I have some ideas I wanted to run by you so you can ask the owner if they’ll be okay.”

I walk around and nudge her out of the way, reach inside her amazing smelling car and retrieve the laptop carrying bag. “Come on,” I tell her. We stop so I can unlock the door and then we head inside. “By the way, you only have to impress me with the design idea.”

“Oh hell,” she mumbles.

A chuckle escapes me. “That bad, huh?”

“Considering it’s you and me... kind of.”

I put the food, drinks, and laptop bag down on the desk. “I promise to keep an open mind.”

“Sure...” she says, with a roll of her eyes. “So, the owner must really trust you.”

Thankfully, my back is already to her. “Yeah, I’ve been here for so long it’s almost like I own the place.” Kosi giggles. The lights come on as I hit the switch. When I turn around she’s got the smallest smile on her face as she nuzzles Mushu. This is a side that you don’t see often from Kosi. I like it.

“Would you like to sit and have some breakfast while we go over the design ideas?” I offer.

Her eyes move around the space. “Sure, as long as we won’t be in Annie’s way.”

I scoff. “We won’t be. She hasn’t bothered to show back up for work since the day you filled in for her.”

Kosi’s mouth forms in an O shape. “So, who answers the phone and books the people?” I raise my hand, like I volunteer. “What about when you’re out teaching a class?”

“They don’t get answered,” I admit. That familiar feeling of failure settles in again. “I’m looking for someone but no one has come in yet. So, we’re trying to manage.”

She nods her head before taking a seat. Kosi gives Mushu a moment to decide where he wants to be. He jumps down and comes over to my feet before deciding he wants to be in my lap. He settles in, and for a moment, Kosi just stares at Mushu and me before shaking her head. “I never would have guessed.” I shrug my shoulders. We eat in silence and then Kosi pulls out her laptop. “So, I have a couple of ideas but I’m going to start with my favorite.”

I watch as she shows me multiple sketches. All of them are amazing, but my favorite is her favorite as well. The idea is a mural across the back wall of the sky with tiny figures and parachutes floating in the sky too. A gray, white, and sky-blue color scheme for everything. Updating the counter and flooring. There's a possibility of new light fixtures if it makes the budget. She's already spoken with Drake James about doing what little construction needs to be done. The mural will be done by his younger sister, Dawsyn, who is really into painting and more talented than any of us know. We're getting by cheap on those things she tells me. I sit back and scratch at the stubble coating my jaw. "I'm impressed. It was definitely the right move to hire you. Everything you showed me is perfect for this place."

Kosi beams at me. "I'm glad you think so."

"I do." My phone begins to blare in my pocket, so I fish it out. An unsaved number flashes on the screen but it also seems familiar at the same time. "Sorry, I should get this." She waves her hand in a gesture telling me not to worry. When I answer the phone it's the last thing I expected to hear. I don't know what my face looks like when I hang up, but Kosi must read something.

"What's wrong?" she asks as she wraps a slender hand around my upper arm.

"It's Riverlyn."

Nineteen

Kosi

It's easy to see the worry and concern in Roscoe's eyes when he says his sister's name. Without a moment of hesitation I step forward and wrap my hand around his tattooed bicep. I don't know much about his family or his relationship with his sister because, to be perfectly honest, I don't actually know much about Roscoe. We've

always just been so opposite. However, none of that matters at this moment because he clearly needs help. “What about Riverlyn?” I ask.

He shakes his head. Strands of his sun-kissed blonde hair fall over the bandana rolled and tied around his head. My hand itches to move the stray strands but I know that would make it strange. It feels too intimate for us. “That was the high school. Riverlyn never showed up to school today.”

My heart sinks for him. There was a time when Rome went “missing”. Everyone was so worried, but I felt like my world had ended. I can’t even imagine how Roscoe feels right now. He’s the older of the two and by the look on his face, he protects Riverlyn no matter the cost. I don’t blame him but I can tell by the panicked look in his eyes he needs someone to help him keep his cool. Bowie or Lane would probably be best at this, but for now all he has is me. I take a deep breath. “Does Riverlyn have a phone?” Roscoe nods in reply. “Okay, how about you try to call it first?” Roscoe pats his pockets for his phone without realizing that it’s still in his shaky hand. My hand closes over his to stop his frantic patting. “Your phone is right here.”

Roscoe winces because I’m sure that made him feel embarrassed, but it shouldn’t. It makes perfect sense considering the situation we are currently in. He unlocks the phone and then presses Riverlyn’s number on the speed dial. It rings and rings before going to voicemail. In the meantime, I think we both hold our breath. “She’s not answering.”

I nod my head. “How does she normally get to school?”

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“The bus. My dad goes to work too early so Riverlyn always gets her own self off to school,” he explains.

“Good, how about we go to your dad’s house? Maybe, Riverlyn just overslept,” I suggest in the most soothing tone.

He still looks panicked but he agrees with another nod of his head. “We can take my car. I’ll drive.”

Once he agrees, I turn around and scribble a quick sign to hang on the door. After I tape it to the door, I hold my hand for Roscoe to drop his keys in. I lead us out of the school. Mushu follows along with us on his leash. We pause for a moment so I can lock the door. The sign explains that we had an emergency and will be back as soon as possible. Everything is postponed until tomorrow. Once Roscoe, Mushu, and I are in my car we head towards his dad’s house. I glance over at Roscoe. “Do you really think she might just be asleep?”

“It’s possible. Her phone could be silenced which is why she isn’t waking up.” As we hit the outskirts of Los Angeles I tell Roscoe, “I need directions to your house.” At first he looks caught off guard but then nods in understanding. We all kind of grew up together in a roundabout way but I never knew Bowie James’ friends well enough to know where they lived. The car is silent except for when Roscoe tells me to turn. Even Mushu sits quietly in Roscoe’s lap, like he knows something is wrong.

Finally, we pull up to the house. A simple white, single story house with baby blue trim around the windows and stair railings heading up to the porch. The yard is neat with one large tree that shades a portion of the house. There’s a carport attached as

well. Roscoe tells me to pull into the driveway so I do. Roscoe digs around for his keys before he realizes I'm holding them out to him. For a moment, our eyes lock on one another. Something passes between us and then it gets awkward. Do I go in with him? Do I sit out here and wait? Does he need a moment alone to compose himself?

He clears his throat. "You should come in with me."

"Are you sure?" I ask. "I don't mind waiting out here."

Roscoe shakes his head. "No, please come in. For some odd reason you are keeping me oddly calm."

My eyebrows pull together. "Am I?"

"Yeah, you are." He climbs out of the car. Leaving Mushu who is about to fall asleep in the front seat. Roscoe waits for me and we head towards the house together. When we reach the porch his hands connect with mine, fingers intertwined together. For a moment it catches me off guard but when his hand squeezes around mine I realize I'm his life jacket at this moment and I'm happy to be. I squeeze his hand back. We pause on the top step. He looks down at me. A look I can't decipher on his face before he takes a deep breath and looks away. Roscoe continues to hold my hand as he unlocks the door and leads us inside. The house is simple, small but inviting. The living and dining room are basically one. Dark brown furniture is all set up to face the TV hanging on the wall. In the far corner is the kitchen. There's a hallway on either end but we take the one on the right. Before we even make it halfway down the hall we hear the sobbing. Roscoe drops my hand like it's on fire and dashes into the first door on the right. I watch as every muscle in his body sags in relief. "Riverlyn," he sighs.

Murmurs come from inside the room. When Roscoe comes back out he looks awkward. "Is she okay?"

He nods his head. “Yeah.” We stand in the hallway, his body just inches from mine. One of his hands scratches at the back of his neck. Tension builds between us. “Can I ask you a favor?” I try to answer but my mouth is dry and my voice won’t work so I nod. “Would you talk to her? It has something to do with a boy... that’s all I can get out of her.”

No wonder Roscoe looks so awkward. If the situation hadn’t been as tense as it was moments ago I would laugh at that look on him, but instead I bite my tongue and nod my head. He leads us back to what I assume is Riverlyn’s room. The room is white and mint green with a little black thrown here and there. Posters of actors and musicians I should know cover her walls. In the middle of the bed, leaning against the headboard, is a beautiful girl. Her honey blonde hair is a little matted and her face is blotchy and tear stained but her brilliant blue eyes shine beyond all that. “Riv, this is my friend Kosi.” She looks up at me.

I give her a little wave and make my way farther into her room. “I’m guessing you’ve had a crappy morning.”

She tries to laugh but really a few more stray tears leak onto her face. “You can say that.” Riverlyn hugs a teddy bear to her chest.

Lightly I sit on the edge of her bed. “Do you want to talk about it?” I offer. She shakes her head. My mind races to find a different approach. “Well, then I should at least thank you.”

Riverlyn looks at me, her eyes curious. “Why?”

“Because to see your brother completely freak out like that was mildly entertaining.”

She quickly glances at Roscoe. “You were freaked?”

“I was not,” he chimes in.

“He was so freaked out. He was patting himself all over trying to find the phone in his hand. It was quite the sight.” Silence falls between us all.

Riverlyn sits up a little straighter. “My boyfriend dumped me for dumb-blond Patty.”

“He what?” Roscoe roars behind me. “I swear I’m going to hunt him down and rip his head off with my bare hands.”

I can hear him pacing back and forth behind me. Riverlyn’s eyes go large and I turn around. I catch his eyes. “Hey caveman, want to cool down for a minute?”

“No, I want to find this little dumbass and kick him into the ocean.” Riverlyn laughs and so do I. Roscoe stops and looks at us. “What are you laughing at?”

“You,” I answer.

“Why?”

“Because you’re acting like a mad man,” I explain. I stand up and take him by the elbow. “Why don’t you go and get us girls something to drink and probably something to eat. Call the school and let them know she’s okay and maybe your dad because I’m sure he has a message from them.” I urge him out the door. He nods and heads down the hallway. I join Riverlyn on the bed and she gives me a sad smile.

We’ve talked for a good while and I know all about Josh.

“I thought he loved me.”

My hand reaches out and squeezes hers. “Maybe in his own way he did, but I’ve learned that no two people love the same. It sucks and it hurts a lot but it’s true. You’re both still very young, try to remember that. I highly doubt that any boy you meet now will be the one you end up with, but if you are lucky enough to find that one, you’ll know. You’ll feel it in your bones, in every fiber of your soul. It’ll be so worth it, I promise. But for now let this hurt, let it settle, and then move on.”

“But how?” she asks with a snuffle.

I give her a small smile. “You’ll know. You’ll wake up one day and It won’t feel like such a big hold in your heart and each day from there gets a little better.”

“Thanks Kosi. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare anyone. I just couldn’t face going to school.”

“You don’t owe me an apology but I do know you didn’t mean to scare anyone. How about I go find that food Roscoe is supposed to bring?” As I get off the bed I hear footsteps in the hallway. When I enter the kitchen Roscoe is standing there with an odd look on his face. “She’s better.”

“Thank you,” he says quietly.

I raise my eyebrows at him. “You’re welcome. Did you have fun eavesdropping?”

His cheeks flame red. “I didn’t mean to. I just didn’t want to interrupt the moment

and then the next thing I knew my feet wouldn't work."

My shoulder bumps into his side. "It's okay."

"You sounded like you knew what you were talking about?"

Memories of Colby flash through my mind but land on the engagement announcement in the paper that Baylor showed me. The wound is still fresh. I shrug my shoulders. "I have some experience."

Silence falls between us. I look at everything besides him while I feel his eyes on me the entire time. My skin heats and I'm about to start fidgeting when he says. "I'm sorry."

"Why? Did you break my heart and I didn't know about it?" I ask, forcing a laugh that sounds as fake as it is.

Roscoe slips a finger under my chin and urges me to face him. When I do I'm knocked over by the amount of emotion there. He shakes his head, his hair moving with him. The scent of a man's body wash fills the space between us and intoxicates me. "No but I'm sorry anyone broke your heart. You deserve better, surely you know that."

My heart beats erratically in my chest. "I'm not sure I know anything anymore."

"That makes two of us," he admits. His mouth inches closer and closer to mine. I'm lost in this moment, a moment I was certain would never happen, especially with him. I forget how to breathe. When his mouth is just a breath away from mine when we hear Riverlyn coming down the hallway. At the sound of her footsteps we jump away from one another.

For a moment we stand there, awkward and confused before I finally say, “I should go. I’ll see you later.” As I head for the door I catch Riverlyn. “It was great meeting you. If you ever need anything, I’m around.” She looks as confused as I feel. I rush outside and I’m almost to my car, to my escape, when I hear the door open.

“Kosi, wait,” I hear Roscoe. “Mushu is in the car,” he reminds me. I nod my head and unlock the car. Mushu is napping away but Roscoe scoops him up as he shuts the passenger side door and I slide behind the wheel. I don’t give him time to say anything else. As fast as I possibly can I start the car and back out of the driveway, heading for any place but here.

Twenty

Kosi

This past week has been odd to say the least. Originally, I had planned to start work at Free Fall, but after the way things played out the last time I saw Roscoe... well, I haven’t been able to shake it off. So, instead of going to work there I’ve been planning and creating lists of all the things I need to do the job. The rest of my time has been filled with actually working at Rowdy’s and, of course, job hunting for a marketing position, but it’s like my name is tarnished. It makes me wonder if someone hasn’t been spreading rumors around in that part of the world. Blaming me for the fall of the company. It’s depressing really. I worked so hard for Curve Tech. Literally, I gave them everything and it wasn’t me that caused it to fail. Thomas, the head of marketing, was egotistical and self-centered. If it wasn’t his idea then he’d never pitch it. Ultimately, he caused it all to sink faster than the Titanic. However, with as many marketing positions open, all of which I have applied for, you would think I would at least get an interview, but no. It’s like Thomas has damned us all for his misgivings.

I’m working tonight... it’s a Friday night, and Baylor’s birthday. Luckily, I kind of

get to spend it with her because she convinced Summer to host the first half at Rowdy's before moving it to the races and JamesTown.

From inside my bedroom, I hear Baylor squeal in delight. When I got home last night, I stayed up late hanging banners, streamers and placing balloons all over the living area, kitchen, and dining room. Guessing by the sounds, she has found them. Suddenly, my bedroom door is thrown open. Baylor stands there for a moment in her Gossip Girl t-shirt and leggings before she bolts onto my bed. "You are the bestest ever!"

I laugh. "That doesn't make sense."

"It's my birthday, nothing has to make sense if I don't want it to," she tells me before sticking her tongue out at me.

"Okay, okay," I tell her as I hold my hands up in surrender. "Happy birthday."

"Thank you! That was a great surprise." Baylor points out towards the living room area.

I hug her. "I'm glad you like it. I was so worried you were going to wake up while I was trying to blow up the balloons last night. Three of them popped and I just knew I was going to get busted, but luckily you sleep like the dead," I tell her.

Baylor puffs out her bottom lip. "No, teasing the birthday girl."

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“Yes, your highness.” I climb out of bed and open my closet door. From the shelf I pull out a dollar store tiara and birthday girl sash. “Here you go.”

She claps excitedly as she gets to her knees on the bed. “My very own tiara. I really do feel like royalty.”

I laugh and shake my head. “Yes, you are the queen of the dollar store.”

Baylor chunks a pillow in my direction. “No raining on my parade.” She places the tiara and sash on before sitting back in my bed while I take a seat at my desk that doubles as a vanity more than anything. Her soft green eyes meet mine in the mirror. “Are you still bummed about Roscoe?”

After I got home the other day I spilled everything to Baylor. The almost kiss had shocked me to my very core and I needed someone to put some perspective on it. Of course, Baylor is familiar that normally Roscoe and I are more like enemies, but I explained how things have seemed different, for lack of a better word, the last few times we had been around one another. She declared that my “hate” for him was a cover for my underlying feelings that I’ve been subconsciously harboring for years now. Normally, I’d call bullshit but I kind of have a feeling she may be onto something. You don’t almost kiss someone you actually dislike. Ever since that awakening revelation I’ve been in a bit of funk. It’s her birthday so I’m trying to keep it under wraps but I know it’s still showing. I shrug my shoulders. “I don’t know what I am to Roscoe to be honest. At first I wanted to deny your theory but the more I think about it I think you might be right. Which bugs me on a whole new level.” My eyes roll.

Baylor stays silent for a minute before she crawls to the end of the bed. “If it’s any consolation I think he’s into you just as much.”

I growl in frustration. “That’s not true. I don’t want to be into Roscoe. I mean what’s the point? It would never work. We are completely opposite.”

“Opposites do attract, or so they say,” Baylor adds.

I turn to give her a ‘come on’ look. “I couldn’t even make it work with Colby who understood me on every level and had been with me for years. There’s no chance in hell Roscoe could do that.”

I can tell Baylor is biting her tongue so I sit quietly waiting for her to give in, which probably takes about twenty seconds. “Okay, yes the two of you are opposite but there’s more to him. He’s funny and kind and hella hot. I seriously think he’s just as into you as you are to him. I’m just saying maybe don’t count him out just yet. Give it a minute... think about it... truly consider it.”

A few hours later I’m still running Baylor’s words through my head. Eventually, coming to the conclusion that she’s right. Maybe, I’m not giving him enough credit and maybe I should consider it. Either way I’ve made up my mind. I’m going to Free Fall tomorrow to start working because I took the job and I can’t avoid Roscoe forever. As I grab an order and head back out to the dining area I see some of the James brothers filing in along with their wives. Jaxx and Kenndrix are with Ace and Kynlee. Summer waves to me as I head their way. “The back corner is reserved for the party. Head on over and I’ll be there to grab your drink orders.” I avoid Jaxx’s eyes because the last thing I want is to see the look of sympathy I’m convinced I’d find there.

After dropping off the order on my tray I swing back around and grab the drink orders of the people already here for Baylor’s party. Over the next twenty-five

minutes everyone else arrives. Even Tillman, Odette, Decker, and the rest of the Street Kings. The Street Kings are a group of foster boys who Tillman and Decker have taken under their wing. They provide them with a place to live and the boys help pay bills by earning money street racing or working jobs. They all look really excited to be here. I can't help but be happy for all of them.

Baylor arrives in style. Her gold sequined mini dress shines as bright as she does. A black and gold studded belt is wrapped around her waist with gold heels. Makeup dark and mysterious looking along with a few dainty pieces of gold jewelry. Her red hair is perfectly curled and teased and dancing around her shoulders. Her birthday tiara is in place on top of her head and sash in her hand. She waves at me as she enters. I meet her. "You look amazing!"

She beams at me and does a little spin. "Why thank you, darling! Just a little something I grabbed for myself. How's work?"

"It's busy but I'll make time to come by off and on." Baylor smiles at me. "I also made a decision."

Her eyes go large. "About Roscoe?" I give her a 'keep it down' look and she gives me an apologetic look. "Sorry, I didn't think about them all being here."

"He's not just Bowie and Lane's best friend, but yes about him. I'm going to stop avoiding him and see how things go."

Baylor does a little clap and jump thing and I laugh. "I'm so excited for you." As I watch her excitement I feel mine drain as my eyes are drawn to the front door. Roscoe enters and he looks amazing. The cranberry short-sleeved button up compliments his tanned skin. It's unbuttoned to mid chest revealing a black muscle tank underneath. Dark denim jeans and black combat boots finish his look along with a couple of silver rings and a necklace I can't make out from here. Roscoe's hair is

perfectly slicked back and his stubble is neatly trimmed down. Now that I've accepted that something else might happen, I can't look away from him. Then, almost in what feels like slow motion, he steps up to a girl and wraps an arm around her shoulders nonchalantly. I don't know when Baylor turns around but she makes a sound of disgust. "Why the hell is he with that troll hoe?"

Normally, I'd laugh at that comment but right now it feels like the air has been sucked out of the room. Before I realize what I'm doing I'm turned around and heading for the restroom. I rush inside with Baylor on my heels. I was so stupid. I knew that we were too opposite but I let myself think that for a moment that didn't matter.

Baylor is fuming behind me. "Oh my... hells freaking bells! What is he thinking?" She paces back and forth while I lean back against the cool wall. "He can't almost kiss you then bring another girl here!" She throws her hands up in frustration. The door opens and I swear the night can't get any worse. Baylor swings around only to come face to face with the exact reason I rushed into the restroom to begin with. Petite, doe-eyed, blonde bimbo that Roscoe dragged in here.

The girl stops short in the doorway when her gaze collides with Baylor's. Recognition comes over her features. "Baylor, the birthday girl."

"Yep," Baylor replies. Her answer is short and snippy, her arms crossing over her chest as she does. The awkwardness and tension fills the area.

The girl bites down on her bottom lip. "Am I interrupting something?" Uncertainty visible on every feature of her face and the way her body tenses.

In the reflection of the mirror I can see Baylor about to say yes. And while I love her for having my back, I can't let her make this girl feel any more out of place than she already does. It's not her fault that she's landed in the middle of awkward-ville. She

wasn't the one who almost kissed me a few days ago. This is on Roscoe. Then again it's really not. Baylor and I just totally misread the situation. Obviously, he wasn't that into me. He just got caught up in the moment. If he was into me he wouldn't have brought this girl. So, before Baylor can answer I shake my head and tell her no. She gives me a grateful smile and steps around Baylor and into a stall.

Baylor turns and gives me a 'are you crazy?' look. I just shrug my shoulders. The only crazy thing I've done lately was to actually consider giving Roscoe a chance. The worst part is I don't even have a right to be upset about the current situation. Roscoe and I have never been anything other than enemies to a certain extent. I have no claim on him. An almost kiss doesn't give me anything to fight with. The girl steps out of the stall and heads to the sink. Baylor and I stand there in awkward silence. I try to ignore the girl's existence while Baylor seems fine staring her down. The girl fixes her lipstick then turns around and Baylor steps in her path. "You came with Roscoe, didn't you?"

"Yeah."

Baylor makes a show of looking her up and down. When people call Baylor feisty they aren't kidding. "You're new." The girl opens her mouth I'm assuming to reply, but after a moment it snaps shut and she looks dumbfounded. "What's your name?"

"Chrissy," she squeaks out.

"Where did he find you? On the corner of Hollywood Boulevard?"

My eyes nearly bug out of my head. I've heard about the protective Baylor from Summer but I've never seen her in action. I can't just stand there and let her do this to Chrissy. "Baylor," I scold her.

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“I want to go,” Chrissy comments.

Baylor scoffs, rolls her eyes then points behind her towards the door saying, “Right there, is the door.”

Chrissy scurries out and I step towards Baylor. “You’re horrible.”

“I’m protective. There’s a difference. Besides, how long is that going to last? Oh, that’s right it won’t. He’ll be bored by the end of the night,” Baylor says in a sing-song voice.

I raise my eyebrows. “He might not be.”

We start to head out of the bathroom. I have a job to get back to but Baylor looks over her shoulder and in a sing-song voice says, “Mark my words.”

Twenty-One

Roscoe

Rejection is never easy. It stings pretty bad. Takes a hit at the pride. It was pretty clear when Riverlyn walked in that Kosi regretted what was about to happen. The last thing I wanted to do was follow her outside but Mushu was in the car. I couldn’t let her take him. It was so bad that she couldn’t even look me in the eyes. At first I thought I might be overreacting. Maybe she was just freaked out, but after a few days of her avoiding me and radio silence via phone, I took the hint.

For a moment I considered calling Chrissy up and canceling the date I had set up well over a week ago, skipping Baylor's birthday altogether and just chilling at home with Mushu, but then I figured the best way to move past whatever weird attraction I suddenly had to Kosi was to get over it. In my mind, I figured Chrissy would be a great distraction to help with the Kosi situation. My plan was laid out and foolproof, or so I thought.

However, the moment I walked into Rowdy's and my eyes landed on Kosi, I knew I was screwed. There was no way I could ignore her. My bruised ego hurt but it still wanted her snarky, sarcastic comments. The way she rolled her blue eyes. I was actually missing things about her which was odd. At first her eyes danced with something... desire... attraction, I'm not quite sure but it morphed quickly. Before I knew it, she had dashed off towards the back. Baylor glared at me clearly pissed before following after her. My eyes follow Kosi and her legs that look as if they go on forever, the jeans she has on hug every inch. Brown cowboy boots hit midcalf. She's got a black sequined tank top on with a red button up over it and tied up on her midriff. Her hair is perfectly curled and she's got some little twisty thing going on in front. The thing that is perfectly engraved in my mind though is the look of red lipstick on her perfectly shaped lips. The lips I was just inches from the other day. The same ones I have been picturing in my mind every day since.

Before we even made it to the table, Chrissy announced she needed the ladies room. I wanted to tell her that if my suspicion was correct about where Kosi and Baylor disappeared to then the ladies room probably wasn't the best idea. In the end, I kept my mouth shut because I doubt she'd listen to me anyways. Besides, I didn't want to make the situation into a big deal.

Chrissy is gone for a bit. I'm sitting next to Bowie when he leans over and asks, "Do you need to go check on her?" I just shake my head. Bowie doesn't bring it up again. Chrissy finally reappears but I have to admit she looks a little confused. She plops into her seat next to me.

My arm is draped across the back of it. She turns to me. “I think she just called me a hooker.”

I have to bite back the laughter inside my chest. It’s just the look on Chrissy’s face is kind of funny. Once I’m certain I won’t laugh I ask, “Who?” I’m assuming her answer will be Kosi. She does always come across as judgy.

“Baylor.” Her answer shocks me. As if her name summons her, Baylor appears from around the corner. Our group cheers for her. She’s all smiles and waves until her eyes land on me. I watch as her happy look morphs into one of disgust and kind of angry. Her eyes narrow into a glare and her smile falls away. I’m not sure what I did but clearly something. When they say looks can kill... well they must have witnessed the look Baylor is giving me right now. It causes me to squirm in my seat a little.

When I turn to Chrissy she looks as uncomfortable as I suddenly feel. “I’m sure you misunderstood her.”

Chrissy’s eyes go wide. “I’m pretty sure there was no way to misunderstand that.”

Kosi comes to the table with another waitress. She passes out drinks and begins taking orders. However, she seems hell bent on avoiding me once again. She’s standing next to Baylor and going down the left side of the table, taking orders. The other waitress comes down mine. Disappointment floods me but I’m not sure why. It’s obvious how she feels about the almost kiss. Regardless, I still try to catch her eye, but she refuses. It isn’t until she finishes and turns around to check on the other waitress that our eyes lock. Something flashes in hers... I almost want to say she’s hurt but I know that can’t be. But before I have time to truly decipher it, her guards are up and she looks exactly like the girl I’ve come to know.

Music plays around us and the night continues. The longer I sit here the more my mood drifts to a place I don’t go often. Irritation simmers beneath the surface.

Eventually, I make my way towards the birthday girl where Kosi is currently but when she sees me coming she turns around and runs away like I have some sort of plague. I squat beside Baylor and I have to give her credit she looks shocked. “Roscoe.”

“Happy birthday.”

She forces a smile onto her face that never really reaches her eyes. “Thank you.”

We stare at each other for a moment. “Did you call my date a hooker?”

Baylor smirks. “I guess I should give her more credit. Honestly, I had my doubts about her catching that.”

“Baylor,” I scold quietly.

She shakes her head. “Nope, you don’t get to take that tone with me. It’s my night and I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“You can’t be serious,” I comment.

We stare at each other for a long while before she answers. “As a heart attack.”

“Why?” I ask. There has to be some reason why.

Baylor scoffs. “If you have to ask then you didn’t deserve the answer anyways.”

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Chrissy appears at my side. I'm so close to getting an actual answer out of Baylor but then Chrissy messes it up. She looks down at me expectantly. "Are we doing something down here?"

"No," I bite out.

A look of confusion crosses her face. "Then why are we down here?"

I'm about to reply when Baylor sneers. "Does this belong to you?" she asks me while waving her hand dismissively towards Chrissy.

Baylor has always been pretty welcoming to pretty much everyone, but I think whatever her problem with Chrissy is... actually has to do with me. I just don't know why. I stand up and take Chrissy's elbow and lead her back to our seats. The rest of the night goes by without a hitch for pretty much everyone else but me. Every time Kosi is anywhere in the dining area my eyes can't seem to look anywhere else. She stops at our table so much but she is a pro at avoiding my eye contact. Admittedly, it's driving me crazy. I want to catch her eye just once more to see what I can see there but I keep getting nothing.

By the time we decide to disperse with a lot of the group heading to the races and then JamesTown I can't shake the feeling that Baylor's attitude towards Chrissy actually has to do with Kosi and me. Is it possible that Kosi told Baylor about the almost kiss?

Twenty-Two

Roscoe

After we all leave Rowdy's, most of us head to the street races. A lot of us are missing because they have kids to pick up from babysitters and whatnot, but some of us are able to go. Lane hangs with Chrissy and me. Thankfully, Lane is able to entertain Chrissy because my mind is anywhere but here. It's busy running around in circles like a hamster stuck on a wheel. Baylor's words and attitude, Kosi's avoidance... it's all driving me crazy. Once the races finished I planned on taking Chrissy home but Lane made the mistake of inviting us to JamesTown and now Chrissy is looking at me expectantly. Eventually, I give in.

So, here we are sitting at JamesTown. Chrissy is already on the tipsy side. I'm on the irritated side, and based on the look on Lane's face, she's on the apologetic side. She leans over, her fire engine red hair dancing under the lights. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were wanting to call the date to an end. I feel horrible that I invited the two of you and now you're stuck here."

"You didn't get me stuck. I could have come up with an excuse to take her home and I kind of wish I had. She's tipsy as hell. Worst part is I can't blame her. I've been a crappy date and she knows it. Please, don't feel bad," I assure Lane. It's not her fault. This is mine. "I'm going to call it a night and get Chrissy home. Let me know when you make it home safely." I stand up and make my way to the dance floor. After gathering Chrissy up, we head to my car. Once I get her home, I walk her to her door and help her inside. As I leave I make sure the bottom lock on her door is at least locked and secure.

As I slide behind the wheel of my car once more, I feel like I'm not ready to go home just yet. Instead, I drive around, music playing low, windows down so the fresh air can come in. Aimlessly I drive around, no destination, no reason. A little while later, without actually making the decision, I pull into the parking lot of Rowdy's. I don't remember even coming this way but here I am. Kosi's car is still here. A quick glance

at the clock on the dash tells me she should be getting off any minute now. I don't know why but I park and wait.

About twenty minutes later she appears in the parking lot with a couple of other workers. The parking lot is really dark. These lights definitely need to be fixed. As she gets closer I climb out of the car. When her eyes land on me her steps falter for a moment. If I didn't know Kosi better I'd think there is a flash of hurt in those eyes once more. She shakes her head and starts heading back to the car. "Kosi," I call out.

She stops but she doesn't look at me. Her hands pull the gray zipper hoodie she has on tighter around her. I don't know why but she looks so vulnerable at this moment. Something I never thought of before. I've been so closed minded when it comes to her. Assuming I knew everything there was to know about her based on what she allowed others to see. I'm ashamed to admit I stereotyped her long before I ever knew her. Now, I want to know her but it might be too late to repair the damage that years of being enemies has left behind. Kosi sighs, "What do you want, Roscoe?"

My mouth opens and closes multiple times before I finally have to admit. "I don't know."

"That's very helpful."

We stand there for I don't know how long. "Why are you avoiding me?"

Kosi recoils like she's been slapped. "I haven't been avoiding you."

I laugh but it's short and sarcastic. "Yes, you have."

"I'll be at Free Fall tomorrow to start working on the facelift. I still plan to fulfill my duties, so don't worry. You can tell the owner that," she says. She still hasn't looked my way so I make my way to her.

Her body tenses as I approach but I don't let that stop me. "I'm not worried about the facelift." That's not completely true. Ever since Kosi pointed out the outdated appearance it's all I've worried about, but right now Free Fall is the last thing on my mind. Once I'm close enough I slip one of my fingers under her chin and urge her to meet my eyes. Eventually, she gives in and it reminds me so much of the other day. It's almost like I have Deja vu. "Why did you run away?" That's the question that I haven't been able to get off my mind the last few days.

Kosi's eyes narrow and for a moment she bites her bottom lip which only causes my body to react. "I didn't run away." Her eyes dart away from mine and I realize I just found something that Kosi isn't great at... lying.

"You're lying. You're actually not great at something," I tease her with a raised eyebrow and a smirk.

For a moment she stares at me before she slightly shakes her head. "I'm not lying."

I lean forward, the distance between our lips narrows. "You are. You bolted so quickly out of my dad's house I thought it might be on fire for a moment. Why is that?" There was a fire but it wasn't in the house. It was me. It was her. It was us. We were the fire. I suddenly understand the temptation of playing with it. Taking a chance on getting burned just to let it run rampant. I avoid true connection. Terrified of loss. Paralyzed by my own fear, but Kosi... she's worth the risk, worth the hurt, worth the burn.

"Your sister had been found. All was right in the world. There was no reason to hang around." Once again her eyes look at everything but mine. I inch even closer to her. Her cinnamon scented breath fills my senses.

I smirk, a slight chuckle joining the space between us. Her eyes whip to mine. Again, an unguarded emotion swims in the depth of her ocean blues. "Or maybe there was a

reason to stay and that's why you ran."

Kosi scoffs. "Oh really? And what reason was that?"

"This," I whisper as my lips crash down onto hers. For a moment she's stiff as a board but her startled gasp gives me the access I'm dying for. My tongue brushes against hers and suddenly her body is pressed against mine. Space eliminated. Her hands wrap around my forearms. For a brief moment the world falls away. The fire rages wildly. Everything seems right for a moment. Kosi is everywhere.

Suddenly, a car horn sounds and Kosi jumps back. The fire raging inside extinguished. Her wide, shocked eyes meet mine. Kosi's mouth opens but before anything happens she bolts. The sound of her car door closes puts the last burning ember out and I listen as she drives away. The taste of cinnamon still lingers on my tongue as I stand in the darkened parking lot, alone, my heart slamming against my chest, my breath heavy and quick. I've kissed my fair share of girls but never like this.

Twenty-Three

Kosi

When I get home Baylor is already sound asleep, but I barge into her room. When her door hits the wall behind it she jumps up from where she was in her bed. Her hair in every direction. “What?” she hollers. Her hands formed into fists, ready to fight. Her sequined dress barely hanging on.

“I kissed Roscoe,” I announce, rather dramatically I might add. After admitting that, I rush into the kitchen and rummage through the freezer until I find the caramel ripple frozen yogurt I love so much. The light comes to life above me and Baylor is standing there, looking a little rough but wide awake.

“What the hell did you just say?” she asks as she steps in front of me and starts to look for her ice cream.

I grab us both a spoon and I hop up onto the counter then hand her a spoon while she hops up onto the island, facing me. “I kissed Roscoe. Or well, he kissed me.”

“Which is it?” she asks.

My mind is jumbled and at the moment it’s racing. I’m not sure how everything went down now. “Does it really matter?”

Baylor gives me a look like I’m crazy. “Yes! Yes, it matters... a lot! If he kissed you then that’s a whole new ball game.”

“Are we playing ball?”

“Ugh!” Baylor drops her head back in dramatic fashion. “How can you be so smart and so clueless at the same time?”

I shrug my shoulders. “I’ve only ever been with Colby. He asked me out freshman year of high school. He kissed me after the movies and we were together from then on. It wasn’t complicated. I knew he liked me.” My voice trails off because he did like me. He loved me but I made him not love me and that hurts on a level I never expected. We were supposed to be each other’s forever but now he’s got a new forever.

“Sorry,” Baylor says. “I didn’t mean to bring up that lame ass.”

“He wasn’t lame,” I tell her, shaking my head.

For a moment we’re silent. “He is lame but we are talking about Roscoe, not Colby. So, did he kiss you?” My mind replays the event and yes it was an event. An event of monumental proportions. I must be taking too long because Baylor groans. “What is taking so long?”

“I wasn’t expecting it. I was tired and probably gross from work.” Baylor starts to say something when I whine out, “Barbecue.”

She raises her eyebrows. “What?”

I sit my yogurt aside and place my face into my hands but they’re cold so I jerk away quickly and slam my head into the cabinet behind me. “Ow!” Baylor is off the kitchen island and to me in five seconds. She pulls me off the counter.

“Off to the couch we go,” she says. Our frozen treats are long forgotten. Once we’re

seated she turns to me. “What about barbecue?”

“I probably smelled like it,” I tell her as I bury my face into one of the throw pillows.

“Kosi,” Baylor says soothingly.

I don’t know when I became such a girl but I kind of hate it. “He kissed me and I smelled like barbecue.”

“I’m pretty sure he didn’t care about that.”

Sighing, I lay back on the couch. My eyes close, feeling heavy with sleep. “Maybe, he was drunk,” I mumble.

Baylor laughs lightly. “I doubt that.”

I don’t remember falling asleep but the next thing I know I’m waking up to the sun sneaking in through the vertical blinds in the living room. Baylor must have covered me with the throw blanket she leaves lying across the back of the couch because it’s draped over me now. My body aches from falling asleep and staying in such an odd position. I scrub my hands over my face, but as I do there is a familiar scent that isn’t mine lingering on my skin. Last night comes flooding back to me. Roscoe and I kissing. Heat fills my cheeks. That had to be some kind of hallucination, right? I mean Roscoe and I didn’t kiss.

Even as I tell myself that I know it’s a lie. We totally kissed which is awkward since we now have to work with one another while I do the facelift at Free Fall. I told him I’d be there today. However, that was pre-kiss and now we’re post-kiss and I’m not sure what the rules of this should be. I catch the time on the clock and realize I really need to get to Free Fall and start on this project.

After showering and shaving every last part of my body, I dash to my room and spend way too long applying lotion, makeup, doing my hair and picking out my outfit. By the time I'm finished and I open my bedroom door, Baylor is sitting on the couch expectantly. She looks me over and frowns. "That's got to be some kind of record for you." My brows knit together in confusion. "Taking that long to get ready. You never take that long."

"I needed a super long shower after last night," I tell her. It's the excuse I've decided to go with but really it's just a lie.

"Where are you headed to looking so fancy?" she asks. Baylor is like a lie detector. Even the best liar couldn't make it through her. I sigh and sag against the door frame. Baylor stands and makes her way over to me. "Are you going to Free Fall?" I nod my head. "You can't go looking like that."

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She marches past me and into my room. I look down at the pleather black leggings, wedges, and red and black striped tank that's flowy. "Why not?" I thought I looked cute.

"For a few reasons," Baylor replies, her voice muffled from where her face is currently buried in my closet. "For starters you're going to be doing and overseeing manual labor. There is nothing about that outfit that says either of those things. It's a killer outfit but not for this type of work. Second, I know you and Roscoe kissed but remember how last night started out."

Memories of him showing up at Rowdy's with Chrissy resurface. "You're right."

"Third, I don't know what you've decided as far as what you want for him or how you feel towards him but if you are still on the decision of giving him a chance I support that, but make him work for it. In my opinion he's screwed up three times already. He needs to earn you now," she tells me as she starts throwing some clothes onto my bed.

"Three times?"

Baylor nods and holds up one finger. "Letting you run out on the almost kiss." She holds up two fingers. "Not getting into contact after the almost kiss." Adding the third finger she says, "Bringing troll hoe to my birthday party which was being held where you work after the almost kiss and radio silence."

Her words seep into the cracks of my defensive wall and resolidify them. Those words are like an ice cold bucket of water bringing me back to reality. I needed them.

Tossing my purse on to the bed I strip out of the clothes I have on. Baylor passes me the capris, simple red t-shirt, and Converse. I turn around and take the jewelry off and pull my hair up into a ponytail. It's got a lot of volume but it doesn't look like I'm trying so hard now. When I turn around I give Baylor a smirk. "Thank you. I needed that."

She smiles. "So, where do you stand when it comes to Roscoe?"

I shake my head. "I don't. I've had two too many momentary lapses of judgment. No more. From this moment on things will go back to how they were before."

"I didn't exactly mean that," Baylor tries to explain but I step forward, grab my purse, give her a quick squeeze, and head out the door. I can't believe I almost allowed myself to get caught up in Roscoe. Nothing good can come from that. I must have hit my head or something. However, on the way to Free Fall I decide that I'll follow his lead. If he acts as if the kiss never happened then so will I.

Twenty-Four

Roscoe

Surely last night was a dream. There's absolutely no way that I kissed Kosi Scott. It's just not possible. The only way that would ever happen is if we were living in an alternative universe, but since we're not... it just didn't happen, okay? Mushu purrs beside me where he's curled up into the crook of my neck. I reach up blindly and stroke his fluffy fur. Memories from last night come back to me in pieces. Kosi is at the front and center of each and every one of them.

Her silky blonde hair is so soft despite being curled. The way her eyes keep showing a vulnerability I never imagined she had before. How her lips pout when she starts to think about something or when she's avoiding something. That floral scent that

follows her wherever she goes. Kosi reminds me of an early spring day in the park. Fresh flowers are everywhere. Growing up, we went to this park in our neighborhood. It was everyone's pride and joy so a lot of the moms got together and planted a huge flower garden in one corner. It always smelled amazing when I used to walk by it. Kosi reminds me of that. Her cinnamon taste is something else I'll never complain about. Kissing her shouldn't have felt so right. It felt like it was meant to be, but that's ridiculous. This isn't some kind of movie. I don't believe in destiny. Hell, I don't really believe in relationships or love or any of that other junk.

As I sit up in bed, Mushu slides down the pillow. Based on the hiss he gives my back, he's not too thrilled about it. Normally, I'd apologize to him because, let's face it, that cat means everything to me. But this morning, my mind is too distracted to be of any use. Moments later I decide to get out of bed and get ready for the day. Before the kiss, Kosi said she'd be in today to start work on the facelift of Free Fall. I'm not sure that still stands but I need to be there just in case.

A quick shower and glass of orange juice later, and I'm out the door. I'm heading for my motorcycle when I decide to take in breakfast for Wyatt, possibly Kosi, and me. Changing direction, I head for my car. Once inside, I find Bowie on the local throwback 80s rock radio station and head out. It's still pretty surreal to hear my best friend on the radio. I make my way to one of my favorite spots. Busted Bagels is a local bagel shop. Everything is made in house and they have some bizarre flavors, but everything I've tried is so good. Most of their toppings and ingredients are bought locally too. The bright, sunshine yellow building comes into view. At the top of the building is a huge bagel that looks like it is bursting with stuff inside and it spins around. I'm not shocked to see that the parking lot is already packed. I swing in and find a spot before hopping out and heading inside. Carol is behind the counter and when she sees me she starts my order. "Good morning Roscoe, chicken and waffle bagel, extra syrup on the side and a protein infused banana smoothie, to go?"

I smile and nod my head. "That is correct for me but I also need a bacon buster on a

bacon cheddar bagel and a large black coffee.” As I stand there I realize I’m not sure what Kosi eats. I look over the menu before deciding that sweet and savory is the way to go. “Cinnamon swirl bagel with fluffy egg whites and bacon, large iced caramel latte.”

She raises her eyebrows. “Ordering all kinds of different things today.”

“Yes ma’am.” I pay Carol then move over to the side to wait for my order. The inside is white with all sorts of bagels plastered on the walls. Every table is round and decorated to look like a bagel with wood chairs. The floor is checkered with khaki and brown. Behind the long wooden counter are floor to ceiling cases that hold all the bagels. Off to the left is where all the coffees and drinks are made. Eventually, my name is called and I grab the drink carrier and sack before heading back to my car.

I’m the first one to Free Fall. I park around back today so I can be in between both the office and the classrooms. Once I’m inside, I place everything on the counter and head back outside to unlock the classrooms and hangar for Wyatt. As I head back into the office through the back door I come face to face with Kosi. Our bodies collide and she lets out a startled yelp. My hands instantly and instinctively reach out to steady her. My hands connect with the skin on her lower back, warm and soft, just how I imagined it would be after last night. “Roscoe?” she asks.

I can’t help but smirk at her. “The one and only.”

“What are you doing here?” she asks, confusion clear in her voice. Kosi looks really cute when her eyebrows are pulled together like this.

My eyes dart around to see if I’m missing something. “I o—.” I cut myself short. Admitting I own the place right now just doesn’t seem like the best idea so I clear my throat and try again. “I work here, remember?”

Kosi nods. “Yes, I meant I didn’t think you were here because I didn’t see your car when I pulled up.”

My head motions towards the back door. Her eyes follow the movement of my hair. I hate to admit it, but I kind of love it when she does that. “I parked around the back.”

“Oh,” she says quietly.

As the silence descends upon us, I realize I’m still holding her. That floral scent is invading the space between us. Reluctantly, I step back. “I brought breakfast but I wasn’t sure you were coming.”

Suddenly, she’s cold and cut off and I’m not sure why. It’s impossible to get a read on Kosi. “I told you I’d be here.”

Her arms slip across her chest, closed off from me. So different from a moment ago. “Yeah, well that was before.”

Her head falls to the side. “Before what?”

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Our eyes meet, both of us daring the other one to bring up the unspoken kiss we shared. Neither of us budge and eventually I shake my head. “Nothing.” I move away from her and towards the counter. I reach inside the bag and hand her a bagel. “I wasn’t sure what you eat normally so I went with savory and sweet. I hope that’s okay. Oh, and an iced caramel latte.”

She takes the bagel and coffee before stepping ten feet back. “Thanks bagel boy.” Kosi’s words throw me off. They sound slightly harsh but surely, she isn’t mad at me.

I take a seat and watch as she does too, but far enough away from me that she’s clearly marking a territory line. I can’t help myself. “Bagel boy?”

“Yeah, can’t mistake you for prince charming so I guess bagel boy is as good as anything, right?” she glares at me from over her bagel.

For a moment I just stand there. This is the Kosi I’m used to. This I can work with. Everything about last night was insane. Kosi and I were never right or meant to be and if we were it was enemies. “Definitely not your prince charming. Then again, I’m sure even he could do something wrong.”

Kosi scoffs. “Maybe, you should try and do something right for a change.”

That mutual irritation we have always felt around one another is back and raging inside me. I let it ride. Before I know it, the words are slipping out of my mouth. “I’ll be sure to go ask Colby for some tips and guidance.”

At the mention of his name her face falls. Instantly, I feel like an ass and I hate that I

let myself go there. I don't know how or why they ended things but that was an unnecessary low blow even for us. "I think I'll start a different day. I don't feel so well." She's out of her seat and to the front door in no time. I'm mentally kicking myself. How can things change so quickly? I woke up this morning wanting to repeat last night and now we're farther apart than ever.

Twenty-Five

Kosi

I don't return to Free Fall for a few days. The wound that Roscoe threw salt into wouldn't allow it. I have no right to be upset with him. I started it with him that day. He, of course, shot back but I fired first. His words just hit home on a level I didn't expect. Then again, nothing about that morning had gone like I expected. I truly thought he would want to kiss me again. In all honesty I had wanted him to kiss me again. Then when we ran into each other, no space between us, and his hand on my back, it felt like the perfect time but then nothing happened. I realized he was going to ignore our kiss as much as he did the almost kiss. That stung so of course my defenses went right back into place. I felt foolish for even letting the kiss happen after that. Giving us space seemed necessary. If he was going to ignore the kiss then I needed to as well. However, that's easier said than done. Especially, when he looks so good and all I can think about is kissing him again. By the time I ran out of Free Fall and made it back to my car, I was so glad Baylor had made me change clothes before coming here. She was right. I was trying too hard.

Roscoe's comment about Colby, though, is what had been the absolute worst. He doesn't know how much I blame myself for the demise of our relationship. I know I caused that. Colby was pretty much prince charming and I had taken that for granted. It was foolish of me because now here I was finding myself attracted to Roscoe, of all people, and he was off getting married.

Doing the facelift for Free Fall is still something I really want to do but it's hard with Roscoe around. So, Wyatt showed up at Rowdy's last night and gave me a copy of the key. When I had asked him about it he told me that Roscoe had asked him to give it to me. Luckily, my smile didn't falter as I took the key from him. I'm surprised it didn't, considering that Roscoe was basically telling me he didn't even want to see me. I guess I should have seen it coming.

Regardless, Free Fall is getting its facelift. Since I actually get off at a decent time tonight, I head home, change, and head straight there. It takes me a bit to get set up but I manage to get all the paint inside and the old sheets laid down to protect the floor. Just because I'm redoing the place doesn't mean I need to be messy. Grabbing my phone, I turn on some angry girl rock music. Some of my favorite bands come on and I'm really lost in the music and painting. It's kind of therapeutic. At least until I hear the chuckle come from behind me in the middle of belting out a wild part while swinging my hair around.

I spin around so quickly that I lose my balance and I know I'm fixing to go face first into the floor, at least until a set of arms wrap around my waist and save me. A fire ignites in my stomach where his arms are resting and he hauls me to my feet. His cologne is all I can smell, even over the fresh paint. "Whoa there," he says. His mouth is so close to my ear that his warm breath dances over my skin causing me to break out in goosebumps. Once I'm firmly back on the ground he asks. "Are you okay?"

My head nods because I'm scared to speak. Finally, I say, "Yeah, I'm fine, thanks to you."

"Well, I'm not sure that was your brightest idea."

Slowly, I turn around. Heat flooding my cheeks. When I look up Roscoe is standing there just looking at me. His hair is damp like he just went swimming or got out of

the shower. Based on how good he smells I'd say shower. The gray muscle tank hugs his body. No wonder the girls drool over him. He has on a pair of gray camo shorts and flip flops. He looks so different from what I'm used to. Quickly, I look away and come face to face with the ladder I was just on. I point at it. "Yeah, head banging on a ladder was a very poor decision. Definitely ill advised."

Roscoe shrugs. "We're all allowed some ill-advised fun from time to time." Something tells me that's something he knows plenty about. I wrap my arms around myself before I realize the music is still blaring. For a moment I worry someone called the cops because of the music and that's why Roscoe is here. Then I remember there's no one around for miles so that's doubtful. After turning the music down, he speaks again. "I take it you're not working at Rowdy's tonight."

"I already did. I just got lucky and actually got off at the time I was scheduled. Since I had some free time, I figured I'd better come and work on some of this. I've slacked enough. The owner probably thinks I'm a total flake," I tell him with a roll of my eyes. I am pretty disappointed in myself and how I've handled this whole situation. My father would be so upset with me.

"I'm pretty sure he doesn't think that. Actually, you're the least flaky person he knows so I'd say you're good." He gives me a small smile. Roscoe Langston actually seems nervous. I've said it before, and I'll say it again. Seeing Roscoe nervous is such an odd sight. Something I definitely never thought I'd see.

I know he's just humoring me. The owner doesn't know me so he doesn't know how hardworking I can be or how much pride I take in my work. All he's seen so far is me not fulfilling my end of the job. "I'll make sure to stay on it." Roscoe nods his head then silence follows after that. Finally, I ask, "So, what are you doing here?"

"I'm not sure. I was home and restless, so I thought I'd come out here. Maybe, organize something or look over paperwork," he explains as he stuffs his hands into

the front pockets of his shorts. My mind takes that as code for ‘wanting to be alone’. I turn around and turn the music off. “What are you doing?”

“What?”

He closes the space between us. “Why did you turn the music off?”

I look down at my phone then back at him. “So, I can get out of your hair. You have stuff you need to do. I don’t want to be in the way.”

For a moment, he just stares down at me. His expression is unreadable, but it catches the oxygen in my throat. “You are never in the way, Kosi.”

I hate our hot and cold routine lately. Usually, we’re just as cold as Antarctica but lately it’s like global warming has hit us as much as the planet. My heart stumbles around in my chest like it’s drunk, and maybe it is. His words seem to have that effect on me lately. Intoxicating me in a way no one ever has. “I really don’t mind,” I admit.

He looks around the room. At least half of the back wall is primed for painting. “Actually, how about I help you paint.”

Quickly, I look down at my clothes as everything seems to become clear again. My ridiculously large, thin, black t-shirt hangs to mid-thigh completely covering my khaki shorts underneath and I’m barefoot. I didn’t want to get my sandals dirty. I look like a mess. “I don’t mind the help but I don’t want you to ruin your clothes.”

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Roscoe chuckles. “These old things?” I nod my head and he reaches around me, getting into my space once more, and turns the music back on. “Please, tell me you have some Cheap Trick on your playlist.”

I’m surprised he knows Cheap Trick. I guess I shouldn’t be considering he grew up with the James brothers and 80s rock bands are their specialty. “Of course, I do. I’m surprised you know who they are.”

He looks back at me. “You might be surprised what you don’t know about me,” he tells me with a wink.

We’ve been working alongside each other for a while now. Suddenly, he turns to me with a playful smile on his face. “Are you hungry?” For a moment I just stare at him. If you know me then you know I eat all the time. “Right! Dumb question. How do you feel about Chinese food?”

“I love it, but I don’t think they’ll deliver this far out.”

Once again, he winks. “I have my ways. Any requests?”

“Egg rolls!” He disappears for a few and I’m thankful for the time to collect myself. I feel like my body has been on hyper drive since he walked through the door. I can’t help but get sucked into the Roscoe vortex, but I’m really starting to like it there.

Twenty-Six

Roscoe

I call a friend of mine, Dereck, who works at one of the local Chinese restaurants. We met a few years ago when he took skydiving classes. Dereck is a great guy and one of the head cooks over there. It takes a few before he comes to the phone. “Roscoe!” he says with excitement when he picks up the phone.

“Hey man! How’s everything?” I ask.

Dereck got married a couple of months ago. He’s still in the honeymoon phase, lucky for him. “It’s great man. You should wife a girl up already.”

I love Dereck but the way he talks sometimes makes me want to slap him. I’m pretty sure I’ve never heard ‘wife a girl up’ before and I hope I never do again. “I’ll see what I can do. So, a friend of mine and I are working late at Free Fall. Is there any chance that you can pull some of those strings of yours.”

“Give me the order. You know I got you covered,” he tells me. I give him the order. The bad thing about me and Chinese food is that I always order way too much, like half the menu. I never know when to stop. “Are you sure that’s all?” he asks with a laugh.

He’s such a smart ass. “Yes, that’s all.”

“Give us a bit and it’ll be there.”

“Thanks man,” I tell him before I hang up the phone. When I head back into the main office area, I stop as the music becomes audible. I Want You To Want Me by Cheap Trick. I don’t know if she already had it in her music library or she put it on for my benefit but either way I couldn’t be happier. For a moment I hang back and just watch as Kosi dances and jumps around, singing along to the song. I wish this side of her was around more often. Once she notices me she stops.

“I didn’t realize you were done.” She looks bashful. Her blue eyes dart to everything but me.

My head bobs up and down. “Yeah, I caught that.”

“So, did you manage to sweet talk some girl into bringing food out here for you?”

It almost sounds like there’s a hint of jealousy in her tone but I can’t be sure. “Yes, I got the food ordered and it’s being delivered but the only sweet talking I did was to a buddy of mine named Dereck. He’s really funny and chill but not exactly my type.”

Kosi’s eyes meet mine. “I’m sorry.”

I wave off her apology. “No big deal. It’ll take a bit before the food gets here.”

She fidgets with her hands. “Then I guess we should continue painting.” We both go to the opposite sides of the room. The back wall is finished, now it’s time to get the rest. Music plays and I’m surprised to hear the different genres and artists in her music library. I’m shocked by most of them.

“You know, I never thought you would listen to rock music,” I comment.

She turns around and looks at me. She’s perched on the ladder, near the top step. A teenage me would have been over there trying to see up her shirt, then again the adult me probably would be too, but I know she’s got shorts on. I caught a glimpse of them earlier. “What did you think I listened to, country?”

“Nope.”

“Rap?” she asks. I shake my head. “Okay, pop?”

“No, not really pop,” I admit.

Kosi studies me before climbing down the ladder. As she makes her way to me I decide to meet her halfway. She shrugs her shoulders. “Okay, I’m out of musical genre ideas. What did you think I listened to?”

I smirk. “Classical.”

Her eyes go large. “Classical?”

“Yep.” I nod my head. “Like Mozart and Beethoven and shit like that.”

Kosi bursts out laughing. “Shit like that.” I shrug my shoulders. “I’m sorry but I’m pretty sure that phrase has never been used with those two names before. I do appreciate classical music but it’s not my go to.”

“I’m learning that.”

Her head falls to the side as she studies me. Stray strands of her hair escape the messy bun on top of her head. “Did you really think I was that uptight?”

My teeth sink into my bottom lip, and I take a step forward. “I did. Clearly, I had it all wrong but you were intense from the moment I met you.”

“I was laser focused. There’s a difference. You don’t take anything seriously,” she tells me.

Oh boy, is she wrong. She just doesn’t know it yet. “Is that so?” I ask. She nods her head and crosses her arms over her chest. “And you, sweetheart, take everything so seriously.”

Kosi sighs. “I do. I always have. The weight of the world and all that, I guess. From the moment my brothers left the family business I felt like I couldn’t let my dad

down.”

Bad Company comes on and it feels like the entire mood shifts. There’s barely one step between us. For the first time in probably ever I feel like I can understand why Kosi has always been so serious. Something tells me she was never allowed to be her own person. Too many expectations were placed on her too soon. She felt like she had to compensate for her brothers’ decisions and by doing so she’s given up some of herself. Without realizing it, I’ve taken the step, eliminating the space. Our bodies are touching with every breath we draw in. She looks up at me. No need to slip a finger under her chin and give her the push, she does it on her own. Her cobalt blue eyes lock onto mine. I lean in without making the actual decision. Her mouth, centimeters from mine. Kosi rises up to her tiptoes to meet me, our lips brush.

A banging on the door shatters the moment. I drop my head back in frustration. Closing my eyes I take a few deep breaths to calm the heat within me. However, when I open them Kosi is already at the door, paying for the food. “I was going to get that,” I tell her.

She gives me a small smile. “I know but you’re already helping me with the painting. The least I can do is pay for the food. Besides, you did get it delivered out here.”

As she’s making her way towards me she steps on one of the paint can lids. “Ow!” she exclaims. Before I have time to register it I’m across the room, taking the food and placing it on the counter before bending down to make sure she didn’t cut her foot. However, it’s covered in paint, so I pull my muscle shirt over my head and wipe the bottom of her foot. A startled gasp comes from Kosi. Once I’m sure her foot is okay, I stand up. The heat floods the room once again. “You ruined your shirt.”

“I needed to make sure your foot wasn’t cut or anything. You should have shoes on,” I tell her.

She looks away. “I didn’t want to get paint on them. I’m sorry about your shirt.”

“I’m not,” I admit. I just don’t add that I’ll go shirtless anytime if it causes her eyes to look at me like they are right now. Kosi turns and walks back to her side of the room. She’s about to climb on the ladder again when I make my way over. We are far from done here. I wrap an arm around her waist and pull her back down to the ground. “You’re forgetting the food. I thought you were hungry.”

For what feels like forever, she just stares at me before she quietly admits. “I’m not sure what I think anymore.”

I don’t think. I just react. Our mouths crash together in a chaotic mess. Teeth bump, tongues collide, her nails dig into my bare shoulder blades and my hands roam over her body. Once again, I’m hit by how right this feels. We stumble then she pushes me against the wall and wraps her arms around my neck before kissing me as if I’m saving her life. Damp paint feels sticky against my back but all I care about in this moment is her... I’d stay here in whatever fantasy or bubble this is, if I could.

Her nails scratch at the back of my head, tangling in my hair. My hands find the back of her thighs and I lift her up. Her legs wrap around my waist and I sit her on one of the steps on the ladder. Both of our lips are still greedy for the others. How did we go from the constant insults and bickering to this?

Eventually, we pull away but I rest my forehead against hers. Our breaths mingle as we drag in air, desperate to get a clear thought. Kosi’s eyes remain closed, her baby doll-like cheeks flushed the perfect shade of pink, lips swollen. I reach my hands up into her hair and release the messy bun. The floral scent engulfs us as her strands scatter down. My hands twist into them before I bring my lips back to hers. The hell with oxygen. Who needs it anyways? Kissing Kosi feels more like breathing air than anything else I’ve ever experienced.

Her hands skim over my sides, her nails lightly drawing designs. She nibbles my bottom lip, driving me crazy. I used to think Kosi would be the death of me because of how boring I believed she was or because I'd say the wrong thing and push her overboard. Now, I don't care, she can be the death of me as long as she kills me while kissing.

Twenty-Seven

Kosi

My head feels dizzy, and my heart is slamming around erratically in the confines of my chest. Nothing makes sense but this feels right. Roscoe's hands leave a trail of fire wherever they land on my body. A different song joins in with the current one. For a moment we both ignore it until I realize it must be his phone. I place my palms on his bare chest. His skin beneath mine is heated and his chest feels as if it's beating as hard as mine is. Applying a little bit of pressure, Roscoe takes a couple of steps back. "What's wrong?" he asks.

I shake my head. "Nothing," I reply quickly. "It's just I think that's your phone that's ringing."

Roscoe looks around before realizing where his phone is. He darts across the room. "It's an unknown number."

Looking over his shoulder I notice the number is local. "It's a local number though. Maybe, you should answer it."

He nods and answers the call. I step away to give him some space. I watch as the muscles in his back tense. "Is she okay?" My heart sinks. I really hope this isn't about Riverlyn again. "Yeah, I'll be right there." When Roscoe turns around he looks so torn. "That was Urban, one of the boys from Pit Stop. Apparently, Riverlyn showed

up at some party and she ran into that Josh kid and now she's upset."

"Oh no," I say quietly. "Poor thing. You should go take care of her."

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Roscoe looks around while nodding his head. “Yeah, I should.” Without another word he heads to the door. “Kosi?” I turn around, he looks so uncertain. “Do you want to come with me?”.

My gut reaction is yes! Then I stop and look around at the mess. I can’t leave the room like this. Free Fall is open tomorrow. “I really should clean up here.”

A look of disappointment washes over the handsome features of his face. “Yeah, okay,” he says quietly before he turns and heads out. For a moment I just take in the room. The paint cans are open, the food is now forgotten. Deciding on what to start with I turn around. When a hand wraps around my bicep and spins me around. I don't even have time to think before Roscoe’s lips crash on mine. Everything falls away. When he pulls back I can read the silent pleading in his eyes. “Please, come with me. We’ll get new paint.”

Silence hits me. I’m dumbfounded by the Roscoe in front of me. I don’t know how to react so I grasp onto the only thing I can think of. “That’s a waste of money. The owner might not like that.”

Roscoe waves a hand dismissively. “I am the owner and I’m saying it’s fine to leave it. I’ll grab the food but come with me, Kosi.”

My common sense goes out the window. Without thinking, my head bobs up and down. “Okay.”

He pulls me into him once more and presses a quick kiss to my mouth before stepping away and grabbing the food. I rush over and grab my purse and phone,

turning the music off in the process. When I turn around I realize we have both forgotten something. “Roscoe.” He turns around and looks at me. “Aren’t you forgetting something?” I watch as he surveys the room and then shakes his head no. Laughter bubbles out from me. “Your shirt. You ruined it on my foot and now you’re shirtless and have paint all over your back.”

For the first time he looks down and it sinks in. He starts laughing. It’s probably not appropriate considering Riverlyn is distraught right now but it’s all we can do. As Roscoe passes by me he hands me the sack of food and disappears into the back. When he comes back out he is buttoning up a short sleeve black shirt. “There’s no need to traumatize my sister even more tonight.”

“I agree.”

He takes my free hand in his and pulls me out of the office. Once we step outside, he locks the door. Guilt settles in my bones because I can’t believe I just let him talk me into leaving good paint to dry out. I really should have stayed and at least picked up the stuff. The car ride is quiet except for the music. My thoughts are going a mile a minute, guilt has completely won out over my body. I’m assuming Roscoe knows where we’re going because he’s driving like he does. It isn’t until he turns onto one of the residential streets that something he said earlier clicks into my head. I whip around to face him. “You own Free Fall?”

For a moment he glances in my direction, indecision written on his face. When he looks away he clears his throat before announcing. “We’re here.” Perfect timing for him. I, on the other hand, feel oddly upset. This entire time he’s led me to believe that someone else hired me for the job. I took the job under false pretenses. Roscoe probably gave me that job as some kind of pity thing. I’m so stupid. Roscoe pulls up along the curb. The house we are parked in front of is definitely not the party house because it’s quiet and dark. He glances my way. “Once we get this sorted out and whatnot, I’ll explain the ownership.”

“You don’t owe me an explanation,” I tell him before I turn around and climb out of the car. A car door slams shut behind me.

“Kosi,” he says my name. Almost like he’s pleading with me.

I’m ahead of him and I plan to keep it that way. He doesn’t say anything else. My eyes land on the sight of Urban and Riverlyn sitting on a set of porch steps. He seems to be comforting her which is odd. Most guys his age just awkwardly pat your shoulder or back while trying to run away from a crying teenage girl. Urban, though, is sitting there, arm draped over her shoulders, her head resting in the crook of his neck. His hand rubs slowly up and down her arm. He seems oddly comfortable. “I found them.”

Roscoe sighs in relief as he darts around me and towards Riverlyn. She meets him halfway on the sidewalk so I decide to go over and talk to Urban. From what I can remember about him, he moved to the states from England recently. Urban is tall and lean with well-defined muscles. His hair is a medium brown with a slight wave to it but he keeps it cut short so you can’t tell. Pale skin, square jaw, and the prettiest aquamarine eyes I’ve ever seen. He’s also rich or well, I guess his dad is. “Hey, in case Roscoe forgets to say it, thank you for calling him about Riverlyn.”

“No problem. I didn’t think she was in any kind of state to get herself home and she wasn’t comfortable enough with me. Smart girl though. I mean not getting into a car with someone she doesn’t know. A lot would these days.” His British accent is thick.

As I listen to him talk I have to say, he sounds pretty smart himself. “You looked pretty comfortable with her.”

He shrugs his shoulders. “It’s one of the things my mum taught me. How to truly comfort a lady. No awkward pat and trying to bolt for me.”

“Smart lady,” I comment.

Urban looks down at the ground. His jaw clenches and I feel like I brought up a subject I shouldn’t have. “She was. I have to say though... it made me bloody popular with the ladies, but not so much with the guys.” He chuckles at whatever thought is crossing his mind now.

“I bet that didn’t go over so well with them.” I can just picture the fights he’s been into because of that alone.

“No, not at all. They thought I was trying to go after their girl. I mean, I didn’t need to comfort her in order to do that. My looks alone could do that,” he tells me. Shocks hits me, but when I look up at him he just smiles and winks. “The accent doesn’t hurt either. Girls are suckers for accents.”

My head falls back in laughter. “That is very true.” I can list at least ten celebrities who are definitely more attractive because of their accent alone.

Riverlyn and Roscoe make their way towards us. When Riverlyn spots me she jogs forward and straight into my arms. I wrap my arms around her and stroke her hair. “It’s going to be okay.” She doesn’t say anything just squeezes tighter. Roscoe watches us before turning to Urban and thanking him.

“It wasn’t a problem at all. I’m glad I could help.” For a moment, Roscoe and Urban seem to be having some sort of standoff but eventually Urban nods and announces. “Well, I should head back.” His thumb over his shoulder indicates what he means. Back to the party.

Riverlyn steps away from me and starts to slide the expensive leather jacket off her shoulders. “Don’t forget this.”

Urban walks backwards very slowly. “I’ll get it later. You need it more than I do at the moment. See you soon, Riverlyn.” Urban is all bright eyes and smiles as he continues to walk backwards while staring at Riverlyn. She also can’t seem to take her eyes off him. Something tells me this is the last call Roscoe will be receiving concerning Josh.

Twenty-Eight

Roscoe

Kosi puts Riverlyn in the passenger seat as we head to my father’s house. I want to protest but Kosi has clearly put up some walls of defense once again. It’s frustrating. We just had one hell of a moment. The type of moment that I can’t ignore, I can’t avoid. There’s no way I can ever ignore her again. However, I’m not sure what she’s thinking but it feels like she’s a million miles away. I hate it. Riverlyn talks to Kosi nonstop and I should probably be paying attention but my head is still at Free Fall with Kosi on the damn ladder. The only thing I have managed to catch is that Riverlyn clearly has a newfound crush on Urban. I’m not sure how I feel about that, but I file that away for something to deal with another day.

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As we pull up to my childhood home, I turn around and face Kosi. She's looking out the window. Her hair is down and slightly wavy, skimming her elbows. The moonlight makes her pale skin look translucent. "I'll be right back out. Why don't you move to the front," I suggest.

"I'm fine back here," she says quietly.

Sighing, I pinch the bridge of my nose. "Move to the front, Kosi."

My tone clearly awakens the sleeping beast I've known all these years. Her head whips around in my direction. Even with the space between us and the dark of night around us I can see the fire in her cobalt blue eyes. "Why?"

"Because I'm not a damn chauffeur!" I get out of the car in a fury. Slamming the door as I do. I don't look back as I head towards the front door of my house. Riverlyn is already inside. My dad is home for the night. His truck is parked under the carport.

As I step into the house my dad looks up from the leather recliner that has always been deemed as his spot. There's a tumbler cup sitting in the cup holder, coffee I assume since his addiction to it pretty much keeps the coffee industry afloat. He has a book in his hands and a pair of glasses perched on his nose. He looks up from the book at me. "Evening son." He's changed a lot over the years. His honey-colored hair has morphed to white, laugh lines have formed around his eyes and mouth. However, he's still as welcoming as ever.

"Hi Dad," I tell him as I stand near the door. "I can't stay long. I have a friend waiting for me in the car."

He stands up and stretches his back before dropping the book into the seat of the chair. “No worries. Is Riverlyn causing a lot of trouble?” Concern dances in the hazel iris of his eyes.

I shake my head. “No sir, not really. She’s had an issue with a boy but I think after tonight that’s resolved.”

“Good, good.” My dad crosses the small living room to where I’m standing. He places a hand on my shoulder as he looks out the screen door. “You know you don’t have to take her on as if she’s your own.”

He’s referring to Riverlyn. I do know that but I do take her on because he has enough to worry about and I only want the best for her. My head bobs up and down. “Yes sir, I do. She is mine, though,” I tease. I remember growing up. I was almost ten when Riverlyn was born. Suddenly, my dad was a single parent with an almost teenager and newborn. He needed help and I didn’t mind being the one to step into that roll. Riverlyn is as much mine to protect as she is his.

For a moment he looks sad but then he chuckles and smiles. “That sure is a pretty one you got out there,” he comments and motions his head outside.

Over my shoulder I look back at where Kosi is moving from the backseat to the front seat. My body relaxes some knowing it won’t be another battle when I get back outside. “She really is. She isn’t mine though.”

My dad raises his eyebrows. “She isn’t?” I shake my head. “Well, you should fix that.”

I chuckle. “If only it were that easy.”

He squeezes my shoulder. “Nothing easy is worth having. You have to remember that

son.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now, go tell your sister bye so you can get on with your night.” I nod and head down the hallway. My sister is already in her pjs, makeup gone, and hair combed out. She’s so grown up now and it seems like it happened in the blink of an eye.

Riverlyn turns and smiles at me. “Thank you. I’m sorry I’ve been in so much trouble lately.”

Dismissively I wave my hand. “You aren’t trouble, Riv. You’re perfect. Unfortunately, you had your first heartbreak and those suck. Josh still deserves his ass beat but I won’t go there. Overall, I think you handled it really well.” I wrap an arm around her shoulders and squeeze. Her arms come around my waist. “I’m proud of you, Riverlyn, don’t you ever forget or doubt that.”

She looks up at me. “You’re the best big brother ever. Most definitely my favorite.”

“Hey! I’m your only big brother,” I tell her as I tickle her side. We laugh for a while and finally I decide I need to get back out there. I tell Riverlyn good night and head for her bedroom door. Just as I reach the door she says, “I really like Kosi.”

I don’t reply but I can’t help but think so do I. As I head back towards the living room I catch my dad coming back inside. My eyebrows pull together. “What are you doing?” I ask.

He smiles at me. “I like her... a lot.”

The fact that my dad went outside to talk to Kosi throws me for a loop. I’m not mad about it, just shocked. “You talked to Kosi?” I ask. Even I can hear the surprise in my

voice.

“Yep, she’s a keeper. You need to remember that.”

I sigh and head for the door. “Good night, Dad. I’ll see you soon.”

“You too son,” he tells me as I head back outside.

As I make my way to the car I can’t help but feel at a complete loss. Kosi and I have always been one certain way, at the opposite ends of the sword, so-to-speak. Now, it’s like we have no clue what we’re doing. I know I don’t. If I follow my gut, it’ll follow her. I have no doubt about that. Everything else in my body tells me to run the hell away. There is no good that can come from this situation. It’s too complicated. We’re too different. Then her eyes land on mine and I know I won’t be able to fight this anymore.

When I climb inside she just stares ahead. She doesn’t speak, doesn’t move. “Do you want to go get your car now or do you want me to come get you in the morning?”

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“Now is fine,” she replies quietly. It’s not the answer I want to hear but given her current demeanor I don’t push the subject at the moment. As we pull back onto the road my favorite band, Five Finger Death Punch, comes on the radio. I resist the urge to blare it. Kosi doesn’t come across as the type of girl who blares her music. Then again I did totally have her choice of music wrong.

The car ride is quiet except for the music. Eventually, we make it back to Free Fall. It’s late and out here it’s completely silent. It’s odd compared to the noise of Los Angeles. I park next to her car. She is out of the passenger seat without a word. The door shutting sounds deafening in the middle of the silence. Against my better judgment I follow behind her. “What the hell, Kosi?”

Kosi spins around and she looks like something I’ve never seen before. Her eyes are wet with unshed tears. “Is that why I have this job?”

“What?”

“You own it! You own this place!” she shouts.

Slowly, I nod my head. “Yeah, I do.”

“What? Did Jaxx ask you to do me a favor? Did he think I couldn’t make it on my own? Because newsflash to everyone, I’m fine. I’m making it without anyone’s help.” Her arms fly out on either side of her.

I make my way around the car. “No, your brother didn’t ask me to give you a job. I gave you the job because I didn’t know how else to get the facelift for the school

without you. You were the only good one I could afford because I'm not exactly floating in money over here either, you know? This place was my dream come true. I wanted it so bad that I took out a huge loan and now I don't know if it'll survive and that's scary as hell."

She steps back. "You gave me the job?"

"Yes, I gave you the job. No one else aside from Bowie even knew I was considering it," I explain to her.

Suddenly, she deflates. She looks so tired and broken. I hate that the girl who fought so hard for everything, to be perfect, for a degree that she didn't even care about, is standing here. Kosi was destined for huge things and she should have had them. She shouldn't be a waitress in a BBQ joint. "I'm sorry it's scary."

"There isn't much I'm scared of, Kosi."

Kosi looks up at me. "You mean aside from this school failing?"

I nod my head. "Yeah, I'm scared of that. No one wants to fail. Even I don't want that, and I know I have a reputation of being carefree, but even I can't be that carefree."

She looks away, her arms wrap around her midriff. "Failing sucks. It makes you feel like the lowest of low."

It hits me right then why it bothered her so much that she thought Jaxx had me hire her. She thinks she failed because she got laid off from her marketing job. Kosi doesn't see it but I do. I close the distance and once again I slip a finger under her chin. "You didn't fail. Something was yanked from your grasp and you've had to adjust your path and you've done it quite well I might add."

Her eyes swim with tears and she bites down on her bottom lip. It's an attempt to hide the slight tremble there. "What else scares you?"

Without hesitation or even thinking about it I answer, "You." Suddenly, her arms are around my neck and her lips are on mine. I don't know where this leaves us or where we're going but right now it doesn't matter.

Twenty-Nine

Kosi

It's been a few weeks since the first kiss with Roscoe and since then things have been oddly good. Of course, no one in my life except Baylor knows about whatever is going on between the two of us. The only reason she does know is because she caught me sneaking out and we both realized I was not the person to tell a secret to. I'll cave in two seconds. Luckily though, she's been great about it. Baylor never pushes the subject but she does ask a few questions and listens when I speak about it. With everything going on, I feel like I see Baylor less and less. We have a plan to fix that soon.

However, tonight is about Roscoe and me. To say I'm nervous is an understatement. I'm currently sitting at my desk that doubles as my vanity with nothing but my robe on. Baylor comes into the room. "I'm beginning to worry about you. For the last half an hour, every time I pass by the room you're just sitting there."

"What was I thinking, Baylor?" I ask quietly.

She sits behind me on the edge of my bed. "You were thinking that you like him. That you enjoy his company. There's nothing wrong with that."

There's this ball of self-doubt that sits in my gut and just rolls around, banging into

my rib cage. It's something no one understands or even knows about. To the rest of the world I plaster on my smile and roll with the punches. To them I probably come across like one of the most confident people, but in reality, I second guess everything. These past few months have been incredibly difficult. The feeling of utter failure is not a fun one. First it was my relationship with Colby, then losing my job. Those were two huge blows and it's made me feel like I'm not good enough.

Stepping outside of my comfort zone with Roscoe almost seems like too much. What if things go badly and I fail here too? Baylor is right. I have come to enjoy his company. I've finally admitted that I like him. The problem is I don't know how much he likes me.

"You need to stop worrying and just get ready." Baylor comes up behind me, reaches around and grabs my hairbrush. Silently she starts to brush my hair, which I'm thankful for because it's actually really soothing. Less than an hour later and I'm ready. Baylor straightened my hair and left it down, she went a little heavy on the eye makeup but opted for a nude lip. I finally decided on a pair of straight leg jeans, wedges with a lilac tank top that flows away from my body. In a last-minute decision, I grab my black leather bomber jacket from my closet and drape it over my arm just as the doorbell rings. "Take a minute to breathe and collect yourself. I'll go let him in," Baylor tells me as she scurries from my room.

I can hear their voices but I can't make out what they're saying. Eventually, I take one more look in the mirror before heading out to meet Roscoe. As I approach, I take him in. He's got a simple army green t-shirt on that makes the hazel of his eyes pop even more. A pair of medium wash jeans and brown combat boots. His signature bandana is missing but his hair is slicked back with those few strands curling over his forehead. It totally gives an early 90s Johnny Depp vibe, only with lighter hair. His scruffy face is gone except for just enough stubble to give it a shadow. When he realizes I'm approaching, his eyes swing to mine and for a moment I forget Baylor is there. His eyes roam over me and I can't help the heat that floods my body and colors

my cheeks. Baylor snickers. “Well, I hope the two of you have a great night. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” she tells us with a wink.

Roscoe steps forward. “Wow! You just look... amazing. I’m speechless.” He shakes his head and I watch as he opens and closes his mouth multiple times. He clearly is struggling.

I laugh. “You don’t look too bad yourself.” For a quiet moment we just stand there staring at each other. I’m pretty sure anyone would be able to feel the electricity.

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“Are the two of you really going to stand there all night? It’s a date for a reason. In case you were unclear about the concept. You actually leave the house,” Baylor tells us.

We laugh and Roscoe reaches for my hand and pulls me out the door. He leads me out to his car in silence, but before he opens the passenger side door he spins me around, pins me against the car and kisses me until my knees are weak and I’m breathless. “Let’s go, sweetheart.”

First on the agenda is grabbing some food before heading down to the strip to see a live band at one of the local bars. It’s great. The band is amazing. They’re a rock band that does covers of songs from all genres and turns them into rock. Afterwards, he drives us out to the ice cream stand and we head for a walk on the beach.

“So, what did you think of the band?” he asks.

I smile. “I loved them. A lot of those songs I’m not normally a fan of but change them to a rock song and apparently, I’m sold.”

His head falls back in laughter. “Brownie points for Kosi.”

My shoulder knocks into his. “I’m shocked by your choice of ice cream flavor.”

“Why?” he asks with his eyebrows pulled together.

“I don’t know. I just had you pegged for a chocolate kind of guy, not butter pecan with caramel drizzle.”

He shakes his head. "I'll leave the chocolate to you."

I gasp in dramatic fashion. "You have no clue what you're missing out on. Cherry cream chocolate with pecans is something out of this world," I tell him while sticking a huge spoonful of the ice cream in my mouth.

Suddenly, I stop walking because hello brain freeze! Roscoe stops along with me. I swallow the ice cream as quickly as possible but I don't have time to think before he pulls me into him and kisses me. When we break away from one another he smiles at me. It's kind of wicked. "You were right, I was missing out," he tells me with a shrug of his shoulders.

After we finish the ice cream the night is still pretty early so we take a seat on the sand and just stare at the ocean. "This was nice."

"Did I live up to the standards of the infamous Kosi Scott?" he teases.

I know he's just teasing and he means well but his words hit home. The image and reputation I tried so hard to create. I could play this off or I could get real with him. Then again getting down to the nitty gritty with Roscoe seems dangerous. It could make him run for the hills but I guess I might as well find out. "Honestly, I didn't have a lot of expectations for this date."

Roscoe looks over at me. A flash of hurt crosses his face before he says, "Ouch, you really didn't think I could live up to your standards."

"No, that's not it at all." He stands up, dusting the butt of his jeans off. Now I can see where that could come across like that.

He runs a hand through his hair. He mumbles, "Whatever."

I jump to my feet. “You misunderstood me.”

“I’m pretty sure I didn’t,” he bites out.

For a moment I wonder if we’re better off like this. Maybe, we should end here before we ever begin. I mean, we always end up here, bickering like some old married couple. As I watch him walk away, though, I realize I’d rather bicker with him than anyone else so I bite the dust. “I didn’t have expectations because I’ve never really been on a date like this. I’ve only ever been with Colby and we were so young when we got together. His mom took us to the movies and dropped us off before picking us back up. I never had this with him.”

Roscoe pauses. Slowly, he turns around. “Colby is your only boyfriend ever?”

My head nods. “Yeah, and we can see how well that ended too. I don’t have a good track record lately, Roscoe. This is scary. I feel like I’m lost and not good enough.”

He marches back towards me. No distance is between us when he comes to a stop. His eyes search mine, for what? I have no clue. “You are a lot of things Kosi, but not good enough doesn’t make the list.” His mouth crashes down on mine like the waves crash into the shore. For the first time in a while I feel like there might be some hope.

Thirty

Kosi

Things between Roscoe and I are still on the down low but it works for us. I think a lot of people in our lives suspect something is going on but no one is really sure. Being with him brings out a different side of me. I feel like I can just be where I am and accept that. Free Fall is almost completely done. Creed has got the website finished and is just waiting to make it go live. I’ve organized a big grand opening and

Bowie is going to come out and broadcast his show from it that day. Hopefully, it'll all be good for business.

However, for now I'm still working at Rowdy's and applying for every open position in marketing on the local job sites. Marketing may not be my passion, but I'm hoping I can get back into it. It's great money and hopefully in the down time I can start setting up my own design business. Or at least that's my ultimate goal, but for now I'm just a waitress. Every night I work Roscoe meets me and walks me to my car. It doesn't matter what time I get off, he's there, ready and waiting.

Tonight is going to be a long one. It's game night and we have a huge birthday party booked. I'm already dreading it but hopefully the tips will be great. As I head inside my phone rings. Assuming it's Roscoe I pull it out of my back pocket but see an unsaved number on my screen. It's local so I go ahead and pick it up. "Hello."

"Hi Kosi, it's Riverlyn," her voice wavers like she's nervous.

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I gave her my number the day she didn't show up for school in case she ever needed to have some girl talk. At the time I didn't think she'd ever use it, but I'm glad she feels comfortable enough to call me. "Hey Riverlyn, how are you?"

She sighs. "I'm good. I kind of have a favor to ask you."

"Sure," I reply.

"Prom is coming up and I got asked but I was kind of wondering if you could go thrift store shopping with me. I'm a pretty average size and I have a small stash of money saved up from chores, birthdays, and Christmases. I'd ask my dad but then he'd try to pay for it, and I don't want him to spend even more money on me, especially on a dress that I'll only use one night. The same thing with Roscoe so I thought maybe if you have free time you could take me. It'd also be nice to have a girl's opinion, but if you're busy I totally understand."

My head is spinning from just listening to her. She literally said all that in one breath. I take a moment to digest. "Of course, I'll take you. I'd be honored. I'm off tomorrow if that would work for you."

"Yes, that'd be perfect. If you give me your address I can ride the bus to you," she offers.

"Nonsense. I'll pick you up from school," I tell her. Riverlyn gives me the time she gets out and what parking lot to pick her up in. After that we say goodbye and I head into work.

The night is so busy I don't even have a chance to look at my phone until we are closing up and heading outside. There's multiple missed texts from just about everyone Jaxx, Roscoe, Baylor, and Riverlyn. I open hers first in case she's had a change of heart. She didn't but she doesn't want me mentioning it to Roscoe or her dad right now. I'm not sure I'm comfortable with that but ultimately she's not doing anything illegal and she's not in trouble so I decide it'll be our little secret for the time being. As I step outside there's a smell of rain in the air. The humidity feels different now and the sky, from what I can tell, looks darker than normal. My eyes find Roscoe waiting by one of the wooden pillars, one ankle crossed over the other, arms crossed over his chest, leaning back. I'm almost to him when the thunder roars through the night. My body jerks with startle but luckily Roscoe has some quick reflexes. His arms wrap around my waist and steady me. "My hero," I tease him in my best southern accent.

He smiles so large dimples appear. "It's about to be one stormy night."

"It is," I tell him as my hand reaches up and runs through his hair.

His eyes close and he hums in approval. "That feels nice."

"It always amazes me how soft your hair is."

When he opens his eyes they are more intense than I've ever seen. Without warning, his mouth is on mine. His arms pull me as close to him as possible. We don't break away until a bolt of lightning so bright that it lights up the night sky strikes. "I should get you to your car before it starts pouring."

"The queen of hell doesn't melt from a little water. That's the Wicked Witch of the West. Are you saying I'm a witch now?" I tease.

Roscoe shrugs his shoulders. "Well, you do have some kind of unknown power."

I laugh. “How so?”

His forehead comes to rest against mine. “I can’t seem to resist you.” My heart stutters in my chest. No one has ever said something like that to me. No one has ever done the things that Roscoe has done for me. That may not be a fair thing to say about Colby because we were just so young there was no way for him to do these things for me. We were too immature for him to say things that leave me as a puddle of water on the floor. Roscoe’s hand closes around mine as the thunder rumbles once more. “We need to go now.” He drags me across the parking lot. We’re halfway to my car when the sky opens up and larger raindrops unleash on us. Within seconds we are soaked to the bone. I quickly unlock the car and we scurry into the back seat. “Damn, I shouldn’t have gotten caught up in kissing you for so long.”

“I made you waste all that time with my powers of non-resistance,” I tease him.

Roscoe turns to look at me. His hand comes up and cups my cheek. His rough thumb caresses my skin over my cheekbone. Eyes locked on mine. One lonely parking lot light sneaks through the window giving us a warm golden glow as the storm beats against the car. Ever so slightly he shakes his head. “There’s no amount of time with you that could ever be a waste.”

An unfamiliar flurry sets off in my stomach. For a moment I wonder if this is how he feels when he jumps from a plane to skydive. I’ve never been the girl to make the first move but suddenly I’m across the backseat, straddling his lap and kissing him as if he can tame the wild flurry taking over my body. His hands and mouth roam and I get lost in the darkened night, in the raging storm, and most of all in Roscoe Langston... the thing I never saw coming.

Thirty-One

Kosi

I'm getting ready to go meet Riverlyn when a very distracted looking Baylor comes into the apartment. "Is everything okay?" I ask her.

She waves her hand dismissively in the air before running it through her long red hair. "Yeah, it's just been one of those weeks." She comes in and sits on my bed and takes a look around. "Do you have plans with Roscoe today?"

I shake my head. "No, I actually have plans with Riverlyn."

"Roscoe's little sister?"

"Yep," I tell her as I nod my head up and down. "We're going thrift store shopping to look for a prom dress for her. She called yesterday before my shift and asked if I would be willing to take her."

Baylor gives me a small smile. "It's really nice that she feels so comfortable with you. Will her dad or Roscoe not take her?"

"They would but she doesn't want either of them to pay for it."

"Aww, that's so sweet. I hope she finds something." Baylor looks away and as I study her profile I realize she looks a little sad. It's an unusual look for her.

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She stands up to leave. “Hey Bay.”

“Yeah?”

“Why don’t you come with us?” I ask her.

Baylor shakes her head. “If she only asked you I doubt she’d want me tagging along.”

I turn around and give her a smile. “I’m sure she wouldn’t mind at all. Just don’t tell her dad or Roscoe for now. Besides, you’re like some fashion guru. We could use you.”

“Do you really think it would be okay?” I nod and reassure her it will be. Once it’s decided that Baylor will join Riverlyn and me, we head out the door. Baylor offers to take her Jeep and I’m thankful because at least her Jeep has a decent radio. I shoot a text to Riverlyn to let her know we are on our way. At some point our plan to pick her up at school got changed to picking Riverlyn up at her house. Somehow, I manage to get us lost a total of two times on the way to Roscoe’s childhood home. Eventually, we make it. Riverlyn is sitting out on the porch steps waiting for us. Her caramel colored hair is pulled up into a high ponytail and her pastel green sundress looks comfortable and easy enough to try on clothes.

As we pull up along the curb I roll my window down. “Hey Riverlyn, I hope it’s okay that Baylor joins us.”

She smiles. “Yeah! It’s great.” Riverlyn slides into the backseat. “I’ll pay for the gas as well. I forgot to mention that yesterday.”

“It’s no big deal. Save your money for prom. Do you have any music requests?” Baylor asks her.

“No, anything is fine with me,” Riverlyn replies.

We drive in silence for a bit until we reach Drink Up. Baylor pulls in, cutting off the car in the other lane. For a moment I hold my breath because, to be honest, Baylor is a good driver but her technique scares the hell out of me. “What does everyone want to drink?” Reluctantly, Riverlyn and I give her our drink orders. “Okay, now we can shop! I needed caffeine.”

Baylor slows down as we reach the area that is our first stop. Lots of little boutiques and secondhand stores are on the next few blocks. We climb out and Baylor pays the meter as we head down the street. The first three secondhand stores are a bust. They have some pretty evening gowns but nothing in the right size for Riverlyn. We’re going to head to Finders Keepers which is probably where we should have started. It’s the biggest thrift store in the area. As we make our way back to the car Riverlyn pauses to look at a window of a bridal boutique. With prom being just around the corner the bridal boutique has traded their wedding gown windows for prom inspired windows.

Standing there on the mannequin is a beautiful emerald-green mermaid gown with a beaded bodice, strapless and sweetheart neckline. I can picture Riverlyn in this dress. Her hazel eyes would shine like a million dollars. By the look in her eyes right now, she can picture it too. I glance over at Baylor and I know she’s thinking the same thing. Riverlyn’s shoulders rise and fall with a heavy sigh before she turns towards us. When she realizes we’ve been watching her she blushes. “It’s a beautiful color but so not my style.” Riverlyn speed walks past us back to Baylor’s Jeep. I stand there a moment longer looking at the dress. It really is gorgeous. When I turn around I see that Baylor and Riverlyn have been waiting on me.

Finder's Keeper's is packed. Wall to wall. However, they do have a nice selection of evening gowns. Riverlyn manages to find five in her size. We wait as she tries each one on. Finally, she decides on a cream colored skirt and top with a slit to the knee. It's simple but for whatever reason it just doesn't give me the same feeling as the emerald green one. However, I keep my opinion to myself. We find a pair of shoes and some jewelry then stand in line for almost forty minutes to pay.

Once we're back in the car Riverlyn thanks us. "Thank you so much for taking me around today. It took so much longer than I had anticipated but I can't thank you enough."

"Any excuse for shopping is good with me," Baylor says with a big smile on her face. She's not wrong based on how many bags are in the back of her Jeep. The girl has more than enough of everything but she bought something in every single thrift store we went into. I laugh to myself.

"Can I at least buy us all dinner? It'll have to be McDonald's or something like that but it's the least I can do," Riverlyn offers.

I want to decline but one look in her eyes makes me realize that she feels bad for taking up our day and she feels like this is something she can do. It's totally unnecessary but if it makes her feel better. "Girl, I will always go for some chicken nuggets," Baylor replies.

Baylor pulls us into the next McDonald's and we all grab something small to eat. Riverlyn pays and her smile is proud which makes me feel so much better. As we head back to Riverlyn's house I ask, "So, you said you got asked to prom, who asked you?"

"Ohh, is he cute?" Baylor chimes in.

“Josh asked me actually,” she replies quietly.

My heart sinks. I was really hoping she’d say Urban or really any other name than Josh but it’s not my place to but in so I simply say, “That’s nice. I’m glad that worked out for the two of you.”

The rest of the ride is quiet except for the music. When we pull up to the house, Riverlyn gathers her stuff and climbs out of the car. “Thank you guys so much for today. It meant the world to me.”

“We had so much fun,” Baylor reassures her.

I nod my head. “Yes, call me anytime you need anything.”

“I will. Thank you.”

We watch to make sure she gets back inside her house safely. Once the front door closes Baylor turns to me. “We don’t like Josh, do we?”

I close my eyes and shake my head. “Not even a little bit.”

Thirty-Two

Roscoe

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Things with Kosi have been going great but I almost feel like I'm always waiting for the other shoe to drop. It's hard sometimes to digest the fact that I'm in this situation. One of the things that I always promised myself was no relationships. I saw how broken my dad was after my mom passed away. Seeing that first hand left me scared of relationships. Despite all of my reservations, I can't seem to find a good enough reason to stay away from her. The way she makes me feel is terrifying and I jump out of a plane for a living. Being with her is literally a free fall.

Kosi is working tonight at Rowdy's which works out kind of perfectly since I have family dinner at my dad's. Every Sunday night I go to my childhood home and have dinner with my father and Riverlyn. It's been a tradition since I moved out of the house years ago. As I pull up to the house I notice Kosi's car parked along the sidewalk a few spaces up. My eyebrows pull together in confusion. I pull in behind my dad's beat up Ford truck. Kosi is stepping off the steps of the small porch, her head whipping in both directions. She darts off the steps and hustles towards her car. I hop out of the car and call, "Kosi." She stops but trips and ends up falling to her knees, thankfully she's in the grass so that helps break some of the fall. I rush towards her. "Are you okay?" I ask as I help her up. Kosi limps a little on her ankle. I feel horrible. I didn't mean for her to fall.

"Roscoe, what are you doing here?" She looks up at me, her cheeks flushed. Kosi looks nervous.

I chuckle. "Well, that seems like it should be my question."

A look of confusion crosses over her face. I'm about to explain when she catches on. "Oh, right. It's your house."

“Well, not anymore but once upon a time.” The front door opens and my dad gives us a curious look. He looks down at the silver and white striped box sitting on the porch. A huge silver bow sits on top of it.

My dad looks over his shoulder. “Riverlyn, you’ve got a package. Roscoe bring Kosi in here. You know there’s more than enough. I’ll set her a place real quick.

Kosi shakes her head. “What’s wrong?” I ask.

“I didn’t want her to know,” she says quietly.

My eyes dart to the porch where Riverlyn is kneeling down and opening the box. She drops the lid, jumps about ten feet away and squeals in excitement. “What the hell?” I mumble.

Before I can even look back up, Riverlyn is racing towards Kosi. Riverlyn hits her pretty hard so I’m thankful I’m helping hold Kosi up. “You shouldn’t have. You didn’t have to but I love it so much! I can’t thank you enough!” Riverlyn goes on and on. Kosi awkwardly pats Riverlyn. “You’re the absolute best,” Riverlyn mumbles into Kosi’s back. Kosi looks uncomfortable, so I do the only thing I can do. I pat my sister and motion for her to go ahead and go back to the house.

Once Riverlyn and the mystery box are inside I turn to Kosi. “What’s going on?”

She fidgets with her hands for a moment. Her blonde hair is lying in curls down her back. “Well, your sister called me last week and told me she got asked to prom and she wanted to know if I could take her dress shopping. She didn’t want you or your father to have to pay for the dress so I agreed. Riverlyn asked me not to tell you so I didn’t. We went to a bunch of thrift stores but didn’t find much. She did buy one from Finder’s Keeper’s but the one in the box on your porch was in the window of one of the wedding boutiques. She loved it, we all did. It was so Riverlyn when we

saw it, but she just walked away from it. It's bugged me all week so I decided to go to the store and get it for her but I wanted it to be a surprise, but then you showed up and I fell... the rest is history."

I'm processing all the information that was just thrown at me. My heart beats at a different pace. Kosi looks a million times more beautiful than she did even before. The fact that she spent a day off taking my sister around to dress shop for prom means more than she knows. Kosi buying my sister's dream dress when she doesn't really have the money for it either... well it's an overwhelming feeling that I don't exactly have words for right now. "So, you didn't work tonight?"

Kosi looks up at me. "I do, just half a shift. I'm going there in a bit."

"I'm sorry I ruined the surprise," I tell her. I really do feel bad for ruining the surprise she had planned.

She shrugs her shoulders. "It's okay. I'm sure she would have guessed it was me or Baylor. We were the only two that knew about the dress."

Without a thought I step into her and wrap my arms around her waist. Her scent, which is now comforting and familiar, wraps around me like an old friend. Kosi's head rests against my chest. It's a feeling I've become all too used to these days. I look forward to these moments. "I'm going to pay you back for the dress. Just let me know how much it cost."

Kosi steps back so quick I'm surprised I'm not flat on my ass from the motion. "No, you will not."

"Riverlyn is my little sister. It's mine or my dad's responsibility to get the dress and we would have if we had known. Plus..." My words die out.

Her eyebrows pull together and eyes close to a glare as her arms cross over her chest. Once again, she's completely closed off. "Plus, what?"

I sigh, pinch the bridge of my nose, and stare up at the sky that is currently the host of the setting sun. "Plus, you work your ass off for your money. I know things aren't as easy as they once were for you so let me pay you back."

"I can afford the dress. If I couldn't then I wouldn't have done it. Everyone thinks I'm some huge failure that can barely make ends meet now. That's not true. I have a savings account. I work just like everyone else but I work so much to keep from touching that savings. I'm not accepting money for the dress."

Kosi doesn't think she's a failure, does she? I certainly don't see that when I look at her. I had to misunderstand that comment. "I never said you were a failure. I never even thought that."

She scoffs and rolls her eyes. "Sure, you don't. Everyone else does so don't tell me you don't think that too. Hell, you probably threw a party when I got laid off from my job considering how we used to be towards one another."

"Kosi! I would never be happy about someone getting laid off no matter where I stand with them. After all this I thought you knew me better than that." Disappointment and a little hurt tumbles through my body. It sucks. I've never been with anyone long enough to argue with them. It really freaking sucks.

"Go have dinner. I have to take my failing self to work now to make money that apparently I desperately need." Her tone is sarcastic. I want to chase after her but I don't. My feet are rooted to the ground. I have a feeling that if I go after her it will only make it worse because we're both too hurt right now. Against my better judgment I turn around and watch as Kosi gets into the car and drives away. She doesn't turn around to give me another look and somehow that just makes it all hurt

even more.

Thirty-Three

Kosi

Sleep was not my friend last night. I kept making simple mistakes at work. Proving to myself that I'm just as much a failure as everyone already thinks. I can't even waitress properly. Yesterday was horrible from beginning to end. It started with brunch. My mom had called and asked me to meet her and my dad for brunch so I did. I'd been avoiding seeing them for a while so it was time. However, seeing them is never a fun time. Well, my mom is but not my dad. He just likes to remind me how I failed him. It's hard to deal with sometimes, especially when I can't even get an interview for one of the hundreds of applications I've put in since I got laid off. My dad acts like I enjoy working at Rowdy's.

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After an hour of being belittled, I got up to leave but my mood was already sour. Baylor was out. Roscoe was busy with something for Free Fall. I didn't want to call Jaxx or Rome. That would just put more strain on the relationship they have with our father. The relationship is barely existent as is. So, I stayed at home, binge watched Supernatural, and drowned my sorrows in ice cream. As I sat there a thought occurred to me. Riverlyn who was selfless enough to not ask for anyone to purchase her prom dress deserved the dress of her dreams. I could give her that.

For years I had saved every last penny of money I made. I didn't splurge on anything. It all went into savings. Don't get me wrong I'm thankful I saved because it has come in handy since the job fiasco, but at the same time I look back and wish that every now and then I had splurged. So, I got up and got dressed, then went to the boutique and bought the emerald green dress because I could.

Getting caught delivering the dress was not part of the plan. Taking out my frustrations on Roscoe wasn't part of the plan either, but I had. If anyone in my life doesn't view me as a failure based on my job status it's Roscoe. He's so go with the flow. He doesn't care about the money or status of things. Where I work doesn't bother him. It shouldn't bother me either. At least I'm out working, making my way and whatnot.

After my shift I had hoped to see Roscoe but he wasn't waiting for me by my car, not that I blame him. I considered going to his place but as I was driving towards his apartment I realized he had never invited me over since we started seeing each other. Suddenly, I felt awkward and insignificant. So, I turned the car around and went home. I picked up my phone probably a hundred times to text him an apology but I've always hated texting that sort of stuff. Eventually, I laid back in bed and tried to

sleep away my mood but it didn't work. I tossed and turned and eventually gave up and started to go through the job sites again. I applied for all sorts of things.

This morning I was up early because Roscoe and I were supposed to have a meeting with Creed Eisenhower concerning the final website for Free Fall. I'm hoping Roscoe remembers since I didn't get to remind him like I had planned to. Since this is technically a business meeting, I dress in a blush-colored wrap dress with nude heels. I leave my hair down, curled and one side pinned back with some rhinestone bobby pins. My makeup is light and airy. When I look in the mirror, I recognize this girl. It's who I'm used to being. I grab my purse and head out the door.

When I reach the area where Creed's company is, I pull into a parking garage then head for his building. I'm surprised to see Roscoe pacing back and forth by the front door. He's dressed in black dress slacks and an eggplant-colored button up. His signature bandana is gone but he's still Roscoe. As I approach, he looks up and his eyes flood with relief. "Before we go in there, I need to apologize to you, Roscoe. I took everything out on you yesterday and that wasn't fair. I'm sorry," I tell him before he can interrupt me.

For a second, he just stands there. Clearly, he's stunned. "You don't need to apologize. I understand how my comment probably felt to you. I've just never viewed you as a failure so that thought of you taking it that way never crossed my mind."

"It's okay."

He smiles. "You look beautiful."

Heat floods my cheeks. "Thank you. Are you ready for this last step?" I ask.

Roscoe looks nervous but nods his head. "I guess we should go in." He opens the door, but instead I step into his space and wrap my arms around his lean waist. His

arms come around me and suddenly everything feels right in the world. “What’s this for?”

I shrug my shoulders. “For being you.” We stand like that a little while longer before I step away. “We should get in there.” He nods and opens the door. As we walk inside, I’m hit by the ice cold blast of air conditioning. The brown and silver color scheme is gorgeous but unexpected. The office looks modern. Large desktop computers on every desk beyond the glass wall. We check in with the front receptionist before taking a seat on the brown leather couches in the waiting room. Instead of news or something as equally depressing and boring playing on the TV, music plays from a digital radio station. Creed appears not too long after that. His chocolate brown hair is messy. Large, black-framed glasses are perched on his nose. Pale skin, square jaw that is clean shaved. Dark brown, intelligent eyes. He definitely has a nerd vibe but a hot nerd vibe as Baylor would say. “Kosi, Roscoe,” he says as he shakes our hands.

As Creed leads us to his office, I recognize Onyx Mills. She is Odette’s sister and another member of the reformed Street Kings. She lives at Pit Stop with them as well. Her wild mess of curls are the first thing I notice. She doesn’t look up at us. She’s clearly into her job. Creed opens the door and ushers us in. His office is light and bright. All silver with pops of brown. “If you two will have a seat I’ll get the website pulled up.” In the middle of the room are two large easy chairs facing the wall where a white screen is hanging. Free Fall’s website comes up, and to say I’m impressed is an understatement. It looks great, easy to follow and understand. The color scheme matches the school now and the pictures look phenomenal. One quick glance as Roscoe tells me he’s more than happy with it.

After the presentation, I stand up and walk over to Creed. “It’s perfect. Amazing work.”

Creed looks a little bashful. “Thank you. What do you think, Roscoe?”

“I think you should be damn proud of how far you’ve come.” Roscoe winks at him. I often forget they all kind of grew up together. Creed went to a fancy private school in the rich part of town but he was a scholarship kid. So while he was best friends with Londynn Parrish, he was also next door neighbors to the James brothers. Sometimes you forget Los Angeles isn’t as big as you think.

We all talk for a few minutes more before we head outside. The website will be live the day after tomorrow and the grand re-opening of Free Fall is this weekend. I can’t believe we managed to get it all done, but here we are. Roscoe grabs my hand as we exit but then my phone starts to ring. I glance at it but don’t recognize the number. For a moment I think about letting it go to voicemail but then I think it might be one of the jobs I applied for.

“I should take this,” I tell Roscoe. He smiles, nods, and then steps away to give me some privacy. “Hello.”

“Hello, I’m looking for Kosi Scott,” a very formal female voice comes over the phone line.

“This is her,” I reply.

“Great. I’m Patricia. I work with Sharp and Wester. I got your application today and I’d love to interview you. We could do it remotely to save you the trip if you’d like. The position is lower on the ladder than someone with your qualifications would normally start, but there is room for advancement,” she explains.

I can’t remember Sharp and Wester. I don’t know where they’re located. For months I’ve been applying everywhere so there’s no telling, but I’m assuming it’s not in Los Angeles if she’s saving me a trip. My eyes scan the sidewalk as a sense of panic settles in my gut. I didn’t expect to feel like this, but as my eyes land on Roscoe I know why I feel the panic. It’s him. In such a short amount of time he’s come to

mean so much. I swallow the lump in my throat. “Remotely would be great.” I hope my voice doesn’t shake as much as I am right now. We set up a date and time. The entire time my heart is on the sidewalk jumping around like a fish out of water.

Thirty-Four

Roscoe

The week has flown by. The website went live and class bookings are already up. Today is the day of the grand re-opening. I’ve been out since four this morning. Something about sitting out here, watching the sun rise, gave me a sense of calm. Kosi texted a little while ago and said she’d be here soon. Bowie is already here with his crew setting up the van he’ll be broadcasting from. Axell and Jagger are here setting up the grill along with a couple cooks from JamesTown. They volunteered to do the food for the event. Ace and Jovi are helping with games. Lane and some of the other girls are here to help decorate. Kosi got Jaxx to agree to come by and set up a booth and sign autographs as well.

I spot her car as she heads around back. When she gets out I have to take a moment to drink her in. Tanned skin, white sundress with little blue flowers on it. Her white wedges match perfectly. Her hair is down and straight with a blue ribbon headband. Her sunglasses hide her eyes but she smiles when she sees me. As she approaches, I open my arms and she walks straight into them. For a moment I just stand there and appreciate this, appreciate her. She’s done so much for me, for Free Fall. I can’t begin to repay her. When she pulls away I smile down at her. “Hey, after all this can we talk?” she asks.

those are words nobody ever likes to hear. “Sure, everything okay?” I prompt her. I hope she’ll just talk about whatever it is now.

“Everything is fine. I just got a job offer.”

Excitement fills me for her. I wrap my arms around her waist and lift her off the ground and spin her around. “That’s amazing! I’m so happy for you. Kosi, you deserve this.”

When I place her feet back on the ground and she looks up at me, she looks uncertain but I’m not sure why. “Thank you,” she says. Maybe I’m reading too much into this. I’m sure she’s excited. She’s been trying to get back into her field of study for a while now. “Let’s go start this day!” I let her lead me back to the group.

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Hours later and the place is actually swamped. People are all over the place. Kosi and Wyatt are signing people up for classes. There's a line to meet Jaxx as well as Ace and Bowie who are also both kind of celebrities in their own way. It's exciting to see all of this come to life. I get in line to get some food thinking Kosi is probably hungry. It takes longer than I expect but forty-five minutes later I head over to the sign-up table, but Kosi is gone. "Hey Wyatt, where's Kosi?"

"She took a break," he comments, then eyes the hamburgers in my hands.

I sit them down beside him. They'll be cold if she takes too long to get back anyways. "Have at it my man," I tease him. As I leave the sign-up table, I decide to head inside thinking that maybe Kosi is in the restroom. If she's in here I can steal a kiss at least. When I step inside, the area hits me like a slap in the face, just like every time before. The sky mural with parachutes in the clouds brightens up the whole room. The buffed tile shines like a million bucks. Drake and his guys did a great job replacing the counters and changing light fixtures. This room gets to me for more than that, though. This was the spot where Kosi and I let our guards down and finally admitted what we had been trying to deny for years. Every time I look at the wall I think of her and that night with the paint.

After checking the restroom and not finding Kosi, I decide to look out back. When I glance out the window I see Kosi standing there against the building. She must have needed some peace and quiet. I open the door but instead of finding her in silence I hear a guy's voice. "You look really good, Kosi."

"Thanks," she says quietly. She doesn't seem that into the compliment which makes the caveman inside of me feel so much better. "How have you been?"

“I’ve been good. How about you?” It sounds like she’s just trying to be polite. I should turn around and go back inside because eavesdropping is the last thing I should be doing. I’m sure Kosi wouldn’t like it very much.

I turn to leave but the ginger colored hair catches the corner of my eye and causes me to stop and turn back around. Colby, Kosi’s ex-fiancé, is standing there. His eyes roam over her. Greedy and thirsty and it makes my skin boil. “I got engaged.”

Kosi sighs. “Yeah, I heard. Congratulations.”

“I heard you got a job offer at Sharp and Wester.”

Her head whips up. “How do you know about that?”

“I have my ways. I didn’t think you’d ever leave Los Angeles,” he comments. It throws my head into a tailspin.

She sighs. “I didn’t say I was.”

“Come on, Kosi, I know you better than anyone. You want the job. You’ll leave but it makes me sad.”

Colby steps closer to Kosi and my heart stops. “Why would that make you sad?”

“I miss you, Kosi,” he says. He leans in and I don’t stand there to wait to see how it ends. I turn around and go back inside. I think I hear my name, but I don’t stop to find out. The back door opens and Kosi comes rushing inside.

“Roscoe, stop.”

“Why? So you can keep lying to me some more?” I ask her as I whip around.

Kosi stops and steps back like I've hit her. "What are you talking about?"

"Your ex knows you're apparently moving from Los Angeles, but I don't?" The hurt I've been trying to ignore bubbles up in my gut. I really thought that she and I had something going. Foolish, is all I feel right now.

Kosi stares at me like I've lost my mind. Maybe I have. Maybe that's the reason you should avoid all your emotions and attachments. This shit is ridiculous. "I don't know how Colby knows. I'm just as shocked as you, but I was going to tell you. It's why I asked if we could talk after today. I wanted to discuss the job offer with you. Get your opinion. I've never wanted to live anywhere but here, but San Francisco isn't that far. We could make it work."

It's like all those bloody, slasher movies I like so much. She took the knife and gutted me. Right here in the room where it all started. For whatever reason I let my guard down with her and it was a foolish mistake, one I won't make again. When I speak I sound calm, which is nowhere near what I feel right now. "You want my opinion?" Kosi stares at me for a long time, silence heavy between us, finally she nods her head. "Here's my opinion. You should take the job. You should move to San Francisco. You have been wanting to get back into your desired field. Here's your chance."

"But... but... what about us?" she asks. Her voice shakes and it rips at the remainder of my heart, the part that's still hanging on, but the thread is worn and barely there.

I shrug my shoulders and look away. The mural hurts to look at but I can't look at the unshed tears in her eyes right now. This is a rock and a hard spot under the damn ocean. I'm drowning here and she has no idea, and I can't show it. Kosi Scott is meant for so much. Kosi is meant for great things. I can't hold her back. Kosi Scott is meant for so much but she's not meant for me. "There is no us. It was fun while it lasted but the school is finished. You fulfilled your contract. You're free to go."

It's silent except for the slightest of snuffle coming from Kosi ever so often. Still I avoid looking at her. I avoid going to her because if I do, if I touch her, I'll ask her to stay and I can't. She deserves to go. "I didn't," she says quietly.

Confusion hits me like a ton of bricks. "What?"

"I didn't fulfill the contract."

I hold my arms out to my sides. "What do you call this?"

She steps towards me, but instead of showing weakness and stepping away, no matter how badly I want to, my feet remain rooted in place. "We never watched Mulan."

She remembered. I really wish I did have that memory to keep. Then again maybe it's best if the memory of Kosi watching it doesn't ruin my favorite Disney movie for me. "It's like every other Disney movie. Girl finds her inner strength, gets the guy and everyone lives happily ever after. You know, the basic unrealistic shit."

I can't stand her any longer so I turn around and head for the front door. Air. I need air that isn't filled with her intoxicating scent. A room that isn't tainted by her memory. "I didn't invite Colby. I didn't know he'd be here."

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The sincerity in her voice lets me know it's true but it doesn't matter. Our illusion is broken. We ran in the fast lane, but now we've crashed and I'm trapped burning in the car watching her escape.

Thirty-Five

Roscoe

It's been a week. A very long, miserable week. My mood has been shit. Actually, pretty much everything has been shit except Free Fall. The school has been amazing. It's booked solid for three months. I've never seen it this busy even before I purchased it. I should be celebrating but instead I'm sulking. I'm fixing to close up for the day when the front door opens. When I turn around, I'm shocked to see my two best friends standing in the doorway. "Hey guys, what are you up to?"

"I told you we'd find him here," Lane says to Bowie as if I can't hear her.

Bowie shakes his head. "We're going out."

Going out doesn't sound like something I want to do so I shake my head. "I'm not really in the mood to go out. How about a raincheck?"

"Oh I'm sorry, did it sound like Bowie was asking?" Lane asks in her typical snarky fashion. Lane is closed off and defensive to everyone in the world except for me, Bowie, and her grandpa. She has a story but it isn't mine to tell. Her fire engine red hair is gone. Platinum blonde now sits there.

“I didn’t think it sounded like a question,” Bowie comments.

I roll my eyes. “You two are being ridiculous.”

“Nope, that would be you,” Lane tells me.

I cross my arms over my chest. “How?” My gut reaction is I’m not going to like the answer to that question.

Bowie and Lane both smirk and exchange a look. “Lock up and meet us outside. We’re going out,” Bowie says. He even stoops as low as to use his dad voice on me. As if I’m a child. Although I have to admit his dad voice is a little scary. For a moment, I stand there and try to think of a way out of this. The last thing I want to do is go out tonight. All I want is to go home and eat some leftover pizza, watch a horror movie, and cuddle up with Mushu. In the end, though, I do exactly what Bowie told me to do. I lock up and meet them outside.

I don’t say anything. I just slide into the passenger seat of Bowie’s car. Lane sits in the back seat. Classic rock plays throughout the car. Bowie drives us to the place we usually meet up—JamesTown. We head inside. Bowie heads for the counter to order while I follow Lane to a table. The place isn’t too crowded, then again it is a weeknight. Things around here are a little slower on weeknights. Lane and I sit while we wait for Bowie. I look over at Lane. “What is going on?”

“You need an intervention, Ros.”

Scoffing, I sit back in the chair and cross my arms over my chest. Defenses up and it is not normal for me to be defensive around these two. If there’s one thing a person never wants to hear is that they need an intervention. Bowie joins us. He looks at me then at Lane. “You called it an intervention didn’t you?”

Lane rolls her eyes. “That’s what it is!”

“No one wants to hear that shit, Lane. You tell him we need to talk. Never call it an intervention.” Bowie turns to me. “It’s not an intervention. We just want to talk.”

“About what?”

Lane sighs. “You know what.”

The one who shall not be named. Yes, immature but avoiding the subject they are now wanting to talk about is on my to-do list. “We’re not going there.”

“Do you know who you remind me of?” Bowie asks. I shake my head. “Me.”

“How?” I ask. There is no planet where I sound like Bowie James. Bowie has it all these days. Most days I feel like I barely have anything.

Bowie smirks. “Do you remember how I was when Hollis left?” I give him a ‘come on’ look and he just smiles bigger. “You sound exactly like that version of me. I was so mad at the world for losing her, but guess what, she came back. And Kosi, she isn’t gone yet. You can still stop it.”

I shake my head and look away. “I can’t,” I mumble.

“Can’t or won’t?” Lane challenges.

Her eyes meet mine from across the table. There’s a reason she’s such a hard ass the majority of the time. Lane keeps the world at arm’s length. “Can’t,” I bite out.

She shakes her head. “You mean you won’t. You’re going to let your pride get in the way of whatever you and Kosi had going on. That’s just stupid, Ros!”

Burgers and fries are placed in front of us. Bowie sighs. “I think you should at least think about it.”

“You don’t get it. She’s meant to go. She is meant to succeed. There’s no way for her to do that here. She doesn't want to be some waitress and girlfriend.” I pick up a fry and aggressively dunk it into ketchup.

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Lane and Bowie exchange a look. “You don’t know that, and I’m willing to bet she’d be okay with the girlfriend part of it. Stop acting like you know what’s best for her. She’s an adult and she can decide that for herself,” Lane lectures to me. “Life is too short to go around wondering what if. Or to look back and regret that chance you didn’t take. What are you going to do? Go through life alone just you and Mushu? Don’t tell me you want that because I know you don’t. You want Kosi and you could have her... if you’d just try. This sulking needs to stop. If you’re going to let her go then be man enough to do it with some damn pride and dignity. Otherwise, get off your ass and go get your girl.” Lane stands up, grabs her burger, and stalks off to the bar where she sits to finish her burger.

There’s nothing like a good Lane lecture to get you thinking.

Thirty-six

Kosi

I look around at what was once my room. Everything is boxed up now except for the furniture, of course. Rome is coming down with his truck to take my furniture up to San Francisco. Baylor sits on the floor in an oversized t-shirt, pj shorts, bunny rabbit house shoes, and her red hair pulled up in a ponytail. Her face looks so sad. “I can’t believe you’re really leaving.”

“I know.” I’ve been putting on a brave face all week but I’m really sad to go. All of my friends and family are here. Everything I’ve ever known is here. Leaving just feels so wrong.

Baylor shakes her head. “You’ve become one of my best friends. I loved having Summer as a roommate, obviously, but at least when she moved out I knew I’d see her again. She still lived in Los Angeles. You’re going to be in San Francisco. I feel like I’m never going to see you.” She gets up and comes over to me. Her bottom lip pouts at me. “I don’t want you to go.”

She’s literally saying what I’ve been thinking. “Baylor...”

“I know, I know. The job is a great opportunity. It’s in your field of work and you can work your way back up to marketing, and I know almost anything is better than working at Rowdy’s, but I don’t want you to go.” Baylor is full of dramatic flair during her speech.

Baylor is right, though. We barely knew each other when I moved in and now, I can’t imagine not having her as one of my closest friends. I had been on my own since college with the exception of my time with Colby, but somehow, I felt like I found out more about myself in these last few months here with Baylor than I had in all my life. Leaving isn’t something I want to do but I also feel like I have no other choice. It’s what my dad wants and really, I don’t have anything keeping me here. For one fleeting moment I had allowed myself the freedom to truly consider opening an interior design business. Everything I did at Free Fall had reawakened the sleeping beast for design that had lived dormant within me for so long. It was a freeing experience and one I wanted to continue, but now... it feels tainted. My heart is sad and I’m convinced that any other design project will just shred at it because it’ll always remind me of Roscoe. It was a short-lived romance, but I felt it all a hundred times more than anything I had ever felt before. We had so much potential and now it’s just gone. “If I had a good enough reason to stay, you know I would.”

“Good enough reason, meaning a certain stubborn boy.” Baylor raises her eyebrows at me.

I shrug my shoulders. “Maybe, but more like if I could find a job here.”

She shakes her head. “You know what I think. I think you should stay, open a design business and work at Rowdy’s until you get a big enough client list.”

Little does Baylor know, that was my plan before Colby showed up and Roscoe blew up on me. Now it’s not a possibility. The doorbell rings and Baylor gives me one more sad look before going to answer it. My brothers, Jaxx and Rome, enter with Ace James following behind them. Rome lets out a low whistle. “Is it too late to head back to the vineyard?”

“I don’t know how girls accumulate so much shit,” Jaxx comments.

Ace laughs. “You’re both being drama queens. Kynlee has double this.”

“You just need to remember that you love me.” Rome turns at the sound of my voice and I bound into his arms. He smells like fresh air and grapes. It’s become normal for him. He traded his cowboy hat for a baseball cap today. The navy blue t-shirt hugs his tanned skin. Jeans and cowboy boots complete him. His blue eyes smile into mine. “I missed you, Rome.”

“I missed you too, little sis.”

For a moment we all stand around and talk. Finally, Jaxx gives me a sad look. “I guess we should start loading. I don’t want you to get into town too late and I know Rome has to get back to Napa.”

“Yeah,” I reply quietly. Within a couple of hours the five of us have everything loaded up in the back of Rome’s truck and in my car. Every material thing I have left to my name sits there. I almost feel like a hundred eyes are on me. I check the time and realize I have to be somewhere. “I want to get everyone dinner but I need to be

somewhere real quick. Can I meet you guys there?"

They all agree to meet at JamesTown and I head for my car. Driving with my life in boxes surrounding me feels odd. Luckily, traffic isn't too bad. When I turn onto the street I hold my breath until I reach the house. One truck sits in the driveway so I feel like it's okay. I head up the porch steps and knock on the door. When it swings open I feel like the air has been knocked out of my lungs. Roscoe stands there looking as good as ever. My heart stutters as my eyes roam over him. "Kosi," he says quietly.

I was so dumb to think I could sneak over here to see Riverlyn before prom like she asked and not run into Roscoe. Words fail me at this moment, but luckily I don't need them because a squeal comes from behind him. "Oh my gosh! You came!" Riverlyn pulls Roscoe away from the door and there she stands looking like a queen. The emerald green dress fits her perfectly. Her caramel colored hair is curled to perfection and piled on top of her head. A black crystal tiara sits in the midst of it along with black crystal jewelry. "I was so worried you wouldn't show up."

That makes two of us. When Riverlyn had first texted and asked me if I'd be willing to come by and see her before prom I had hesitated. Not because I didn't want to see her but because this was Roscoe's family. As much as I wanted to take a tiny part in Riverlyn's prom, I'm glad I came. But seeing Roscoe is throwing me for a loop. I'm not sure what to say or how to act so I do the only thing I can. Ignore him. I ignore his existence because I don't have any other choice. It's the only way to get through this situation. "You look so gorgeous, Riverlyn. Just like a queen."

"Thank you so, so much for the dress." Her hand closes around mine and she drags me inside.

Mr. Langston greets me with a proud smile on his face. "Hello, Kosi. It's so good to see you again." Guilt churns in my gut. The conversation we had the last time I was here comes back to me. He told me to be careful with Roscoe's heart. It was pure

gold but it had suffered a lot and because of that he didn't let many people in. At the time, I thought I could make my way through some tiny crack in the wall of defense, but I had been wrong.

"It's good to see you too." I fidget with my hands because this is so awkward.

"You did some great things for my kids. I can't thank you enough," he tells me.

Despite the guilt I feel, I look up into his eyes because I think he just said kids. A small nod of his head is the only confirmation I need to know I did hear him correctly. He's thanking me for Roscoe and Riverlyn, but I feel like I failed Roscoe. I didn't do enough for him. "There's no need for thanks. I was happy to do it. Riverlyn looks stunning." I turn to her. "I hope you have a wonderful night."

"Thank you, Kosi."

I nod my head. "Well, I can't stay. I have to get going but keep in touch, Riverlyn. It was really nice to see you again Mr. Langston." I turn towards Roscoe and his eyes are blazing. For a moment I forget anyone else is in the room, but instead of saying anything I turn and head for the door.

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As I head to my car, I realize how dumb I was to come here. I should have just told Riverlyn I couldn't because I was moving and to send me a picture. Putting my heart through this was unnecessary. When I get in the car, I blast the music and pull away praying I pull myself together before I get to JamesTown.

Thirty-Seven

Roscoe

For a moment we all awkwardly stand in the living room of my childhood home. My father and Riverlyn stare at me. They both seem to think I'm crazy and maybe I am. Letting Kosi go would definitely fall under that category. The anger I felt the day of the Free Fall grand re-opening has died out. The hurt is still there but she did tell me we needed to talk the moment she got out of the car. I'm man enough to admit when I've overreacted, and that day I definitely did. Kosi deserves an apology. I just had the opportunity to give it to her, but I just stood here, frozen and mute.

"I think you need to go after her, son," my father tells me. I look at him then to Riverlyn who nods her head vigorously. My feet start to move towards the door and as soon as the fresh air hits me I run for my car. I'm not sure where she was going so I do the only thing I can. The moment my car is started I dial Bowie. He doesn't even get to say hello before I say, "I need you to find out where Kosi is right now."

"Why don't you just call her?" he asks.

I sigh as I drive, too fast, down my childhood street. "She won't answer."

“Roscoe, give her some credit. Try to call her. I’ll try to find out where she is,” Bowie tells me.

His words play in my head over and over. I’m about to pull over and take a chance on calling her when I spot her car. She parked by one of the local beaches. Instantly, I cut across lanes and whip into the parking area. My eyes scan the area in a desperate attempt to find her. Then it hits me. This is the beach we came to on our date. I run past people as I try to get to the area where we had sat and talked. Suddenly, the air is knocked out of me.

There she is standing in the spot, shoes in her hands—breeze from the ocean causing her hair to dance. It’s wavy and slightly wild today. The blonde glistens under the setting sun. I take a few deep breaths before heading towards her. She looks so simple, no makeup, soft pink tank top and denim capris. Her arms are wrapped around herself. I’ve missed her. My heart has darted across the sand and is groveling at her feet.

As if she can sense my presence, she turns her head slightly in my direction. Her cobalt blue eyes widen in surprise. My hands hide in the pockets of my jeans and slowly I close the distance between us. Kosi turns to face me. She shakes her head slightly. Her face looks so sad. “What are you doing here?”

Here goes nothing. “I was looking for you.”

“Why?” she asks as her eyebrows knit together.

Taking a deep breath, I dive in. “Because I’m an idiot. Because I’m sorry for how I acted the last time I saw you. Because I miss you so damn much, Kosi. I shouldn’t have treated you the way I did at Free Fall. I saw Colby and that little green monster called jealousy reared its head. I turned into a total caveman. Then hearing him say he knew you were moving before I did. I don’t know, it hurt, and I know that’s not your fault but I took it out on you.” I stop for a moment and run a hand through my hair.

“I’ve done a really good job of never needing anyone. I never let anyone in and then somehow the girl that I had spent years thinking was too uptight wormed her way into my heart and changed me. I want you in my life, Kosi Scott. The job is in San Francisco so I know you have to go but we can make it work if you’ll forgive me.”

Tears run down her face. She shakes her head. My heart sinks. “Maybe, we were fooling ourselves. We’ve always been on opposite ends of the sword. How would this ever work?”

“I don’t know how it works. All I know is that when I’m with you everything in this world feels right.” I pull her into me and kiss her. Her lips are soft and sweet just like I remember. It’s only been a week but it’s felt like a lifetime. When I pull away, I rest my forehead against hers. “Give us a chance. Give me a chance. It’ll work. I know it.”

Kosi closes her eyes and ever so slightly nods her head. “Okay.”

My heart sighs. “Are you leaving tonight for San Francisco?” I ask.

She nods again. “I’m going to meet my brothers and Ace at JamesTown before I leave. Do you want to come with me?”

The thought of her living anywhere but here sucks, but I’ll take what I can get, so I take her free hand in mine and tell her, “I’d love to.”

Epilogue

Kosi

“Will you come on?” I whine to Roscoe. “Mushu and I are getting very impatient!”

Roscoe chuckles from the kitchen of his apartment. “Mushu is named after a movie.

Mushu has seen the movie. You're the only one who hasn't seen it so just hold your horses. We can't watch Mulan and not have an array of Chinese takeout."

I sigh. "I'm hungry and impatient now," I tease him. I watch him from my spot on the couch where Mushu is curled up in my lap. Roscoe fixes a serving platter with pretty much the entire menu of takeout. I smile to myself. It took me all of two months to realize I wanted to be back in Los Angeles with my family, Roscoe, and friends, then to work in the corporate world again. The once determined drive I had was gone. My soul yearned to design so I gave my notice and moved back. Thankfully, Baylor had never rented out my room. So, I moved back in with her. I took a job at Free Fall for the receptionist position and worked on getting my interior design and event planning business off the ground. Planning the grand re-opening of Free Fall made me realize how much event planning could be. It's been a slow go but it's starting to pick up some.

It's been three months since I got back to Los Angeles. My father will probably never forgive me for leaving the job I had at Sharp and Wester but it just wasn't for me. To him, though, that doesn't matter. I've disappointed him like my brothers. It's something I'm having to learn to live with. It helps that I'm happier now than I have ever been.

Colby called off his engagement. He showed up in San Francisco shortly after I moved. He wanted to have another chance, but my heart no longer wanted the life I once dreamed about. For so long all I wanted was to be a marketing executive and to marry Colby. Then everything turned upside down in my life and I thought I had lost everything. I actually ended up finding myself. I found a passion I had long forgotten. I found love in the least likely place.

Roscoe said it best when he said he wasn't sure why it worked between us, but it did. He was one hundred percent right. It makes no sense on paper but it works. We still bicker like an old married couple but that's half of our charm.

I've learned that life is a fast lane. You can't predict what will happen. No matter what you do you won't be able to control it. When obstacles hit, you just have to figure out a way to deal with them or go around them. The life you have pictured or planned may never be, and that's okay because there's always another lane. There's always another way to achieve your goals. I was so uptight, so determined to live up to expectations, to be a piece of perfection... that for a long time I forgot myself. Now, I know myself. I know what makes me happy and I intend to fight for it.

Finally, Roscoe comes out of the kitchen and back to the living room. Mulan is already sitting on the screen ready for me to hit play. The food smells amazing. Roscoe smiles at me. "See, patience is a virtue, little one."

"Bite me," I tell him as I stick my tongue out at him.

He shrugs. "Maybe later, for now the only thing I'm biting is an egg roll." Roscoe grabs an eggroll and bites into it as he takes a seat beside me. We sit there for a minute before he turns to me. "Well, are you going to start the movie or what?"

I laugh. "Now, who is the impatient one.?"

Roscoe reaches over and nuzzles my neck. "I am but this is also my favorite movie so for the love of god please hit play!"

We're halfway through the movie. Stomachs are full. I've learned that Roscoe sings along to every song. Mushu is asleep beside my thigh. Roscoe is asleep beside me and I'm curled up next to him but I've never seen the movie so I'm focused on it. Roscoe snores lightly and my heart sighs with contentment. This is the life I wanted and somehow I got lucky enough to live it.