



# Blazing Hearts

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, New Adult, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** Can she let go of her fears for a chance at love?

Dr. Mallory Storm, a brilliant but guarded surgeon, has sworn off relationships, especially with first responders. But when she meets a stranger in a bar and spends the night with her, it changes everything.

Despite their intense connection, Mallory pulls away when she discovers Kara is a firefighter, haunted by past heartaches.

As fate keeps bringing them together, Mallory faces a choice: hold onto her fears or embrace the fire between them.

Will she risk her heart for love?

**Total Pages (Source):** 45

## MALLORY

Dr. Mallory Storm stepped into the bar, pausing just inside the door as her eyes adjusted to the dim lighting. The place was stylish and buzzing with quiet energy—a perfect mix of polished décor and relaxed ambiance. She hesitated, tugging lightly at the hem of her blazer. It wasn't that she looked out of place, but she felt it; a newcomer standing on unfamiliar ground.

Sliding onto a stool at the bar, she offered the bartender a polite smile. “What do you recommend?”

He tilted his head thoughtfully before suggesting a citrus-forward cocktail, something light and refreshing. She nodded, more interested in the act of having a drink than the drink itself. The glass arrived, and she took a tentative sip. It was good—sharp, tart, and a little sweet.

Mallory exhaled and let herself sink into the moment. Moving to Phoenix Ridge had been a whirlwind—new job, new apartment, new city. Tonight was supposed to be about unwinding, shaking off the tension that had coiled tight in her shoulders since the move. Instead, she found herself wondering if she should have just stayed home to unpack the last few lingering boxes.

Movement across the bar caught her eye as the door swung open and a group of four women entered, talking and joking with each other. They grabbed a table not far from where she was sitting, continuing their conversation as they ordered their drinks. One

had an impressive shock of curly blond hair, waving her hands around animatedly as she regaled the group. But the one her eyes kept wandering back to was grinning as she watched her friend speak; her messy dark hair kept falling forward into her eyes—and was that a dimple? She couldn't keep her eyes off her.

Wait ... She was getting up; had she noticed Mallory staring? Damn. She was coming this way.

She approached Mallory with the easy confidence of someone who thrived on the unpredictable. Stopping just shy of her, the tall brunette leaned casually against the bar, her lips curling into a playful smirk. “Sitting here looking mysterious—is that your usual Friday night routine?”

Mallory glanced up, startled by her assertive approach. She blinked at her, momentarily unsure how to respond. Then a smile tugged at the corner of her lips, small but genuine.

“Only when I'm new in town,” she replied, her voice steady despite the slight blush creeping into her cheeks.

“Well, welcome,” she said, pulling out the stool beside her without hesitation. “Phoenix Ridge just got lucky, I'd say.”

Mallory huffed a soft laugh, her fingers brushing the edge of her glass. “Does this line usually work for you?”

She pretended to think, leaning back slightly and running a hand through her short dark hair. “Not really,” she admitted with a grin, “but I figured you'd appreciate the honesty.”

That earned her a chuckle, low and warm, and the tension in Mallory's posture began

to ease.

“I’m Mallory. I just transferred to the hospital here.”

“Very nice to meet you, Mallory. I’m Kara. I’m sure your new patients will be thrilled. Can I buy you another drink?”

“That would be lovely, Kara. Thank you.”

As the minutes ticked by, their conversation unfolded effortlessly, like the pieces of a puzzle sliding into place. Kara coaxed Mallory into laughter with stories about Phoenix Ridge’s quirks—the best hidden coffee shop, the strangest town traditions. In return, Mallory shared snippets of her own adjustment to the city, skirting around the specifics of her work but revealing just enough to keep Kara intrigued.

“You’ve got this vibe,” Kara said at one point, leaning her elbow on the bar and tilting her head.

“Vibe?” Mallory arched an eyebrow, amused.

“Yeah. Like you’ve got everything together, but you don’t want anyone to know it,” Kara teased. “It’s kind of fascinating.”

Mallory rolled her eyes, but the blush returned, faint but unmistakable. “And you’ve got this vibe where you can charm anyone into telling you their life story.”

Kara laughed, the sound bright and genuine. “Not anyone. Just the mysterious types.”

A fresh round of drinks appeared, and the conversation deepened. They swapped stories of first impressions, favorite books, and the challenge of starting over. Mallory found herself relaxing more than she had in weeks, drawn to Kara’s warmth and

quick wit.

The crowd around them began to thin, but neither seemed to notice. Kara leaned closer, her voice dropping to a lower, more intimate tone. “You’ve got this wall up,” she said, studying Mallory with a mix of curiosity and admiration. “But I think you’re a little braver than you let on.”

Mallory’s breath caught, and for a moment, she wasn’t sure how to respond. Kara’s gaze was steady but soft, her confidence tempered by genuine interest. Mallory felt a flicker of something unexpected—a pull she hadn’t planned for.

“I think you’re a little nosier than you let on,” Mallory countered, her lips curving into a grin.

Kara laughed, leaning back with a shrug. “Guilty as charged.”

They sat in comfortable silence for a moment, the buzz of the bar fading into the background. Then Kara tilted her head toward the door. “Come on. Let’s get some air.”

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Mallory hesitated, her logical mind briefly warring with the impulsive thrill buzzing in her chest. Then she nodded, grabbing her coat and following Kara outside.

\* \* \*

The streetlights cast a golden glow over the quiet sidewalk, the distant hum of the city softened by the late hour. Kara and Mallory walked side by side, their conversation falling into a comfortable rhythm punctuated by easy laughter. But beneath the words was a tension neither could ignore—a magnetic pull that seemed to shrink the space between them with every step.

As they reached a quiet corner, Kara stopped, her hand brushing Mallory's arm. Mallory turned, her breath catching as their eyes met, the light from a nearby lamp highlighting Kara's soft smile and the faint blush coloring her cheeks.

For a moment, neither spoke. Then Kara leaned in, slow and deliberate, her movements measured, as if testing the waters. Mallory didn't pull away; instead, she closed the distance, meeting Kara halfway.

The kiss was warm and tentative at first, like a question asked and answered in an instant. But as it deepened, it became something else entirely—a spark igniting into a flame. When they finally pulled apart, their breaths mingling in the cool night air, Mallory let out a shaky laugh.

“Well,” she said, her voice low, “that wasn't on my agenda for the night.”

Kara grinned; her confidence tempered by the softness in her eyes. “Good surprises

are hard to come by. I'd say we're on a roll."

Mallory hesitated, her heart racing. Then, before she could second-guess herself, she nodded toward the building across the street. "My place is just there."

They walked the short distance to Mallory's apartment building, a modest but charming brick structure with ivy climbing up one side. Mallory led the way, her heels clicking softly against the tiles as they entered the lobby. The elevator ride was quiet but charged, the air between them buzzing with anticipation.

When they reached her door, Mallory fumbled briefly with her keys before pushing it open. She stepped inside, flipping on the lights and turning to gauge Kara's reaction.

The apartment was small but thoughtfully arranged, a reflection of Mallory's practical yet personal taste. The living room opened up in warm, neutral tones—soft grays, muted blues, and touches of white. A sleek gray couch anchored the space, adorned with a few cozy, mismatched throw pillows. A coffee table sat in front of it, its wooden surface stacked with books and a half-finished crossword puzzle.

To the right was a small kitchenette, separated from the living area by a counter lined with two bar stools. The counter tops were spotless, save for a ceramic bowl filled with lemons and a French press sitting by the sink. A print of an abstract landscape hung on the wall above, its rich, swirling colors adding a touch of vibrancy.

Opposite the couch, a set of built-in shelves showcased more books, a scattering of framed photographs, and a couple of small succulents in ceramic pots. One frame displayed a candid shot of Mallory with two older women, their arms around her shoulders and their faces lit with matching smiles. Another held a minimalist black-and-white sketch of a cityscape—clean lines and sharp angles.

Kara stepped inside, her eyes scanning the room with curiosity. "This is nice," she

said, her tone warm and genuine.

Mallory shrugged, a little self-conscious. “It’s a work in progress. I haven’t been here long.”

“It feels like you,” Kara said simply, walking further in and stopping by the bookshelves. She tilted her head, examining the titles. “Let me guess—half of these are serious non-fiction, and the other half are secretly romance novels?”

Mallory laughed, closing the door behind her and slipping off her shoes. “Not quite. Mostly thrillers, actually.”

“Dark,” Kara teased, turning to face her. “But fitting.”

Mallory rolled her eyes but smiled, crossing the room to the kitchenette. “Do you want another drink? I think I have wine, maybe?”

“Wine is good,” Kara said, watching as Mallory filled two glasses.

They sat on the couch, the space between them smaller than it had been when they’d started walking. Kara set her glass on the coffee table and leaned back, her arm draped casually over the back of the couch.

“So,” Kara said, her voice playful, “what made you decide to move here? Phoenix Ridge isn’t somewhere everyone knows about.”

Mallory sipped her wine, her gaze thoughtful. “It was time for a change,” she said after a moment. “I wanted... I don’t know. Something quieter, maybe. Somewhere I could figure out what’s next without too many distractions.”

Kara raised an eyebrow. “And you thought moving to a busy city was the answer to



that?”

Mallory laughed softly, setting her glass down. “Okay, maybe I didn’t think it through completely. But it felt right at the time.”

“And now?” Kara asked, her tone gentler.

Mallory met her gaze, the openness in Kara’s eyes making her feel unexpectedly seen. “Now, I think I’m starting to feel like I made the right choice.”

The words hung between them, heavier than she’d intended but entirely true. Kara didn’t look away, her expression softening.

Mallory couldn’t help her gaze travelling over Kara’s beautiful face and down over her body. Kara looked sporty- fit and capable, and it was something Mallory found super attractive.

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“Well,” Kara said after a moment, a faint grin tugging at her lips, “if tonight’s anything to go by, I’d say you’re off to a pretty good start. Though I have to disagree with not allowing yourself any distractions.”

“You might be right there. I do always find myself distracted by pretty things.” Mallory smiled as she watched a pink flush race across Kara’s face, likely a combination of her words and the wine. Feeling bold, she leaned forward, cupping Kara’s face and capturing her lips in a tentative kiss. As Kara sank forward, responding, she ran her tongue over her lips, tasting the wine they were sharing. Sweet and crisp.

Mallory felt herself being pulled into Kara’s arms, and let herself be brought further into the embrace. The alcohol now fueling the both of them, she felt warm, hot. Too hot.

“God, you’re hot. I mean, I’m hot. No?—”

Kara just laughed as Mallory fumbled trying to find the right words to say.

“Thank you. And I agree, you are certainly hot. If you’re too warm, I’m more than happy to help fix that. Don’t want you burning up after all. Not without me at least.”

Mallory felt Kara’s gaze traveling up and down her body, almost predatory, and felt a wave of heat rush through her.

“How about you? Are you warm?”

“Oh definitely, far too warm. Want to help me?”

Mallory just nodded in reply, not trusting her words to form.

Her behavior felt impulsive perhaps for her, but there was something about being in a new city that felt like she deserved this kind of freedom.

She stood, pulling Kara up with her before swiftly pulling her blouse over her head, tossing it across the room.

“Hmm, much better, though I’m sure there’s plenty more we can do to help,” Kara said, her eyes glazed over with want.

Mallory pulled the taller woman towards her, yanking Kara’s shirt up and over, letting it fall into a crumpled heap at their feet.

“Bedroom?”

“Bedroom.”

The pair rushed across the living room, belts unbuckled, bras unclasped, and pants slipped down their legs as they went.

As Mallory clasped Kara’s hand, leading her through the bedroom door, she found herself being picked up and plonked on her bed with a giggle. Damn, Kara was strong. Kara grinned looking down at her.

“Fuck, you were right. You are hot.”

She felt strangely at ease with Kara. And she liked it.

Mallory laughed before yanking Kara down beside her, winding her arm around to capture Kara's small breasts in her hands. She relished in the sounds that came from Kara as she squeezed and pinched her nipples before leaning forward and taking one in her mouth. Gently nibbling and sucking, each moan that escaped Kara's throat enlivened her.

Moving here had been an excellent idea after all.

Her reverie was only interrupted at the feeling of Kara's hands working their way down her torso and towards her wanting pussy. As Kara's fingers brushed against the folds of her pussy she arched forward, an electric shock of need coursing its way through her.

She moved her own hand down, matching what Kara was doing to her. She ran her fingers through Kara's wetness at just the same time she felt Kara do the same to her.

Fuck, she was so wet. They were both so very wet.

"You feel amazing," Mallory groaned.

Something about this beautiful stranger was just perfect for tonight.

A deep moan was ripped from her as Kara slipped a finger inside her, continuing to draw gentle circles around her clit as she pumped back and forth and added another finger.

She did the same to Kara in response, happy to take her lead and she gasped in pleasure as she felt her own fingers slide inside Kara's beautiful wetness.

It was all too much. She too matched Kara's pace with her own fingers, and felt Kara's body begin to tighten and shake. She was close too.

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Kara threw her head back, and Mallory watched as shocks and tremors wracked their way through her tall strong frame, all the while Kara never stopped what she was doing with her magical fingers, and it was almost no time at all before Mallory's own climax swept over her, intense and amazing.

This was something she could certainly lose herself in for tonight.

Panting heavily, they lay side by side, Mallory drawing lazy circles on Kara's skin.

“Again?”

“Again.”

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The soft morning light filtered through the sheer curtains of Mallory's apartment, casting long, golden streaks across the wooden floors. The city outside was just beginning to stir—a distant hum of cars and the faint call of birds carried on the cool breeze sneaking in through the cracked window.

Mallory stood in the kitchen, her hair loosely tied back, wearing a sweatshirt that hung long over her frame. She reached for the French press on the counter, pressing the plunger down with deliberate care, savoring the earthy aroma of freshly brewed coffee.

Behind her, Kara emerged from the hallway, barefoot and at ease, her tousled hair and wrinkled shirt only adding to the casual charm that seemed to follow her

effortlessly.

She might have been the most effortlessly sexy woman Mallory had ever met.

“Smells amazing,” Kara said, her voice still laced with the huskiness of sleep.

Mallory turned, offering a small smile as she lifted a mug. “I can’t promise it’s gourmet, but it’ll wake you up.”

Kara crossed the room, her bare feet padding against the cool floor, and accepted the mug with a grateful grin. She took a slow sip, closing her eyes for a moment as if savoring not just the coffee but the entire scene.

“You’ve got a knack for mornings,” Kara said, setting her mug down on the counter and leaning against it.

Mallory chuckled softly, her fingers curling around her own cup. “Not really. I just fake it well.”

Kara tilted her head, studying her for a moment, a playful smile tugging at her lips. “You don’t give yourself enough credit, you know that?”

Mallory looked down at her coffee, a faint blush creeping into her cheeks. “You don’t even know me,” she said lightly, though her tone held no sharpness.

“Maybe,” Kara admitted, her eyes warm as they met Mallory’s. “But I feel like I’ve got a pretty good start.”

They stood there for a moment, the quiet between them comfortable and unhurried. Mallory leaned her hip against the counter, her mug cradled in both hands. She glanced at Kara, noticing the relaxed tilt of her shoulders, the way her eyes lingered

as though committing every detail to memory. The chemistry between them was still there, humming softly beneath the surface, but it felt different now—less urgent, more grounded.

Kara broke the silence first, her voice playful but tinged with sincerity. “So, do you always invite strangers home and make them coffee in the morning? Or am I just special?”

Mallory laughed, shaking her head. “Definitely not a habit. You’re a first, actually.”

“Lucky me,” Kara said with a wink, lifting her mug in a mock toast.

Mallory rolled her eyes but couldn’t suppress her smile. She took another sip of her coffee, letting the warmth settle in her chest.

Kara set her mug down again and straightened, glancing around the room as though taking one last look. “I should probably get going,” she said, though there was no rush in her tone.

Mallory felt a pang of disappointment, though she knew the night—now morning—had to end at some point. She placed her mug on the counter and walked Kara to the door, the quiet of the apartment stretching between them like a thread not yet ready to break.

At the door, Kara hesitated, reaching into her back pocket and pulling out a slightly crumpled napkin. She grabbed a pen from the counter and quickly scrawled a number across it.

“In case you feel like being mysterious again,” Kara said with a grin, sliding the napkin across the counter to Mallory.

Mallory picked it up, her fingers brushing against the paper as she read the neat, looping digits. She looked up, her smile soft but genuine. “Thanks,” she said, folding the napkin carefully and tucking it into the pocket of her sweatshirt.

Kara leaned against the door frame, her expression lingering somewhere between teasing and earnest. “Last night was...” She paused, searching for the right word. “Unexpected. In the best way.”

Mallory nodded, her voice quieter now. “Yeah. It was.”



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They stood there for a moment longer, neither quite ready to break the spell. Then Kara gave a small, almost reluctant smile and opened the door.

“See you around, Mallory,” she said, her voice light but carrying an undercurrent of something deeper. Her deep brown eyes gave one last lingering look at Mallory and Mallory almost felt herself swooning.

“See you,” Mallory replied, her tone matching Kara’s.

As the door clicked shut, Mallory stood still for a moment, the quiet of the apartment suddenly feeling heavier. She walked back to the kitchen and picked up her coffee, taking a long sip as she leaned against the counter.

Her thoughts drifted to the napkin she’d tucked away, the number etched into her mind as clearly as if she’d memorized it. There was a thrill buzzing under her skin, something unexpected and intoxicating.

For the first time in weeks, Mallory didn’t feel the weight of her move or the pressure to get everything perfect. Instead, she felt a small, steady flame of possibility—a spark she hadn’t realized she was missing.

She glanced at the clock, realizing the day was only just beginning. The city outside was waking up, the sunlight growing brighter and more insistent. Mallory smiled to herself, her fingers brushing against the pocket where Kara’s number rested.

## KARA

The door clicked shut behind Kara Brandon as she stepped into her apartment, the quiet wrapping around her like a warm blanket. She dropped her keys onto the small table by the door, kicked off her boots, and glanced at the clock on the wall. The morning was still young; the sunlight just starting to creep through the blinds. Her body ached with the familiar heaviness of too little sleep, but the smile tugging at the corners of her mouth told a different story.

She rubbed her eyes and debated starting her day but quickly dismissed the thought. She wasn't on shift until tomorrow, and the pull of her bed was too strong to ignore. Shrugging off her jacket, Kara made her way down the narrow hallway, her socked feet padding softly against the hardwood floor.

Her bedroom was as unpretentious as the rest of her apartment—just a bed, a dresser, and a nightstand cluttered with books and a half-empty glass of water. The covers were still tangled from when she'd hastily left the day before, and Kara slipped back into the sheets with a contented sigh.

The warmth of the bed coaxed her into stillness, but her mind refused to quiet. She stared at the ceiling, the faint lines of sunlight stretching across the textured surface, and let the memories of last night unfold in her mind.

One-night stands weren't supposed to feel like this. They were supposed to be simple, fleeting, and uncomplicated. Fun for the night and forgotten by morning. But this enigmatic stranger Mallory... Mallory felt different. She had a spark—something that stuck with Kara in a way she hadn't expected.

The thought brought an ache of its own, one Kara wasn't sure how to name.

She turned onto her side, pressing her cheek into the pillow as she considered

reaching for her phone. Texting Mallory crossed her mind more than once, but Kara hesitated. Was it too soon? Too much? She wasn't usually one to overthink these things, but this wasn't usual.

Eventually, sleep tugged her back under, her last thought a quiet echo of Mallory's laugh.

Kara woke hours later, blinking against the afternoon light that streamed through the blinds. She groaned softly, running a hand through her messy brown hair as she rolled out of bed. The air was crisp and cool, the faint scent of the eucalyptus spray she kept on her nightstand lingering in the room.

She stretched, her joints cracking as she stood, and wandered into the kitchen, her bare feet finding the cold floor. The apartment was quiet, save for the occasional hum of the refrigerator or the distant sounds of the city outside.

Kara's apartment wasn't much, but it was hers. Practical and cozy, it reflected her personality without much effort. A cork board hung on the wall above the small dining table, cluttered with Polaroid photos, handwritten notes, and a few postcards from friends who traveled more than she did. The shelves were lined with books she swore she'd finish one day and a few nick-knacks that held sentimental value.

The kitchen itself was tidy but lived-in. Takeout menus were tucked neatly into a drawer, and a well-worn coffee maker sat in the corner of the counter. Kara filled the machine with water and coffee grounds, her movements automatic as the scent of brewing coffee began to fill the space.

She leaned against the counter, her phone in hand. She unlocked the screen, her thumb hovering over the messaging app.

Just text her.

The thought was simple, but Kara hesitated. Her usual confidence faltered slightly, and she shook her head with a wry smile. “Get it together,” she muttered under her breath.

Before she could decide, a notification popped up at the top of the screen. It was from Scotti Saunders, one of her closest friends and a frequent instigator of chaos.

So, what happened last night? Left us in the dust, huh?

Kara laughed softly, already hearing Scotti’s teasing tone in her head. Her fingers moved quickly as she typed out a reply.

KARA: Nothing you need to worry about.

SCOTTI: Oh, please. You disappeared with some mystery woman. Spill.

KARA: Maybe I just got tired. Ever think of that?

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SCOTTI: Tired of us, sure. Mystery woman, though? Hmm.

Kara smirked, shaking her head as she set the phone down. Her friends were relentless when it came to prying into her life, but she couldn't deny that their teasing often gave her the nudge she needed.

She picked up her phone again and opened her messages. There was one other new message from an unknown number. It had to be Mallory.

Hey.

That was all it said.

The thought of last night resurfaced—Mallory's sly smile, her beautiful long red hair and big dark brown eyes, the way she'd leaned just a little closer when their banter turned more personal. Kara felt that pull again, stronger now.

Without overthinking it this time, she opened the chat and typed:

Hey, mysterious stranger. Hope the coffee this morning wasn't your best trick—I might expect more next time.

She hit send before she could second guess herself.

The coffee maker beeped, and Kara poured herself a mug, the warm ceramic comforting in her hands as she took a long sip. She leaned back against the counter, her phone still in her other hand, and waited.

It didn't take long for a reply to come through.

That depends—are you calling the coffee mediocre, or are you already angling for another cup?

Kara chuckled, the tension in her chest easing as the exchange flowed effortlessly. Whatever this was, she liked it.

Mallory was sharp, warm, and full of surprises—and for the first time in a while, Kara felt like she might want to stick around to see what came next.

Kara grinned, the words lighting a flicker of anticipation in her chest. Her fingers moved almost of their own accord, firing back a response that carried just enough tease to match Mallory's tone.

Kara: Angling? Nah, I'm not that subtle. Consider this a direct request for a second round—coffee optional.

The reply came quickly, the typing bubbles barely disappearing before Mallory's message appeared.

Mallory: Bold. Do you always cut to the chase like this?

Kara laughed softly, setting her coffee mug down as she leaned her elbows on the counter, fully immersed in the exchange now.

Kara: Only when it's worth it. You're not holding that against me, are you?

The next message took a little longer to arrive, and Kara could almost imagine Mallory smirking as she typed.

Mallory: Not at all. I appreciate the honesty—it's refreshing.

Kara felt a spark of satisfaction. Mallory wasn't pulling away from her flirtation, and that made her bold enough to lean in further.

Kara: Glad to hear it. Now, be honest with me—last night. Fun enough to make you think about me today?

Mallory's reply was almost immediate, her sharp humor cutting through the text like a blade.

Mallory: Fun enough to make me wonder if you always ask leading questions.

Kara laughed again, shaking her head at the way Mallory turned her words around.

Kara: Only when I know the answer is "yes." So, what's your go-to for unwinding after a long day?

Mallory: Depends on the day. A good book if I'm feeling ambitious, bad TV if I'm not. You?

Kara: I've got a couch that's seen more takeout and Netflix than I care to admit. But I'm not above dragging myself out for a drink or two if the company's right.

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Mallory's reply came with a hint of a challenge.

Mallory: You must have high standards for company, then. Lucky for me, I made the cut.

Kara smirked.

Kara: Oh, you made the cut all right. Last night wasn't just good company—there were other highlights I wouldn't mind reliving.

She hit send and immediately felt the heat rise in her chest. It wasn't an unusual thing for her to say—Kara wasn't exactly shy—but something about Mallory made her nerves hum just a little louder.

Mallory's response came after a brief pause, the typing bubbles almost teasing Kara with their slowness.

Mallory: Highlights? You're going to have to be more specific.

Kara's pulse quickened. Mallory wasn't backing down, and that was all the encouragement she needed. She leaned against the counter, her thumbs moving quickly across the screen.

Kara: Oh, you know... the way you kissed me like you'd been waiting all night for it. The way you laughed at my terrible jokes. And maybe the way your hands didn't seem to know where to stop.



There was a longer pause this time, and Kara almost worried she'd pushed too far. But when Mallory's reply finally came through, it sent a jolt straight through her.

Mallory: Funny. I remember you being the one who didn't know where to stop. You seemed pretty determined to test my limits.

Kara bit her lip, grinning as she typed her response. She remembered how good Mallory's naked body had felt against her own. She remembered how beautiful Mallory had been undressed and in her arms.

Kara: Guilty. But you didn't seem to mind. In fact, I'd say you gave as good as you got.

Mallory's reply was shorter, but it hit just as hard.

Mallory: I'm not one to disappoint.

Fuck, Mallory had to know the effect she was having. Kara felt it right between her legs. Well, two could play at that game.

Kara: I have to say, this is making it very hard to focus on anything else today.

Mallory: Is that your way of saying you can't stop thinking about me?

Kara: Guilty as charged. You?

Mallory's reply took a moment, but when it came, it was worth the wait.

Mallory: Let's just say you've made quite an impression.

Kara smiled at the screen, her heart thrumming with a mix of satisfaction and

anticipation. She'd started the conversation on a whim, not knowing what to expect, but now she felt that pull toward Mallory even more strongly.

Kara: I don't think I've been able to stop thinking about you all day.

Mallory: Really, and what exactly have you been thinking?

Kara: Oh, just about how good our sex was. Though I'm sure there's more you were holding back from me.

Mallory: I'm not sure whether that was a compliment, Mallory quickly replied.

Kara: Just a statement. There's plenty more of you to explore. After all, I never got to taste you. And that is something I really want to get the opportunity to do. Lick you until you come in my mouth a thousand times.

Mallory: It's a good thing I'm not working today, I don't think I could have concentrated after that text!

Kara: Is that a no? Kara questioned, her mouth watering at the mere thought of her tongue in Mallory's pussy.

Mallory: I didn't say no, did I?

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Kara couldn't help it, one hand wandered into her pants, pulling her underwear to one side as she typed with the other, her fingers quickly finding her own clit, flicking across it.

Kara: Fuck. You have no idea what you've done to me, Mallory. Every time I close my eyes I see your beautiful body all laid out for me to devour.

She didn't have to wait long for Mallory's response.

Mallory: Mmm and I can still hear your moans from last night. You'll have to give me an encore of them in person though to make sure I remember them correctly.

Mallory: oh, and yes. You can go down on me until I come in your mouth a thousand times. I hope you have the stamina for it.

Kara: Fuck.

Mallory: Maybe we could 69 so I get to taste you, too?

Kara: oh god. Yes.

Kara: Who goes on top?

Mallory: I'll go on top. I think you might like that.

Fuck. The thought of Mallory's body nude and in 69 position on top of her was just too much to comprehend. Kara felt more turned on than she had in such a long time.

Kara moved to her living room so she could recline on her sofa and touch herself properly.

Her left hand was buried deep in her underwear as her right hand still held her phone. Good job she could text with one hand.

Kara: I think I just might. Would you grind down on my face?

Kara could feel her climax building quickly now as her fingers moved fast on her clitoris. What kind of spell was she under?

Mallory: Oh, so much so. You would barely be able to breathe and all you would be able to see, smell and taste would be me.

Kara's orgasm crashed through her like a tidal wave. Her body shook and her eyes closed as she leant back into the sofa and lost herself in the moment.

What was this woman doing to her?

When her body finally stopped shaking and her breathing returned to normal, she responded.

Kara: If that's the case, maybe we should do something about it. You free this weekend?

The typing bubbles appeared, then disappeared, then reappeared again. Finally, Mallory's reply came through.

Mallory: I might be. You thinking coffee again, or something a little more exciting?

Kara's grin widened as she typed her reply.

Kara: Why not both? I'll leave the details up to you.

The soft chime of her phone was the only sound in Kara's apartment as the conversation began to taper off, the pace of their messages slowing but losing none of their warmth. She had made her way to the kitchen and leaned back against the kitchen counter, her coffee long forgotten, and stared at the last message Mallory had sent.

Mallory: I should get back to unpacking before you distract me any further. For the record, though, I'm glad you didn't let me stay mysterious.

Kara smiled, her fingers hovering over the keyboard as she thought about how to reply. Mallory had an understated way of surprising her—sharp and playful one moment, sexual and seductive as hell the next, then sincere and disarming. That mix of confidence and vulnerability was like a magnet, pulling Kara in more strongly than she wanted to admit.

Kara: Me too. Good luck with the unpacking. Try not to get buried in bubble wrap.

She hesitated for a second before hitting send, wishing she could come up with something a little more clever, but the truth was, she liked leaving the conversation on a light, simple note. Anything heavier might have tipped the balance she wasn't sure she wanted to test yet.

Mallory's reply came just a moment later, as if she had been waiting.

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Mallory: No promises. You might need to come to my rescue later.

Kara laughed softly, shaking her head.

Kara: Anytime, mysterious stranger.

She set her phone down on the counter, the faint buzz of excitement still running through her. For a moment, she just stood there, staring at the device as if it might blink back to life with another message from Mallory. But the screen stayed dark, and Kara finally let herself breathe.

The kitchen felt quieter now, the earlier hum of conversation fading into the background of her thoughts. The sunlight streaming through the blinds had shifted, casting angled shadows across the floor. Kara took a long stretch, her body still waking up fully from the night before, and let her mind wander back to Mallory.

Kara wasn't used to being surprised, not like this.

She walked to the window, mug in hand, and looked out at the city beyond. The view from her apartment wasn't spectacular, but it offered a glimpse of life moving outside—cars threading through the streets, a couple walking their dog on the sidewalk below, the distant hum of a bus pulling into a stop. It was ordinary, grounding.

She took another sip of her coffee and leaned against the window frame, her thoughts drifting. Usually, she wouldn't give much thought to a one-night stand after it ended. A fun memory, sure, but nothing more. She liked keeping things simple, leaving

attachments at the door.

But Mallory...

Kara exhaled, a soft laugh escaping her. What is it about you?

The lingering pull she felt wasn't something she could pin down. It was quiet but persistent, a thread connecting her to Mallory even now. She thought about Mallory's laugh, the way it had softened the edges of her otherwise reserved demeanor. She thought about the spark in her eyes when she teased Kara, the way her words carried an undercurrent of curiosity, as if she were figuring Kara out in real time.

And then there was the moment they'd shared that morning, sitting across from each other with coffee in hand, the kind of comfortable silence that spoke louder than words. It had felt easy, natural, like slipping into a rhythm they both already knew.

Kara shook her head, trying to push the thoughts away, but they clung stubbornly.

\* \* \*

The rest of the day passed in quiet fits and starts. She moved through her routine without much thought—washing the dishes left in the sink, throwing a load of laundry into the machine, tidying the cluttered coffee table in the living room. Every now and then, she'd catch herself glancing at her phone, the memory of their conversation still fresh.

By the time she'd finished folding the laundry, the city outside had shifted into afternoon. The light filtering through the blinds had taken on a warmer hue, softening the edges of the room. Kara stood in the middle of her apartment, hands on her hips, and let out a long breath.

Her phone buzzed softly from the counter. She reached for it instinctively, her pulse skipping for a brief second before she realized it wasn't Mallory—it was Scotti, her friend, sending another round of teasing messages about the previous night.

Scotti: Sooooo... Are you gonna spill, or are we supposed to guess what happened after you ditched us?

Kara smirked, shaking her head as she replied.

Kara: Maybe I just needed some fresh air.

Scotti: Uh-huh. Sure. Fresh air that looked like a hot redhead?

Kara: None of your business, nosy.

Scotti: Oh, it will be eventually. You can't hide forever.

Kara chuckled, setting her phone back down. She didn't mind Scotti's nosiness—it was part of the package deal with her group of friends—but she wasn't ready to share this yet. Whateverthiswas.

As she grabbed her jacket and keys, ready to step out for a walk, she found herself glancing at her phone one last time. The screen was still dark, but the echo of Mallory's words lingered in her mind.

“For the record, though, I'm glad you didn't let me stay mysterious.”



Mallory stepped into the bustling hallway of Phoenix Ridge Hospital, her heart pounding in a way she hadn't expected. The sterile yet comforting scent of antiseptic filled the air as the hum of activity swirled around her—nurses rushing by, doctors conferring in quiet corners, the soft beep of monitors drifting from nearby rooms. She tried to steady herself, feeling the weight of anticipation and nerves settle in her chest. This was it, the beginning of a new chapter, a fresh start.

Her old hospital, the one where she'd spent years perfecting her craft, felt like a lifetime ago now. She'd left behind the familiar faces, the established routines. This was Phoenix Ridge, where everything was new—new patients, new colleagues, and most importantly, a new beginning for herself. For the first time in a while, she felt like she was shedding an old skin, ready to become something new.

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Dr. Josephine Mars, her new mentor and Head of the Hospital, spent her hours keeping Phoenix Ridge Hospital running, but she had welcomed Mallory with a warm handshake and an even warmer smile. The older woman was confident, knowledgeable, and sharp, yet there was a kind, almost maternal energy about her that put Mallory at ease. She had guided Mallory through the hospital's layout, pointing out the departments she'd be working with, the high-tech labs, the team of specialists who'd help her adjust to the fast pace of the hospital.

Mallory listened intently, her eyes scanning the sleek, modern equipment in each department they passed. The hospital felt cutting-edge, efficient, and alive with the kind of energy she hadn't felt in years. There was a sense of purpose here, a shared drive to provide the best care possible.

Still, it was a lot to take in. Her mind buzzed with the challenge of it all—the procedures to memorize, the faces to remember, the expectations of her as the new addition to the team. But beneath that initial overwhelm, she felt a flicker of excitement, too. She could already tell that this place would challenge her in ways she hadn't anticipated, but it would push her to grow. And that was something she needed after everything she'd left behind.

What she really loved about both Phoenix Ridge hospital and Phoenix Ridge the city was that it was all women in power. An all woman staff at the hospital and Mallory loved that. No more misogyny for her.

She had barely finished digesting the layout of the hospital when Dr. Mars took her into the staff lounge for a brief coffee break. It was a small but cozy space, with windows that looked out over the city, offering a view of the mountain range that

surrounded Phoenix Ridge. It was a peaceful moment; one Mallory could appreciate in the midst of everything else that was happening.

As they sat, sipping their coffee and chatting about the day ahead, Mallory noticed movement from the corner of her eye. A commotion near the nurses' station, a few voices rising over the usual background noise. She barely registered it at first, until she heard a familiar laugh. It was low and throaty, the kind of laugh that carried without effort, a sound that Mallory recognized all too well. A blast from the past, that was for sure.

Her heart skipped a beat. She felt like she was being plunged back many years. She turned her head, her eyes locking onto the tall, confident figure making its way down the hallway.

Ember Thompson.

Mallory froze. Her breath caught in her throat as her gaze followed Ember's every movement. The woman was just as striking as Mallory remembered—tall, with an easy confidence that seemed to draw the attention of everyone around her. Her red hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and she wore the same relaxed, almost defiant masculine aura that had always made her stand out in a crowd.

Mallory felt a rush of emotions flood her—surprise, disbelief, and a deep, unmistakable ache in her chest. She hadn't expected to run into her ex girlfriend here, even though, when she thought back, she knew Ember was from Phoenix Ridge. She'd left behind everything about her past—everything about the tumultuous, passionate short lived relationship they'd had many years ago—and moved here to start over. To put distance between herself and the things that had hurt her.

But here was Ember, striding into the hospital like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Ember's sharp eyes scanned the room, her gaze landing on Mallory with surprising clarity. For a moment, it felt like the whole world fell away. The bustling hospital, the friendly chatter from nearby doctors, even the comforting buzz of the fluorescent lights overhead—all of it seemed to fade into the background.

Ember didn't smile. She didn't even raise an eyebrow. She just looked at Mallory as though she had known, deep down, that they would cross paths again eventually. The air between them was thick, charged with something unspoken. Recognition. Curiosity. Perhaps even a flicker of regret or bitterness from Ember's side, though Mallory couldn't be sure.

Mallory's mind raced. She wasn't ready for this. Not now, not here. The last time she'd seen Ember, things had ended in a flurry of words—angry, hurt words—that had made her vow never to go back to someone like Ember again. Reckless, impulsive, always putting herself in danger. Mallory couldn't handle it. She couldn't handle Ember's behavior. It was too much.

Ember hadn't been the one to let go. Mallory had walked away, brokenhearted but resolute. And now, seeing her standing there, so familiar and so foreign all at once, Mallory wasn't sure how to feel. Their relationship was a million years ago, when they were both so young, but Mallory felt shaken like it was yesterday.

Ember's lips twitched into something resembling a smirk as she slowly walked toward Mallory and Dr. Mars, the soft click of her boots on the polished tile echoing in the quiet hallway. Mallory stood frozen for a beat too long, her mind unable to catch up with her racing heart.

“Morning, Love,” Ember said, as she drew close to the pair.

“Wh—”

“Morning, Ember. I’m nearly done, don’t worry; I’ll be finished soon,” Dr. Mars replied, sending Mallory’s head into a spin. What was going on?

“Oh, Mallory, of course, you haven’t met. This is my wife, Ember. Ember, meet Doctor Mallory Storm. She’s transferred recently so I’m showing her around. Mallory, sorry, there’s something that needs my attention, I’ll be back in a second,” Josephine rattled a rapid pace before striding off to whatever new issue needed her.

Ember’s eyes never left Mallory, her gaze intense, appraising. For a brief, sharp moment, Mallory wondered if Ember could see right through her—the walls she’d built, the distance she’d placed between herself and her past. If she could sense the way Mallory’s pulse quickened in her chest, how her breath faltered the second their eyes met again.

“Mallory,” Ember said, her voice low and cool, carrying a familiarity that both comforted and unsettled Mallory all at once. “Didn’t expect to see you here.” She tilted her head slightly, studying Mallory with an almost clinical detachment. “It has been a long time. How are you finding working here?”

Mallory forced herself to stand a little taller, pushing back the rush of emotion that threatened to rise up. She hadn’t prepared for this moment, hadn’t expected to face one of the ghosts of her past ever again. But here they were, and Mallory couldn’t afford to let her discomfort show. Not here, not now.

“It’s fine. Busy.” Mallory’s voice remained steady, though there was a slight edge to her words. She leaned into her professional demeanor, determined not to let Ember see how much her presence was unsettling her. “But then, I imagine you’re used to that, given the kind of work you do.”

Ember was a firefighter. An impulsive, thrill seeking, risk taking Firefighter. She had been doing her training in the same city that Mallory was living in. Everything about

Ember had been seductive, and yet dangerous.

Ember didn't flinch at the jab. Instead, she leaned casually against the counter, her eyes locking onto Mallory with that familiar, steady gaze. It was the kind of look that made Mallory's heart beat a little faster, the kind of look that had always made her feel like Ember could see straight through her, could read her thoughts before they ever left her mouth. The woman never had to try. She just knew.

Mallory hated it.

"Used to do. I haven't worked as a firefighter in over six years now. I help out on occasion, but nothing regular. Stopped once we had Natalie, our little girl. I spend most of my time fixing up old cars now when I'm not chasing after our little rascal."

"Six years huh. I had no idea you were married. And to Dr. Mars, too."

"Yep, got lucky there, though I wish the hours she had to work were shorter."

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The silence stretched between Mallory and Ember, thick with something unspoken, something that neither of them seemed eager to address. Mallory felt the old resentment rise up inside her like a tidal wave—raw, dangerous, and completely out of her control. She thought she had buried it; thought she had left it all behind when she'd walked away from Ember all those years ago. But now, here it was, flooding her mind again, reminding her why she had sworn off people like Ember in the first place.

“So, you finally moved to the incredible Phoenix Ridge. Good for you,” Ember said, her voice smooth and almost teasing, though her smile remained tight. “Nice to see you taking that ‘fresh start’ you always said you needed seriously finally.”

Mallory clenched her jaw, trying to hold back the words she knew were about to spill out. She hadn't come to Phoenix Ridge to face this—her. She'd come here to escape, to find peace. But here Ember was, like a ghost from her past, stirring up old wounds she hadn't even realized were still so raw.

“I'm here to do my job, Ember. Not to be a part of whatever drama you've got going on. I'm a cardio-thoracic surgeon,” Mallory replied, her tone clipped.

Ember's smile faltered for the briefest moment, but it was almost imperceptible. She recovered quickly, her eyes narrowing slightly, but she didn't back down. “You always did have a way of shutting down anything that made you uncomfortable,” she said, her voice cool and knowing. “I guess some things never change.”

The words hit Mallory harder than she expected. They cut deep, too familiar, like a reminder of everything she'd tried to leave behind. She knew Ember well enough to

recognize that glint in her eyes—bold, unafraid, and unapologetic. Ember had always been like that, never afraid to call Mallory out, never afraid to push her buttons.

But Mallory wasn't going to let her get to her this time. She'd come too far to let Ember undo all the work she'd done to move on. She took a deep breath and forced herself to respond, her voice cold and controlled.

Mallory crossed her arms, her posture tense as she looked at Ember. "So, how's retirement treating you? Still miss the thrill of running into burning buildings?" Her tone was sharper than she intended, but the bitterness she'd carried for years had bubbled to the surface before she could stop it.

Ember sighed, her expression softening but tinged with weariness. She shifted, brushing an invisible speck of lint from her sleeve. "It's been many years, Mallory. We were just stupid kids. I thought you'd have let go of all that by now."

Mallory's eyes narrowed, her jaw tightening. "Let go? You mean forget? Forget how you threw yourself into danger like it didn't matter I existed at all?"

Ember's gaze flicked downward for a moment, and when she looked back up, there was no anger, only quiet resolve. "I didn't retire because of fear, Mallory. I retired because I wanted something different—for myself, for my life with Josephine, for Natalie." She hesitated, her voice softening even further as she said her daughter's name. "And I've found it. I've built a life I'm proud of with a woman I love."

She hadn't expected to feel this strange mix of relief and anger, knowing Ember had finally stepped away from the danger that had defined their relationship. "So now you get it," Mallory said, her voice low. "Now you understand what it's like to want someone to stay. To not spend every day wondering if the person you love is going to come home in one piece."



“I always understood, Mallory,” Ember said quietly, her gaze steady. “I just didn’t know how to balance it back then.”

Mallory’s hands clenched into fists at her sides. “No, you didn’t. And I paid the price for that. You threw yourself into danger every chance you got, and I had to live with the fear and the waiting—and then the arguments when I begged you to stop.”

Ember flinched at the words, but her composure didn’t falter. “You’re right. I didn’t listen when I should have. I was stubborn and too caught up in proving something to myself. I treated you badly. And I’m sorry for that, Mallory. I really am.”

The apology caught Mallory off guard, her heart stuttering in her chest. Ember’s tone wasn’t defensive or dismissive—it was genuine. But it wasn’t enough to soothe the ache of old wounds. “Sorry doesn’t change what happened,” she said, her voice trembling with anger and something else—hurt. “It doesn’t change how it ended.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Ember agreed, her voice soft but resolute. “And I’m not here to change the past. I can’t. But I thought maybe I could... I don’t know, help you move forward. You deserve that, Mallory.”

Mallory laughed again, bitter and sharp. “Help me move forward? Is that what this is? Some kind of redemption arc for you?”

Ember’s eyes darkened, her calm slipping just slightly. “It’s not about me. It’s about you. You’ve always been so strong, Mallory, but you hold onto things so tightly, like you’re afraid to let yourself heal. What happened between us was 15 years ago. Aside from anything else, we wouldn’t have been right together. I don’t want you to forgive me or forget what happened, but I want you to stop letting it hurt you.”

The words hit Mallory like a blow, sharp and unexpected. She wanted to fire back, to tear through Ember’s reasoning, but the sincerity in her voice was impossible to

ignore. “You don’t get to decide what I need,” she said, her voice softer now but no less firm. “You lost that right when your behavior to me was constantly shitty.”

Ember exhaled slowly, the tension in her shoulders easing slightly. “I know. And I’m not here to argue with you, Mallory. I just... I want you to be happy. That’s all.”

The words hit Mallory like a punch to the gut, raw and painful, but Mallory didn’t flinch. She couldn’t. Not anymore.

She felt a sharp sting in her chest, a memory of the last fight they’d had—the one that had shattered everything between them all those years ago. “I can’t do this anymore. Not with you. Not with anyone like you.” The memory came crashing back, unbidden and sharp, as if it were happening all over again. She pushed it away, but it lingered, raw and aching in the back of her mind.

But Ember was already walking away, her figure retreating down the hallway as she called over her shoulder, “It was good to see you, Mallory. Really.”

The words were almost kind, but they didn’t ease the weight in Mallory’s chest. She stood there for a long moment after Ember disappeared from sight, her mind racing. The past was never as easy to leave behind as she had hoped. And as much as she wanted to pretend that she had moved on, she knew now that part of her would always be tethered to Ember Thompson, her first love,—whether she liked it or not.

She didn’t want to be with Ember. And if she was thinking rationally, she could see plenty of reasons things hadn’t worked out between them aside from Ember’s risk taking and shitty behaviour. But, we don’t always think rationally, particularly when it comes to first loves.

Mallory watched Ember’s retreating figure as it grew smaller down the hallway, her footsteps echoing against the sterile walls of the hospital. There was something so

final about it, like a door closing for good. Yet, Mallory couldn't shake the feeling that the past had crept back in, unnoticed, settling itself like an unwanted guest. Every inch of her wanted to run after Ember, to somehow finish this conversation better, to untangle the mess of emotions that had stirred up within her. But she didn't move. She couldn't.

As Ember turned the corner, Mallory finally exhaled, a long, deep breath that carried the weight of everything she hadn't said. The intensity in her chest had not faded; if anything, it had only deepened, a gnawing ache in her stomach that refused to be ignored. The same ache she'd carried for years after it ended- the aftermath of their relationship. The feeling that no matter how far she ran, no matter how many new jobs she took or how many new faces she met, she would always be tangled up in memories of her first love.

No other relationships had worked out for her either. Maybe, it wasn't Ember after all. Ember was happily married now to a real grown up- head of the hospital, no less. Maybe it was Mallory that was the problem in every relationship. Maybe she was the reason her girlfriends never worked out.

Mallory shook her head, forcing herself to focus. She was here for a reason. Phoenix Ridge wasn't just a change of scenery; it was supposed to be a fresh start. A place to rebuild her life, free from the ghosts of the past. She couldn't afford to let Ember, or anything related to her, drag her back into old habits.

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No more first responders. No more people like Ember.

The mantra echoed in Mallory's mind as she made her way down the hallway toward her office. She had learned the hard way that people like Ember—reckless, driven by the rush of adrenaline, always on the edge of danger—were not people Mallory could build a life with. Ember had never been afraid to throw herself into harm's way, to put everything on the line for the sake of a thrill. But Mallory couldn't live like that. She couldn't keep pretending it was okay, watching from the sidelines as Ember risked it all, all while telling Mallory it was “just a part of the job.”

I'm here to do my job, Mallory reminded herself again. Nothing else. No distractions. No more looking back.

But as she stepped into her office and closed the door behind her, the silence was deafening. For a moment, Mallory allowed herself to breathe, to take stock of where she was.

Her phone buzzed on the desk, startling her out of her thoughts. She glanced down at it, half-expecting a message from Dr. Mars or perhaps a colleague following up on some administrative detail. But the name on the screen made her pause, a small, surprised smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

Kara.

For a moment, Mallory hesitated, her thumb hovering over the phone. She didn't know why she had been expecting it. They had only just met, shared a brief but electrifying connection, but that had felt like a lifetime ago, a world away from the

stress of her first day in this new hospital. Still, the sight of Kara's name on her phone felt like a small, unexpected thread of light in the haze of her thoughts.

Kara: How's the first day? Don't let the hospital drama suck you in too quickly.

Mallory couldn't help but smile at the lighthearted tone in Kara's message. It was like a breath of fresh air, the kind of playful distraction that Mallory had needed after her tense encounter with Ember. Kara's words were easy, inviting, unburdened by the heavy weight of her past, and Mallory found herself grateful for that. For a moment, she let herself imagine a world where things didn't have to be so complicated, where the past didn't hang over everything she did.

Mallory: First day's going well so far. But I've already encountered some interesting personalities. Could use a break from all the drama, honestly.

Mallory hit send before she could second-guess herself. She didn't know what she was hoping for, maybe just the distraction of a light conversation, something to pull her out of the shadows of her own mind.

The minutes passed in silence as Mallory stared at her phone, her mind a whirlwind of conflicting emotions.

She was tired of it.

The phone buzzed again, pulling Mallory from her thoughts.

Kara: Sounds like you've got your hands full. Let me know if you need an escape plan. I know a good place for a drink when you're off.

Mallory's chest tightened, the simplest invitation pulling her back to the present. She hadn't expected Kara's message to be anything more than a casual check-in, but

something about the offer felt different—genuine. Something about the way Kara phrased it, so easy, so unencumbered by the weight of what came before, made Mallory feel like maybe, just maybe, this was something worth exploring.

But Mallory wasn't sure she was ready to let herself go there—not yet. She had only just stepped into this new chapter of her life. And as much as the idea of spending time with Kara seemed appealing, she wasn't sure she could open that door without letting all the failed relationships of her past come flooding in behind her.

She was 36 years old now. Surely it was time she got it together.

Instead, Mallory set the phone down, leaning back in her chair with a sigh. Her eyes wandered to the window across the room, where the soft rays of the afternoon sun filtered through the blinds. Phoenix Ridge was a far cry from the bustling, chaotic city she had left behind. It was quiet here. Peaceful. But that also meant there was nowhere to hide from her thoughts. No distractions.

The pull of the past tugged at her again, an insistent whisper, a reminder that no matter how hard she tried to move forward, the ghosts of the past would always be there, waiting for the moment when she least expected it.

Still, a part of Mallory couldn't help but feel drawn toward something new, something uncharted. The connection with Kara, no matter how brief, had felt different from anything she had experienced in a long time. It wasn't messy. It wasn't complicated. It was just... easy.

She glanced down at her phone again, her fingers itching to send a reply, to accept the invitation, to take a step into something unknown.

## KARA

Kara stood at the bar of The Copper Fork, the familiar hum of conversation surrounding her. She absentmindedly swirled her glass, feeling the slow burn of whiskey warming her chest. The air inside was thick with the buzz of small-town chatter, the low glow of amber lights softening the edges of the bustling crowd. Phoenix Ridge had a way of making a simple evening feel like an occasion, especially when you were with someone as intriguing as Dr. Mallory Storm.

The last few days had been a whirlwind of text messages, each conversation with Mallory a perfect blend of playful banter and deeper moments that made Kara look forward to each new one. Mallory's wit and intelligence had captivated Kara from the start, but what really drew her in was the underlying mystery that Mallory seemed to carry—something quiet, careful, and just a little guarded. Kara found herself wanting to know more, wanting to peel back the layers and find out what lay beneath.

Kara had always been the type to wear her heart on her sleeve, to go after what she wanted without hesitation, but Mallory? Mallory was different. It was a slow burn, the kind that made Kara both impatient and intrigued. Tonight, though, she was ready for something more, even if she wasn't sure where it would lead. She'd been thinking about this dinner for days, eager to see Mallory outside of the digital world they'd built between them. She wanted to know if the spark was just in texts or if it would be just as electric in person.

A few minutes later, the door to the restaurant swung open, and Kara's heart skipped a beat. There she was—Mallory. The soft glow of the lights on her beautiful long red hair and translucent skin made her look almost ethereal, like she belonged in this place, in this moment. Mallory's dark eyes scanned the room before they locked onto Kara's, and the smile that spread across her face made Kara's pulse quicken. She stood, already knowing the greeting would be warm, but not quite prepared for the wave of chemistry that hit her when Mallory walked over.

“Hey,” Mallory said, her voice smooth but laced with something that made Kara’s stomach flutter. “This place is nice.”

“Yeah, I thought you’d like it. Nothing too fussy,” Kara replied, trying to sound casual, but the way her heart was beating quickly betrayed her.



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Mallory's gaze lingered on her for just a moment longer than usual, a glint of something unreadable in her dark hypnotic eyes. It made Kara's pulse race.

Kara gestured to the booth they'd been seated at. "After you."

Mallory slid into the booth, her movement graceful and effortless in a lovely dark green casual dress that shimmered in the light. Kara followed suit, their bodies just a little too close for comfort, but neither of them seemed to mind.

As the waiter disappeared with their drink orders, Kara leaned back slightly, studying Mallory's face, the way the light played off her features. There was a quiet elegance about Mallory, a subtle strength that Kara found utterly captivating. Her red hair was loose and falling in neatly brushed waves around her shoulders. Kara was drawn to the way Mallory carried herself—intelligent, poised, but with a spark that hinted at something more.

"So," Kara began, her voice light and playful, "How's the hospital been treating you? Any drama yet?"

Mallory chuckled, her eyes glinting with mischief. "Oh, plenty. It's a hospital. Drama is part of the deal, right?"

Kara laughed, nodding. "Fair point. But I'm sure you're handling it like a pro. You've got that calm, collected vibe."

Mallory smirked. "I've learned to keep my cool. Sometimes, that's the only way to survive."

The banter flowed easily between them—the natural rhythm of two people who were beginning to feel comfortable with each other. But even as they joked about everything from small-town gossip to Mallory’s seemingly never-ending cases at the hospital, there was an undercurrent to their conversation, something charged beneath the surface. Kara could feel it—the way their eyes met a little longer than necessary, the way their words seemed to hang in the air, heavy with unspoken meaning.

“You know,” Kara said, swirling her drink, “I think I’ve been in Phoenix Ridge long enough to have explored most of the obvious spots. But I’m still trying to find those hidden gems.”

Mallory raised an eyebrow. “Hidden gems, huh? Like secret spots, or are you talking about things I don’t know?”

Kara leaned in slightly, a playful glint in her eye. “Oh, I’m sure there’s a lot you don’t know. I could show you a few, if you’re up for it.”

Mallory tilted her head, her lips curving into a teasing smile. “I’m intrigued. But what kind of hidden gems are we talking about here?”

Kara chuckled softly. “Maybe just a few places that are more... intimate. Where you can be yourself without the whole town watching.”

Mallory’s gaze flickered to Kara’s lips, just for a brief moment, before meeting her eyes again. The shift in the air was palpable now, the playful tension transforming into something more.

As the dinner progressed, Kara could feel herself becoming more aware of every little detail. The way Mallory’s fingers brushed against her hand when reaching for a napkin. The warmth of Mallory’s breath when she leaned in a little too close to make a point. The softness of Mallory’s lips when she smiled just a little too suggestively.

Kara sat back in the booth, watching as Mallory sipped her wine, her lips parting slightly as she savored the taste. The dim lights of The Copper Fork cast a warm glow over the table, reflecting in Mallory's eyes, making them seem even more captivating. Kara couldn't help but notice how beautiful Mallory looked tonight, the way she carried herself with effortless elegance and a quiet confidence. The spark between them was undeniable, and it was becoming harder to ignore the tension building between them with every passing second.

As Mallory set her glass down, their eyes met, and for a split second, Kara felt something shift in the air between them. It was as if the room had quieted down, leaving only the space between them—charged, electric, undeniable.

“So,” Kara said, her voice low, teasing. “What’s something about you I wouldn’t guess?”

Mallory raised an eyebrow, a playful smile tugging at the corners of her lips. “Oh, you think you’ve got me all figured out, huh?”

“Not even close,” Kara replied with a grin, leaning in slightly. “But I’m willing to bet I could guess one thing.”

Mallory's expression turned curious, her head tilting slightly as she considered Kara's challenge. “Okay, what is it? Impress me.”

Kara paused for a moment, taking in the way Mallory's posture had shifted, how the distance between them had narrowed. It wasn't just playful banter anymore. There was something more behind Mallory's eyes, something Kara couldn't quite read, but it made her pulse quicken all the same.

“I’ll bet you’re the type who’s always in control,” Kara said, her voice almost a whisper now. “You like to keep your cards close to your chest. But you let your guard

down for the right person.”

Mallory’s lips curved into a smile, but there was a flicker of something deeper in her gaze. “Is that your guess? I guess we’ll never know until you try to get me to let my guard down.”

The challenge was unmistakable, and Kara’s heart raced. She couldn’t tell if Mallory was flirting with her or genuinely daring her to break through whatever walls she had up, but either way, it pushed Kara forward. She leaned in closer, letting the space between them disappear, and whispered, “Maybe I’m already getting there.”

Mallory’s breath caught, but she kept her cool, offering a small smirk. “You think so, huh?”

Kara could feel the heat rising between them, the playful teasing suddenly morphing into something more intense, more intimate. It wasn’t just their words anymore; it was the way their eyes held each other, the way Mallory’s hand rested on the edge of her glass, just inches from Kara’s. Every time their fingers brushed, it sent a shock of desire through Kara, making it harder to concentrate on anything but the growing pull between them.

“So, tell me,” Kara continued, her voice dropping even lower, “do you like spicy food?”

Mallory’s eyes flickered to Kara’s lips before meeting her gaze again. “Spicy food?” she repeated, amusement dancing in her voice. “I suppose that depends on your definition of spicy.”

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“Oh, I’m talking about the kind that makes your heart race,” Kara said with a sly grin. “The kind that gets your blood pumping and makes you want to take things a little... hotter.”

Mallory’s cheeks flushed, just a hint of pink, but it was enough to make Kara’s pulse spike. “Well,” Mallory said, her voice turning quieter, almost teasing, “I think you’d be surprised what I can handle.”

Kara leaned even closer, her lips brushing Mallory’s ear as she whispered, “I’d like to find out.”

Without thinking, Kara reached out, her fingers lightly grazing Mallory’s arm, the touch sending a jolt of electricity through her. Mallory’s gaze flickered to Kara’s hand, then back to her eyes, and for the briefest moment, they both just stared at each other, as if trying to gauge the other’s next move.

Then Mallory did something unexpected. She leaned in, her breath warm against Kara’s skin as she whispered, “Are you always this bold, or is it just me?”

The question hung in the air, teasing and raw. Kara’s heart pounded in her chest as she slowly, almost reverently, reached out to touch Mallory’s jaw, gently guiding her face toward hers. Mallory’s lips parted slightly, and without any more hesitation, Kara closed the distance between them.

Their lips met in a kiss that started slow, tentative, but quickly deepened. It was like a dam breaking—a rush of heat, a flood of emotions both of them had been trying to suppress. Kara’s hands slid to Mallory’s neck, pulling her closer, and Mallory

responded by threading her fingers into Kara's hair, tugging her in even more.

The kiss was everything they had been avoiding, every longing they had been keeping in check, finally unleashed. Kara could feel Mallory's pulse quicken against her, the heat of her skin matching her own. There was no more pretense, no more games. It was just the two of them and the hunger that neither of them had been able to ignore any longer.

For a moment, the world outside their little bubble ceased to exist. There was nothing but the sound of their breathing, the soft scrape of lips, the heat building between them. When they finally pulled away, it was slow, deliberate, their foreheads resting against each other as they caught their breath.

Mallory's eyes were wide, her lips parted slightly as she searched Kara's face. "I didn't think you'd be the type to wait for a second date," she said softly, a breathless laugh escaping her.

Kara grinned, her own heart racing. "Guess I'm full of surprises."

Mallory smiled, but it was different now—more open, more vulnerable. The walls she'd carefully built around herself were starting to crack, and Kara felt a rush of excitement at the thought of what might come next. "I like surprises."

\* \* \*

The drive to Mallory's apartment was a blur—Kara's mind raced with thoughts of what was to come, the excitement, the anticipation. They exchanged heated glances and brief touches, but there were no words. They didn't need them.

Once they arrived, it was as if the floodgates opened. They barely made it to the bedroom before the kiss reignited, hotter and more desperate than before.

Kara remembered the way to the bedroom, she needed no encouragement and lifted Mallory up and over her shoulder, laughing as Mallory squealed and let out a surprised giggle.

“How are you so strong?”

“Lots of time at the gym. It’s where I get my best thinking done,” she said as she dropped Mallory down.

“Well, don’t get used to manhandling me.”

“I won’t lay any hands on you if you’d rather,” Kara teased.

“Don’t be stupid. Come here.”

“That’s what I thought.” Kara grinned as she stepped into Mallory’s embrace, ducking down to steal a kiss, capturing her lower lip between her teeth. She swept Mallory’s long red hair over her shoulder and out of the way as she began unfastening the buttons of Mallory’s dark green shirt dress, there were far too many for Kara’s liking, but damn, Mallory had looked good in it.

“See I made it easy for you,” Kara joked as Mallory pulled her sweatshirt over her head, and rolled her eyes in Kara’s direction.

“I can wear a onesie next time to make it easy for you to take off, if you’d prefer?”

“I think you’d look fire in anything to be fair,” Kara said as she teased the final buttons open and peeled the shirt dress off Mallory’s shoulders revealing her black lace lingerie.

Oh, fuck.

She looked so good, Kara felt her heart lurch and an intense bolt of desire shoot between her legs.

“And I do seem to remember you promised me a taste the next time we were together.”

“I remember no such promise,” Mallory said, her eyes twinkling with desire. “I just didn’t say no.”

“And what about tonight? Are you on the menu?” Kara looked over her body hungrily.



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“Well, if you are as hungry as you look, then maybe I should offer you a snack.” Mallory leant back showing off her beautiful body, her eyes darkened with desire as though welcoming Kara in.

Kara said nothing, reaching to unfasten Mallory’s bra and then slide it from her shoulders. She followed up by sliding Mallory’s panties to the floor, lifting Mallory’s feet from them, and chucking them behind her. She pulled Mallory’s hips to the edge of the bed, pushing her to lie back and enjoy. Kneeling gently, Kara kissed and nipped her way up Mallory’s legs, laving the soft skin hungrily. Finally, she couldn’t hold herself back any longer and made her way up to the soft, wet folds of Mallory’s pussy. She was hot, slick with want, and Kara could hear her breathing heavily in anticipation. Well, she wasn’t going to deny Mallory anything. Diving in, she enveloped Mallory’s pussy in her mouth, delving her tongue in and out, flicking back and forth across her clit, circling lazily as she listened to which movement drew out the deepest moans. Reaching up, she plucked Mallory’s pert nipples, rolling them in her fingers, and reveling in the groans she was causing.

Kara devoured the taste of Mallory as though she had never tasted pussy before. Sure, she liked going down on women, but this felt different. This felt like she wanted to lose herself in eating Mallory out for hours. Forever perhaps.

Her little gasps and moans were the sweetest thing Kara had ever heard as she pushed her tongue inside as deep as it would go, feeling Mallory’s pussy open for her- it felt like the most incredible feeling in the world. Kara withdrew her tongue before pushing it inside again. Then withdrawing, then pushing back inside. Mallory’s legs opened wider and her moans became louder. Kara’s tongue felt absolutely at home inside of Mallory, like that was where it always wanted to be.

As Mallory's breathing got shallower and shorter, her breath coming out in pants, Kara could tell she was getting close. She drew one hand down, slipping two fingers inside Mallory, pumping back and forth as she licked and sucked at her clit.

As Mallory's body began to shake, Kara increased her pace, thrusting in and out of Mallory, faster and harder. She watched Mallory's beautiful body move as she fucked her. She watched her beautiful face tipped back and eyes closed. She watched her beautiful long red hair spread out on the pillow.

"Come for me, beautiful." Kara growled and as soon as she said the words she felt Mallory tighten on her fingers and come apart beneath her as she cried out in ecstasy.

Her beautiful brown eyes opened wide as her body began to relax. Kara was still inside her, her mouth still close to Mallory's clitoris. She could feel Mallory's pussy still pulsing around her fingers as her orgasm subsided.

"Fuck, you tasted great," Kara grinned at Mallory. "You are so fucking beautiful when you come, you know?"

Mallory smiled a coy smile. "That was incredible," she said.

Kara had never felt more turned on in her life.

"Just relax," she said to Mallory. "I'm so close- this won't take long."

Kara stripped off quickly, her eyes never leaving Mallory's beautiful body.

She climbed back onto the bed, positioning herself to straddle Mallory's lovely long thigh. She could feel the delicious pressure of it against her clitoris.

"I want you to taste your own orgasm from my lips," Kara whispered.

She leant forwards to kiss Mallory, absorbing herself in it entirely. Long deep kisses with her tongue in Mallory's mouth when only minutes before it had been deep in her wet pussy.

Oh fuck.

She ground her own soaking wet pussy down hard against Mallory's thigh as she did so, she could feel their breasts pressing against each other and it was less than a minute before her own orgasm tore through her body in waves that felt like they would never stop.

As she rode through her orgasm, she kept on kissing Mallory. Kissing Mallory felt like home.

When they both finally stopped kissing to breathe, their bodies still pressed tightly into each other, Kara looked into Mallory's beautiful deep brown eyes.

"You are amazing," Kara said and Mallory smiled.

"You are pretty amazing yourself," Mallory said, her voice dripping with sex.

\* \* \*

The room was quiet now, the air heavy with the remnants of what they had just shared. The faint hum of the city outside mingled with the soft, rhythmic sound of their breathing. Kara lay beside Mallory, her arm draped across her chest as she watched the rise and fall of Mallory's breasts. The warmth between them lingered, a quiet heat that refused to fade despite the passing moments.

Mallory shifted slightly, her fingers tracing a delicate pattern on the sheets between them. Her movements were slow, almost absent, as if she was lost in thought.

Kara let her gaze linger on Mallory for a moment longer, the moonlight casting faint shadows across her lovely features. Mallory looked peaceful, her face relaxed, but Kara sensed the quiet storm within her.

She could say something, break the silence, but what words could ever be enough to explain everything swirling in her head? The chemistry, the spark that had ignited between them from the start had always felt undeniable, but tonight had taken that spark and turned it into something else—something deeper, more complex. They weren't just two people caught in the heat of the moment anymore. This was real. Kara could feel it, as surely as she could feel the weight of Mallory's body beside her.

Still, she hesitated. The tension was palpable, and yet there was a comfort in it. Maybe it was because she knew that Mallory wouldn't run, that she wasn't the type of person who would, even if she were unsure. There was a steadiness to her, an unspoken strength. And even though Kara could feel her own uncertainty, she felt a calmness that was rooted in the connection they had shared.

For a moment, they didn't speak. Neither of them seemed ready to shatter the peace that hung in the air. But the silence stretched on, and eventually, Kara felt the need to break it. The question that had been looming between them finally pressed against her chest, and she wondered if Mallory could feel it too—the question that neither of them was saying out loud.

What happens next?

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Kara shifted slightly, careful not to disturb the stillness between them. She reached out, brushing a strand of hair from Mallory's face, her fingers trailing gently across the soft skin of her cheek. The touch was light, almost reverent, but it carried with it the weight of everything unspoken.

Mallory's dark eyes flickered open at the gentle touch, her gaze meeting Kara's. There was a vulnerability in those eyes, the kind of raw honesty that made Kara's chest tighten. For a second, it felt like the world around them disappeared, leaving just the two of them, suspended in time.

"You okay?" Kara asked softly, her voice low and warm, just for Mallory. It was a simple question, but it felt heavy, full of meaning that only the two of them understood.

Mallory gave a small, almost imperceptible nod, her lips curving into a slight smile. "Yeah," she murmured. "I think I'm just... processing everything." Her words were soft, uncertain, but there was something in them that made Kara's heart ache—a quiet acknowledgment of the shift between them, the unspoken change in their dynamic.

Kara nodded, understanding more than Mallory realized. She had been processing everything too—the chemistry, the connection, the way Mallory's presence had made her feel something she wasn't sure she could feel again. "I get it," she said quietly. "It's a lot."

Mallory's eyes flickered with something Kara couldn't quite name—a mixture of hope and fear, of curiosity and hesitation. "You're not in a hurry to figure it out, are you?"

Kara smiled softly, shaking her head. “No. I’m not.” She paused, lifting their intertwined hands to her lips, pressing a soft kiss to the back of Mallory’s hand. “I don’t want to rush anything. I want to take it slow, see where this goes.”

Mallory closed her eyes, a soft breath escaping her lips. She didn’t say anything for a long time, but Kara could feel the tension in her body, the way she was trying to process everything in her own way. Eventually, Mallory spoke again, her voice quieter now, but laced with something more certain.

“Neither do I,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “I think I’ve been running from this... whatever this is, for a while. But now, I’m not so sure I want to anymore.”

Kara’s chest tightened, but it was a good kind of tightness—the kind that came with the realization that they were both on the same page, even if they weren’t ready to fully admit it yet. She leaned in slightly, pressing a soft kiss to Mallory’s forehead, a tender gesture that felt more intimate than anything they had shared so far. It was a promise without words—a promise that they were both willing to take this one step at a time, and that the past wouldn’t define them.

“I’m glad,” Kara murmured, her lips brushing against Mallory’s skin. “I don’t want to rush you. Just... take your time. We’ll figure this out together.”

The words hung in the air, settling between them like a silent agreement. Kara could feel the weight of the night behind them—the passion, the connection, the moment they had shared—but she also felt the promise of something new, something more. It was the beginning of something neither of them fully understood, but for the first time in a long while, neither of them was afraid of where it might lead.

They lay in silence for a while longer, the comfortable warmth of the room wrapping around them like a blanket. Kara felt Mallory’s breathing slow, her body relaxing

against her. She knew that whatever happened next, they had already crossed a threshold—a moment of connection that neither of them could pretend wasn't real. The night may have been filled with heat and passion, but this moment, the quiet after the storm, was where something truly significant was beginning.

And for the first time in what felt like forever, Kara felt like she was exactly where she was supposed to be.

5

## MALLORY

The soft glow of the morning sun filtered through the curtains of Mallory's apartment, casting a warm, golden hue across the room. The light brushed gently over her face, stirring her from sleep. She blinked a few times, her mind still clouded with the remnants of dreams, the hazy feeling of contentment lingering from the night before. She turned her head slightly, and there she was: Kara. Her body was pressed against Mallory's, her chest rising and falling with slow, steady breaths. The sheets were tangled around them both, a silent testament to the night they'd shared.

For a moment, Mallory allowed herself to stay still, to soak in the quiet intimacy of the morning. There was something comforting about this—this simple closeness, the way Kara's warmth seeped into Mallory's skin. It felt right in ways Mallory hadn't allowed herself to feel in years.

Her thoughts kept returning to the decision she had made the night before—to stay in the moment with Kara, to let go of the walls she'd so carefully constructed. She had let herself feel it. Feel them. But now that the morning had come, a familiar unease began to creep in. The fear she had tried to suppress came rushing back with an intensity that made her heart race. This was too much, too fast. She didn't know if she could keep running from her past forever, especially with someone like Kara, whose

presence was already making its way under her skin.

Mallory shifted slightly, trying not to disturb Kara as she untangled herself from the sheets. The soft rustle of fabric was the only sound in the quiet room. Kara didn't stir; her breathing was steady and deep, oblivious to Mallory's sudden sense of turmoil. Mallory slowly slipped out of bed, her bare feet making contact with the cool hardwood floor.

She padded quietly into the kitchen; her movements mechanical as she prepared coffee. The familiar routine was a comfort, something that helped ground her in the face of the uncertainty swirling in her mind. Mallory poured the coffee, the warm steam rising as she took a sip, trying to steady herself. She wanted to push the feelings away, to lock them in some far-off corner of her mind where she wouldn't have to deal with them. But she knew that wasn't possible. Not anymore. Not with Kara.

She walked back into the bedroom, finding Kara still lying in the same position, her long muscular body curled into the sheets. The sight of her made Mallory's chest tighten. There was no denying the attraction, the desire. But there was also that voice in the back of her head, the one telling her to tread carefully, to not get too close.

Kara stirred when Mallory entered the room, her eyes blinking open slowly. She smiled sleepily at Mallory, a drowsy, contented smile that made Mallory's heart beat faster. For a moment, Mallory let herself soften under that smile, the vulnerability in Kara's gaze tempting her to stay in this moment. But she forced herself to retreat and return to the kitchen.

As Kara stumbled bleary eyed into the kitchen moments later, Mallory pressed a steaming cup of coffee into her hands, chuckling as Kara flopped back down onto the couch. Mallory took a seat at the kitchen bar and waited for Kara to take her first sips of coffee and wake up a bit more.



“You know, for all the time we’ve been talking, I’ve realized I don’t really know a whole lot about you,” Mallory began “Like your family, any siblings?”

“Nah, my parents were one and done. Dad worked a lot too, so it was probably for the best. What about you?”

“I have a brother, we’re not super close though. See him a couple times a year, if that. What about work? You know what I do, but I have no idea what you spend your days doing.”

Kara blinked up at her, seemingly surprised by the question. She sat up slightly, running a hand through her hair, her gaze thoughtful. “Oh,” she said, a little chuckle escaping her lips. “I’m a firefighter. Like my dad before me. I joined up to honor his legacy. Silly reason really, but I fell in love with it, you know?”

Mallory froze, the words hitting her like a punch to the gut. Firefighter. The word echoed in her mind, each syllable sharp and biting. It was like a sudden floodgate opening, and Mallory couldn’t stop the rush of memories that came with it. She thought of Ember—the firehouse, the calls, the fear that gnawed at her every time Ember would walk out the door. She thought of the sleepless nights, the constant ache in her chest, the panic she’d felt in her stomach every time the phone rang late at night.

She felt her breath catch in her throat. Kara’s words had unlocked something inside her that she wasn’t ready to face. She knew exactly what it meant to be with someone who put their life on the line every day. She had lived through it once. She couldn’t do it again.

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For a moment, everything went quiet. The only sound was the rush of blood in Mallory's ears as her mind raced. She wanted to run, to push Kara away before things got too complicated, before she let herself fall deeper into this thing between them. But she couldn't seem to find her voice. Instead, she stood there, frozen, the weight of Kara's words pressing down on her chest.

The words landed heavily between them, a seismic shift that Mallory wasn't prepared for. Her mind went blank for a split second, her chest tightening as if she were being suffocated. Firefighter. The word echoed in her brain, reverberating with the force of a thousand bad memories, all those sleepless nights spent waiting for a phone call she never wanted to receive.

She had been so sure that Kara was different—that she wouldn't remind her of Ember in the ways that really mattered. But now, hearing that Kara worked in the same dangerous profession, the world around her seemed to tilt on its axis. She could feel the panic rise in her throat, sharp and insistent, threatening to choke her. All she could think of was Ember—the way the world had once been so fragile when Ember was out on a call, the constant fear of losing her to some fire or accident that could change everything in an instant. She thought she had left that fear behind when she broke up with Ember. But here it was again, rising up, refusing to let her breathe.

Mallory's hand trembled as she gripped the edge of the counter. Her mind raced with images, memories of Ember's determined eyes before each shift, her unflinching resolve, and Mallory's own internal battle as she tried not to let the fear paralyze her. It felt like she had been running from the consequences of loving someone who put their life on the line for a living. And now it was all crashing back in a way that was far too painful.

Why on earth hadn't she asked what Kara's job was earlier?

She inhaled sharply, trying to steady her breath, but it didn't work. Kara was still sitting there, watching her with confusion in her kind brown eyes, not understanding what had just happened. Mallory could feel the tension in her muscles, the way her heart was beating faster, a drum pounding in her chest as if trying to drown out the memories. But it was impossible. The memories flooded her mind in waves.

Her feet moved before her mind could catch up, and she stood abruptly, not knowing if she was trying to run away from the suffocating thoughts or just distance herself from Kara. Her hands were shaking, and the apartment felt too small, too stifling. She paced across the room, her footsteps heavy as she tried to think clearly, but it was impossible. Her thoughts were all tangled up in fear and confusion, and she couldn't seem to get a grip on herself. She could feel Kara's gaze on her, though she couldn't bring herself to meet it.

"Are you okay?" Kara's voice broke through the noise in Mallory's head. It was soft, hesitant, and Mallory could hear the concern in it. But she couldn't focus on Kara right now, couldn't process the fact that this was a conversation she had never imagined having.

Mallory's voice cracked when she finally spoke, her words trembling as if they were forced out of her. "I... I can't do this, Kara. I thought I could. I really did. But I can't be with someone who does something dangerous for a living. I can't go through that again. Not with you."

The moment the words left her mouth, she felt a weight settle into her chest, like a stone that was too heavy to carry. It felt like her own voice was betraying her. Her heart sank with the realization that she was saying goodbye. And yet, it felt like the only thing she could do to protect herself from the fear that was threatening to consume her.

Kara's confusion was clear as she stood up from her seat, stepping cautiously toward Mallory. There was hurt in her eyes, but there was also a deep uncertainty. She didn't understand. Mallory could see that, could see her processing the words, trying to find the logic, the reasoning behind them. Kara stopped just short of her, looking like she wanted to say something, but the words wouldn't come.

"What do you mean?" Kara asked, her voice still soft, but now tinged with something else—hurt, confusion, maybe even frustration. "It's just a job."

But to Mallory, it was never just a job. It was a constant threat. It was Ember walking out the door every morning all those years ago with no promise of returning. It was the dread, the hollow pit in her stomach that grew deeper with every call, every night spent lying awake, listening for the faint sound of a siren, praying it wasn't her phone ringing with bad news. It was the realization that being with someone who constantly put themselves in harm's way wasn't something she could bear again. She had loved Ember. She had given everything to that relationship, only to watch it unravel under the weight of constant fear.

"I can't, Kara," Mallory said again, the words coming out sharp now, more forceful. "It's not just a job. It's... it's dangerous. You're putting your life at risk every single day, and I can't stand the thought of losing someone I care about like I almost lost Ember. I can't keep living in that fear. I can't... I can't be with someone who's always in harm's way."

"Ember? You mean Ember Thompson? What are you talking about? What's this got to do with her? You dated her?"

Mallory nodded. "Many years ago," she said.

She could see the cogs beginning to turn in Kara's mind.

“But I’m nothing like Ember. I respect Chief Becky and all that, and Ember’s my friend, but we’re nothing alike. Ember got hurt being stupid, she was always a reckless firefighter, and you should’ve heard the way Chief Becky ripped into her over it. That is why Ember isn’t a firefighter anymore. She’s too impulsive. I don’t take dumb risks like that. You know me, Mallory.”

Kara’s warm brown eyes looked at her hopefully. Mallory couldn’t let those puppy dog eyes melt her new resolve.

“I don’t think I do though, Kara. Anyone with your job takes risks. That’s the nature of the job.”

Her voice shook with the raw emotion she couldn’t contain anymore. The words felt like a jagged blade, slicing through the moment of quiet connection they had shared. It wasn’t what she wanted, but it was the truth, and she couldn’t stop herself from saying it. The walls that had been slowly coming down between them slammed shut again, rising higher, faster.

Kara’s face fell, and Mallory saw the shift in her expression. Her eyes softened, a flash of hurt crossing her features.

“I don’t know what you want me to say, Mallory,” Kara said. “I’m not going to promise I’ll stop being a firefighter. I can’t change that, and I can’t pretend it’s not who I am. But that doesn’t mean I don’t care about you. You know I do.”

Mallory swallowed hard; her chest tight with frustration. Her voice barely reached above a whisper, but there was a finality in it that she couldn’t undo. “I don’t want you to change. I just... I just need to walk away from this before it gets any worse. I can’t keep doing this to myself. I can’t get attached and risk watching you walk out that door every day, not knowing if you’ll come back. I just can’t.”

The finality of her words cut through the space between them, leaving a painful silence in their wake. Mallory turned her back to Kara, her shoulders slumping with the weight of what she had just said. It felt like a betrayal, like she was pushing away something she had wanted, but the fear was too strong, too real. The tension in her chest grew heavier, and she could feel her heart breaking with each second that passed. But she couldn't take it back.

"I think it's better if we don't see each other again," Mallory said, her voice barely audible, though the pain behind it was clear. "I'm sorry, Kara."

The room was still, the weight of the moment pressing down on both of them. Kara didn't move, didn't speak, and Mallory felt her heart fracture a little more with every passing second.

\* \* \*

The silence that filled the apartment after Kara left was suffocating. Mallory stood motionless; her eyes fixed on the empty space where Kara had been only moments ago. She heard the soft click of the door closing, and for some reason, it felt like an echo in the vast emptiness that now surrounded her. The weight of the decision she had just made pressed down on her chest, the ache settling deep in her bones.

Did I do the right thing? The question gnawed at her, but she quickly pushed it away. She had to believe she did. She had to believe that she had done the only thing she could do to protect herself. The fear that had been building inside her—unseen, unspoken, but ever-present—finally had a voice. It wasn't just about Kara being a firefighter; it was about the fear that had haunted Mallory for years, ever since Ember Thompson. The fear of losing someone she cared about, of waiting for the inevitable phone call that would shatter her world. She couldn't do it again, not with Kara.

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But as she stood there, the emptiness of the apartment swallowing her whole, Mallory couldn't escape the feeling that she had made a mistake. There was a hollowness inside her now, one she couldn't ignore, no matter how much she told herself it was the right choice. I had to protect myself, she thought again, but it sounded less convincing now. The ache in her chest sharpened, and her hands instinctively curled into fists as if trying to hold herself together.

She slowly walked back to the kitchen counter, the place where the conversation had turned, and where everything had shifted. The remnants of their breakfast—the half-drunk coffee cups, the untouched plate—felt like a cruel reminder of what she had lost. What she could've had, if only she hadn't been so afraid. She ran her fingers over the edge of the counter, her thoughts swirling. I just couldn't risk it.

But how could she turn her back on someone who made her feel something she hadn't felt in years? Kara had been different—so easy to be with, so effortlessly kind. Actually so very different to Ember. For a brief moment, Mallory had dared to imagine a future without the constant fear. But now that dream felt so far away. Maybe I should've tried harder. Maybe I should've been braver.

But bravery had never been Mallory's strong suit when it came to matters of the heart. She had loved Ember with everything she had, and in the end, it wasn't enough. The fear of losing her had been a constant companion, one that Mallory couldn't shake. And now it was back, alive and present, wrapped around every thought, every moment. I just can't live like that again.

The silence felt louder now, oppressive. The apartment felt too small, too empty. She wondered if she'd ever be able to fill the space with anything other than the ghost of

what could have been.

6

KARA

Kara walked away from Mallory's apartment, each step feeling heavier than the last. She didn't try to stop Mallory, didn't argue. There was no point. Mallory's decision was final, and Kara knew it. It was in the way Mallory turned her back, the way the words had come out so decisively, with no room for negotiation.

The world outside felt cold, the wind biting as it rushed past her. She pulled her jacket tighter around her, but it didn't do much to ward off the chill that had settled deep in her bones. As she walked, her mind replayed the conversation, each word echoing like a drumbeat in her chest. I can't go through that again. It's dangerous.

Kara swallowed, the lump in her throat almost too big to bear. She's afraid. I get that. But damn... Her hands were clenched into fists at her sides, and she forced herself to breathe, to calm the storm inside. It wasn't supposed to be this way. She hadn't expected Mallory to pull away so quickly, so decisively.

Why does she have to do this? Kara's thoughts were a whirlwind. Why can't she just see that I'm not like Ember Thompson at all?

The anger bubbled up now, mixed with a heavy sense of defeat. I won't promise I'll stop being a firefighter. That was the truth. It was her life, her calling. She had no control over it, and the idea of giving it up just to fit into Mallory's version of safety felt impossible. But it wasn't just about her job, was it? Mallory had made up her mind, and nothing Kara could say would change it. Maybe I never had a chance.

Her heart ached, but it was a dull, resigned pain. She had wanted to be with Mallory.



She had wanted to let this connection grow, to see where it might lead. But the truth was, she couldn't be anything other than who she was—and that meant living with the danger that came with her job. She knew that wasn't something everyone could handle. It wasn't something Mallory could handle.

As she reached her car, she stopped for a moment, letting out a shaky breath. I can't make her understand, Kara thought. I can't change her fears. I can't change what she's been through.

She slid into the driver's seat, gripping the wheel tightly, her heart heavy with the knowledge that this—us—was over before it really began.

Kara started the engine, but she didn't drive off immediately. She sat there for a few moments, staring ahead, the weight of Mallory's words settling deeper in her chest. The tears were there, just beneath the surface, but she refused to let them fall. Instead, she focused on the road ahead, the emptiness of it all pressing down on her, reminding her that she was alone now.

\* \* \*

The sound of sirens wailing echoed through the streets, slicing through the calm of the early morning. Kara's focus was razor-sharp, her grip steady on the stretcher as she and Scotti, her trusted partner, hurried the injured patient into the emergency room. The man was barely conscious, his face pale with shock, blood staining his shirt where the wound lay deep. Every breath he took was shallow, labored.

"Get him to Trauma One!" shouted a nurse as they barreled through the doors, and Kara nodded sharply, never breaking stride. She could hear Scotti behind her, talking to the doctors and nurses, relaying the details of the injury.

The patient was whisked away to an area of the ER where more staff were ready. As

the team continued to work, the low hum of hospital activity surrounded her. The incessant beeping of machines, the rush of nurses coming and going, the hushed conversations between doctors—everything blended together in a symphony of controlled chaos. Kara stayed close to the patient, her attention divided between him and the growing sense of awareness that something else was drawing her attention.

It was a feeling that hit her without warning, the flutter in her chest that she recognized immediately.

Mallory.

She didn't need to search for her—she knew exactly where Mallory would be. She saw her even before Mallory looked up from the clipboard she was scribbling on. It was a momentary flicker of recognition. Kara's heart skipped, a visceral reaction to the sight of Mallory in her scrubs, her beautiful red hair tied back neatly, but there was something else. Mallory was so immersed in her work, yet Kara saw the brief, unexpected pause in her movements. It was subtle, but it was there—an instinctual hesitation.

Kara's breath caught in her throat, and for a moment, the noise of the ER seemed to dull, the world around her shrinking to just Mallory, her presence so magnetic that it drew Kara in despite the chaos. Mallory's eyes met hers, and time seemed to stretch. There was no mistaking the look Mallory gave her: surprise, yes, but also something else. Something that Kara couldn't place—a mixture of uncertainty and perhaps vulnerability, as if Mallory wasn't quite sure how to handle this sudden reunion after everything that had happened between them.

Kara's chest tightened at the thought of their last interaction—the unspoken words, the hurt that still lingered. She should have expected this moment. After all, the world was small, especially in Phoenix Ridge. But even knowing this, it didn't make the tension in the air any less palpable. It was there between them, hanging thick, an

invisible line that separated them, a boundary they both knew they couldn't cross—not yet.

For a second, neither of them moved. Mallory's professional mask was back in place, but Kara could see it—just beneath the surface—flickers of something more. And it made Kara ache. She hated how it felt, like she was holding her breath, waiting for Mallory to speak, to break the silence that stretched between them. But Mallory didn't speak, didn't make a move to bridge the gap.

Instead, Kara felt herself step back, trying to respect the space between them. She had to keep things professional. But even as she gave her full focus to the task at hand, she could feel Mallory's eyes on her, watching, waiting. Kara didn't dare look at her again, but she felt the weight of her gaze like a physical presence, tugging at her with each passing moment.

Scotti, ever the perceptive one, seemed to sense the shift in the room. She noticed the quiet exchange between Kara and Mallory, the way they locked eyes before Kara hurriedly turned her back. She didn't miss the tension that was thickening the space around them, and she couldn't resist. Her easy smile broke through the seriousness of the moment as she nudged Kara lightly with her elbow.

“Not going to chase after her, Kara? I thought you were all about the chase,” she teased, her voice low enough that only Kara could hear. Her eyes twinkled with mischief, and Kara groaned inwardly, wishing she would just drop it. But Scotti wasn't one to back down.

She didn't have time to argue with her. Not now, not with a life hanging in the balance. So she simply shot her a quick look—sharp and almost apologetic—before focusing back on the patient. She kept her movements quick, keeping her thoughts from wandering.

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“Not the time, Scotti,” Kara muttered, keeping her voice steady, though she could feel the heat of her teasing lingering. Her mind flickered to Mallory again, the way her heart had stumbled when their gazes met. She hated the way it affected her, how much she wanted to speak to her, to fix whatever it was that had gone wrong between them. But no. She couldn’t do this now. She wouldn’t let herself.

She glanced over her shoulder for just a moment, catching sight of Mallory again. The brief exchange of glances felt like more than it was, more than it should have been. Their connection was undeniable, but the weight of their past, the complications of everything that had transpired, made it impossible to move forward. Not yet.

Mallory was already moving again, back to the chaos of the ER, and Kara turned away, shaking her head to clear it. This was not the time to get caught up in these feelings. She had to focus on the patient.

As the doctors took over, Kara stepped back, her chest still tight from that brief moment with Mallory. The tension between them was something she couldn’t shake, and she hated it. But for now, she had no choice but to keep going, to keep doing her job. The rest could wait.

The hum of activity in the ER was all around Kara as she stood at the side, watching the doctors and nurses continue to work on their patient. The urgency of the moment hadn’t dulled, but there was something else on her mind. Her thoughts kept drifting back to Mallory, and despite the chaotic atmosphere, it was her presence that had captured Kara’s attention.

She hadn't expected to see Mallory here today. She knew, rationally, that Mallory-Dr. Storm- worked in the ER, but somehow, the sight of her felt jarring, a sharp reminder of the last conversation they'd had, the one where everything had fallen apart between them.

As Mallory approached the group, Kara tried to keep her attention focused on the patient.

"Kara," Mallory said, her tone polite but cool. "I didn't expect to see you here today."

Kara felt the sharpness in Mallory's words, even though it was masked by her professional tone. It was as if Mallory had deliberately put distance between them, trying to keep everything at arm's length. But Kara could see through it, could feel the catch in Mallory's voice, the subtle tremor in her composure. It was as though Mallory was trying to keep a lid on something deeper, something raw that she wasn't ready to confront.

"Yeah," Kara replied, keeping her voice neutral, though it was harder than she expected. "We had a tough call. Hope I'm not interrupting anything."

Her eyes softened slightly as she met Mallory's gaze, but she could tell Mallory wasn't about to let down her guard. The silence between them was thick, the kind that felt like a tangible thing, filling the air and pushing them farther apart. Kara fought the impulse to say something, to break the tension. The words were right there on the tip of her tongue—questions, apologies, anything to bridge the gap between them—but she didn't know how to start. She wasn't even sure Mallory would want to hear it.

Mallory didn't break eye contact either. She was still, her posture stiff, her hands steady as she moved past Kara to assist with the patient. But Kara could feel it, the ache between them, the unspoken understanding of what had been left unresolved,

hanging in the space between them.

It was almost too much to bear, and Kara swallowed the sudden lump in her throat. She had no idea how they had arrived here, where nothing seemed clear anymore.

Before she could take another step, Scotti's voice cut through the tension like a knife. Her teasing tone was unmistakable as she sidled up to Kara, an almost mischievous grin spreading across her face. She didn't miss a beat, her words a mixture of amusement and curiosity.

"You sure you're not gonna go after her?" Scotti asked, nudging Kara lightly with her elbow. "I mean, she's not gonna bite... unless you want her to."

Kara froze, her heart skipping a beat at the way Scotti had phrased it. She glared at her friend, but it was half-hearted. Scotti knew exactly what she was doing—pushing her buttons, teasing her. But it wasn't just that. Scotti knew how much the situation between Kara and Mallory was bothering her, how the lingering tension from that night still haunted her, and that only made the teasing harder to brush off.

"Shut up, Scotti," Kara muttered, her voice low but edged with something sharp. She didn't want to admit it—didn't want to acknowledge the way Scotti's words made her feel—but there it was. She was aware of the chemistry between her and Mallory. She'd felt it the nights they'd shared more than just a fleeting moment together, and she couldn't ignore it now.

But Scotti wasn't about to let it slide that easily. She gave Kara a knowing look, her smirk widening as she continued to prod her.

"What? You're telling me you don't feel it? The chemistry? Because I sure as hell do. Dr. Storm is a catch, you know that, right?"

Kara felt her stomach tighten. She didn't know if it was from the intensity of the conversation or just the sheer weight of the truth in Scotti's words. Mallory was, without a doubt, beautiful, strong, smart, driven, and everything Kara had ever wanted. But it was more than that. It was the way Mallory made her feel when they were close, the way she seemed to pull something out of Kara that no one else could. It was the weight of emotions, the complications that had sprung up after that night they shared, and the fear that it might never be simple between them.

Kara clenched her jaw, refusing to let herself get pulled into this. She was a professional. She couldn't let herself get distracted, not when someone's life was still hanging in the balance.

She glanced back at Mallory, who had moved further down the hall, now working with the doctors to stabilize the patient. The sight of her in control, calm despite the chaos around her, stirred something deep inside Kara. Her chest tightened as she watched Mallory work, the pull of desire and unfinished business gnawing at her.

Kara closed her eyes for a moment, trying to ground herself, trying to shake off the emotions that were threatening to overwhelm her. She couldn't afford to let herself get lost in those thoughts, not now. But every time she looked at Mallory, every time she felt that tug in her chest, it became harder to pretend that everything was fine.

Kara took a deep breath, trying to shake off the heavy feeling in her chest. There was something between them, something undeniable, but Mallory was so guarded, so determined to keep her distance. The ache in Kara's chest had been there since that one perfect night they'd shared. She'd hoped it could be more, that maybe, just maybe, they could move past their fears and see where it went. But now, standing in the ER, surrounded by the noise and bustle, it felt like that hope was gone.

## MALLORY

Mallory had tried to bury the feelings, of course. She was always so good at burying things. But no matter how many times she told herself to keep her distance, the pull was still there, still strong and undeniable. And it was only when she allowed herself to glance at Kara—really look at her—that she felt it. A pang in her chest, a feeling she hadn't allowed herself to acknowledge. The same chemistry that had been there from the beginning, the same connection that she had tried so hard to push away. It was there again. But Mallory wasn't ready to face it.

She had tried, over the past few weeks, to focus on her patients and her career. It was easier, she told herself, to get lost in the constant demands of her job than to deal with the complicated emotions Kara stirred in her. It was safer that way. But no matter how many tasks she completed, no matter how many patients she treated, Mallory couldn't erase Kara from her mind.

Kara wasn't Ember Thompson. Mallory tried to remind herself of that. She was a different personality. And if Mallory was honest, things would have never worked out with Ember, regardless of her job. But there was something about the profession that Kara had chosen that unsettled her. It was too close to the life she had once known—the life she had lost. The constant fear, the anxiety that churned in her gut every time Ember went out on a call, never knowing if she would return. It had been a painful existence—one she wasn't willing to return to. But here she was, again, feeling that same weight in her chest. Kara wasn't Ember, but she was still a firefighter. And that fact alone was enough to make Mallory hesitate. Enough to make her pull away.

When Mallory finished up her task with the patient, she could feel Kara's intense brown eyes on her, even across the room. It was impossible to ignore. Despite the noise of the ER and the rush of activity around her, Mallory could feel the weight of Kara's gaze, as if it was pulling her in. She told herself to keep walking, to stay



focused on the task at hand, but she couldn't help it. She stole a quick glance in Kara's direction. Their eyes met for a fraction of a second, long enough for Mallory's heart to skip a beat.

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But she quickly turned away, her pulse pounding in her ears. She couldn't afford to let herself get lost in that moment, in that connection. Not now. Not when everything was already so complicated.

As she moved toward the exit, it felt like everything around them slowed down. Her footsteps echoed in the hallway, and for a moment, it was just her and Kara, separated by only a few feet but worlds apart in every other way. Mallory's heart beat faster as she heard Kara's voice from behind her, soft and tentative.

"I'll see you around, Mallory."

Mallory's breath caught in her throat. She stopped, feeling like the ground had shifted beneath her feet. The words were so simple, yet they felt like a weight. Mallory turned slowly, her eyes locking with Kara's once more. There was a long moment of silence between them, a pause where nothing else existed except the two of them. Mallory could see the longing in Kara's eyes, the same ache that mirrored her own. But Mallory couldn't say what she wanted to. She couldn't allow herself to say what she really felt.

"Yeah," Mallory said, her voice steady, though her heart was anything but. "Take care, Kara."

The words were clipped, professional. She hated herself for saying them that way, but she couldn't bring herself to say anything else. The ache inside her only deepened, and she knew that this—this goodbye—was the only thing she could offer Kara. It was the only thing that felt safe. The only thing that made sense.

As Mallory walked away, she felt the weight of the unresolved feelings between them. It was a familiar ache, one that had been with her for so long that it had become a part of her. But this—this was different. This wasn't just about fear or caution. It was about something real. Something that Mallory didn't know how to face.

She stepped into the elevator, the doors closing behind her, but the tension still lingered in the air. It hung on her like a second skin. She felt as though she would never be able to escape it, no matter how far she ran.

\* \* \*

Mallory's shift had been grueling. The hospital was a flurry of motion, with patients, staff, and the occasional interruption of beeping machines or the pounding of feet against linoleum floors. Mallory had done her best to push everything aside—every stray thought, every lingering emotion. But no matter how many cases she treated or how many charts she signed, her mind kept returning to Kara. The brief, electric moments they had shared haunted her. She had convinced herself that walking away was the right choice, that it was necessary. But the ache in her chest, the gnawing doubt, told a different story.

She was walking through the quiet hallway between ER rooms, taking a moment to catch her breath, when a voice snapped her from her thoughts.

“Mallory.”

Her heart skipped a beat, and she froze, recognizing the voice immediately. She hadn't heard it in a while, but it was unmistakable. Ember.

Mallory turned, the mix of emotions flooding her all at once—anger, regret, and, strangely, a rush of familiarity. Ember stood in front of her, looking almost the same as she remembered—her wild red hair tied back in a loose ponytail, her muscular

build covered in a plain t-shirt and jeans. There was something commanding about her stance, even here in the sterile halls of a hospital. She exuded the same strength Mallory had once admired.

“Ember,” Mallory said, her voice stiff, betraying none of the turbulence inside her. She wasn’t sure what she was feeling—surprised, unsettled, maybe even a bit angry that Ember would show up like this, unannounced.

Ember didn’t waste time with pleasantries. Her eyes were sharp, focused on Mallory with the same intensity she’d always had. “Heard a few things about you and Kara Brandon,” Ember said, voice casual but with a hint of something beneath it—something Mallory couldn’t quite place. “Scotti’s been talking. You’re avoiding her, huh?”

Mallory felt her chest tighten, and she immediately became defensive. “I don’t know what Scotti told you, but it’s none of your business.”

Ember’s smirk faded, and she pushed herself off the wall, stepping closer. “It’s exactly my business, Mallory. I’m not here to play nice. I know you, and I know how you operate. You’re running from something real.” Ember’s eyes narrowed, her voice softening with purpose. “I see it in you. I see you running from Kara.”

Mallory felt her stomach flip. She didn’t want to deal with this, didn’t want to face the fact that Ember might be right. But something inside her recoiled at the thought of Ember—of anyone—telling her what to do with her life.

She folded her arms defensively, taking a step back. “You have no right to judge me, Ember. You walked away from me when I needed you the most all those years ago. You left. Don’t act like you have the moral high ground now.”

The words came out cold, and Mallory felt the weight of them the moment they left

her lips. But she didn't take them back. Not yet. Not when the past still felt like a jagged scar, still fresh beneath the surface.

Ember didn't flinch. She just stared at Mallory, her expression unreadable. For a moment, Mallory thought Ember might leave, but instead, Ember stepped closer, the warmth of her presence unmistakable. She wasn't backing down.

"I'm not here to make you feel small," Ember said quietly. "But I'm not going to let you destroy another chance at something real either. Kara is a great girl. I think you two would be really good together." Her tone was firm, but there was a sadness there too, an understanding that Mallory wasn't ready to admit.

Mallory opened her mouth to argue again, but Ember raised her hand to stop her. "I'm not done." Ember's voice was sharp, but her gaze softened slightly. "I've heard about your whole situation with Kara. You've been avoiding it, pushing her away, running from it."

Mallory felt heat rise in her chest. She knew Ember was right—knew that every time she had been near Kara, the pull had been there, undeniable. But it was easier to push it aside, to tell herself that she had been doing the right thing. She had told herself it was for the best. She wasn't ready to open herself up to the possibility of getting hurt again.

"I'm not running from anything," Mallory replied, though she could hear the crack in her voice. "I just... I'm not interested. It's not the right time. It's better this way."

Ember's expression softened even further, and she sighed, as if Mallory's words didn't surprise her. "Bullshit," she said, shaking her head. "You're scared, Mallory. You're terrified of getting hurt again, and that fear is holding you back. It's holding you hostage."

Mallory's jaw tightened. "You don't know what it's like," she said quietly, though she wasn't sure if she was trying to convince Ember, or herself.

"I do," Ember replied, her voice low and steady. "I've been there. I've been so scared of losing someone that I shut myself off from the possibility of anything real. And you know what happened? I lost everything. Because I was too afraid to face my own fear." She took a step closer, her voice growing softer. "I didn't fight for you, Mallory. And while I don't regret how that ended up working out, I do regret hurting you. But I'm telling you right now, you can't keep letting that fear control you. You'll lose something real with Kara, and that's on you."

Mallory's chest tightened, the weight of Ember's words landing squarely in her gut. She wanted to argue, to deny it, but a part of her—deep down—knew Ember was right. She had been running. She had been holding herself back because she was scared of feeling that hurt again. Scared of losing someone else.

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Mallory swallowed hard, pushing her emotions down. “I don’t know if I can do this,” she said, barely above a whisper.

Ember studied her for a long moment, and then, with a sigh, she placed a hand on Mallory’s shoulder. “You don’t have to do it alone. But you have to decide if you’re going to keep living in the past. You deserve love, Mallory. Don’t let fear stop you from getting it.”

“You’re married,” Mallory said, her voice taut, the subject one she had avoided for so long. “You have a family now. Why do you care about my life?”

Ember’s expression softened just enough for Mallory to notice. “I care because I know you, Mallory. I know you’re scared of letting someone in. You’re scared of what might happen if you let yourself love again. And I’m not here to make you feel bad about it. I’m here to tell you that running isn’t going to protect you forever.”

Mallory bit her lip, trying to keep the surge of emotions in check. The old wounds—hurts that had never fully healed—suddenly came rushing back. She had been left alone by Ember once, betrayed in ways she couldn’t even begin to unpack. And now here Ember was, telling her what to do with her heart.

“You don’t get it,” Mallory replied, the frustration in her voice rising. “You can’t just walk back into my life after everything that happened between us and tell me what to do.”

Ember’s face softened even further, but there was no judgment, no malice in her expression—just concern. “I get it, Mallory. I really do. But that’s not what this is

about. I've got a daughter now. A wife. Things are different for me. I'm not the same person I was when I walked out on you. And I sure as hell don't want you to make the same mistakes I did."

Mallory's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, mistakes?"

Ember's voice dropped an octave, the intensity returning. "I let fear dictate my choices. I ran away from love because I was too damn scared of losing it. And now I've got everything I've ever wanted. But it doesn't mean it wasn't a fight. It doesn't mean that I didn't have to face my own demons to get here."

Mallory was silent for a moment, digesting her words. She hadn't expected this side of Ember—the vulnerable side, the one that wasn't just an untamed force of nature. Ember had always been the one to push back, to act before thinking, and yet here she was, speaking with a kind of wisdom Mallory hadn't anticipated.

"And Josephine?" Mallory asked, her voice quieter now.

Ember's gaze softened at the mention of her wife. "She's my rock," Ember said, her smile gentle, but fierce with love. "We've got a daughter, Natalie. She's six now—hard to believe sometimes." Ember's eyes lit up at the mention of her daughter, and Mallory could see the love and pride there, a sharp contrast to the person she had once known.

Mallory felt a pang of envy—envy for the love and life Ember had built with Dr. Josephine Mars, a woman who had everything Mallory had always wanted for herself. Josephine was everything Ember wasn't—petite, graceful, the epitome of femininity. The two women, so different, yet perfectly complementary. Mallory knew their bond ran deep, and the connection between them was palpable.

Ember stepped closer, her gaze never leaving Mallory's. "Josephine and I, we've



built something real. And it's because we stopped running from our fears. We didn't let them control us. We chose love. You can't keep hiding, Mallory. Not from Kara. Not from yourself. You deserve this. You deserve to have it all."

Mallory's chest tightened. "And what if I'm not ready for that?"

Ember took a breath, her expression steady but full of understanding. "Then take the time you need. But don't wait too long. Because life doesn't wait for anyone. And neither does love."

Mallory stood there, silent, as Ember's words sank in. She wanted to dismiss them, to push them away. But they stayed with her, echoing in the back of her mind as Ember turned to walk away.

Ember paused for a moment, looking back at Mallory. "You've got another chance. Don't blow it."

With that, Ember was gone, disappearing down the hall, leaving Mallory standing alone, her mind racing. For the first time in months, Mallory felt a crack in the walls she had so carefully built around herself.

\* \* \*

Mallory returned to the busy corridors of Phoenix Ridge Hospital; the weight of Ember's words still heavy on her mind. Her footsteps echoed against the cold tiles as she walked briskly down the hall, her head buzzing with conflicting thoughts. She had barely made it two steps before she found herself replaying the conversation with Ember over and over. The sharpness of Ember's warning, the quiet but insistent way she'd pushed Mallory to face her fears—it was all too much to ignore. And yet, Mallory tried to push it away, bury it beneath the responsibilities of the day. She couldn't let herself get distracted. Not here.

She had a patient waiting for her, a surgery to oversee. But as she walked, her mind wandered back to Kara.

Kara. That name was like a ghost, haunting every corner of Mallory's thoughts. The way she'd looked at Mallory with big golden brown eyes and a messy ponytail, the way her presence had made Mallory's heart beat faster, and the way, no matter how much Mallory tried to fight it, she couldn't seem to forget about her.

Mallory had been so sure, so resolute in her decision to keep things professional, to not let herself get swept up in something that could only end in pain. She had promised herself that she wouldn't repeat the mistakes of her past, that she wouldn't let herself get lost in someone who couldn't stay. And yet, Ember's words echoed in her head: You're scared, Mallory. You're terrified of getting hurt again, and that fear is holding you back.

The thought made Mallory's chest tighten. Was that true? Had she really been running from Kara out of fear? She had spent so much time convincing herself that walking away was the right thing to do, that it was easier this way. But now, with Ember's voice still fresh in her mind, Mallory couldn't help but question herself.

The more she thought about it, the more it made sense. She had always been cautious, always hesitant to let herself get too close to anyone. Her heart had been shattered once, and she didn't know if it could withstand that kind of pain again. But was it really fear that was keeping her from Kara? Or was it something else? Something deeper, something rooted in the trauma of her past that she hadn't fully healed from?

Mallory shook her head, trying to focus. She couldn't afford to get lost in these thoughts. She had a job to do. The patient she was supposed to meet was waiting. But every step she took felt heavier than the last, the pull of her conflicting emotions making her feel more and more out of control.

She turned a corner and passed a nurse on the way to the surgical suite, nodding absentmindedly as she went. Her hands tightened around the medical chart she was carrying, but her mind was elsewhere—on Kara, on Ember’s words, on the quiet ache that seemed to grow the longer Mallory kept her feelings locked away.

By the time Mallory reached the surgical suite, the doors were open, and she was greeted by the familiar hum of activity. Nurses and surgical assistants moved in and out of the room, prepping for the procedure. But Mallory’s thoughts were still far away. She gave quick instructions to the team, running through the steps she’d already planned, but her mind was fixed on one question: What if Ember was right?

What if she had been sabotaging herself this whole time?

\* \* \*

As the team worked, Mallory found herself stealing glances at the clock. Each minute dragged, each second felt like a lifetime. She wasn't sure what she was waiting for—some kind of sign, maybe. Some kind of confirmation that the path she'd been walking down wasn't the only one she could take.

Ember's words haunted her. Was she really afraid? The fear of repeating her past mistakes had always been a part of her, something she had learned to live with. But now, with Kara's presence stirring something in her, Mallory couldn't deny that there was more to it than that. There was something there, something that felt too real to ignore.

As the surgery began, Mallory focused on her work, trying to shut out the emotions threatening to overwhelm her. But every cut, every stitch, only seemed to magnify the feeling of being stuck, of being unable to break free from the walls she had built around herself. And with every passing minute, the doubt grew. Maybe it's time to tear those walls down, she thought, a whisper in the back of her mind.

But what if she was wrong? What if she let her guard down and ended up hurt again? What if she wasn't strong enough to handle the risk of loving someone else, especially someone like Kara, who was so different from the person she had once been with?

Mallory's heart ached at the thought. She hadn't fully processed the grief of losing Ember all those years ago and every other girlfriend since, and the idea of going through something like that again was almost too much to bear. But at the same time,

the thought of walking away from Kara, of pushing her further away, felt just as unbearable.

When the surgery finally concluded successfully, Mallory felt like she had been holding her breath for an eternity. Luckily her hands had worked on autopilot- a surgery she had done a million times before. She stepped out of the surgical suite, her mind still racing with a thousand thoughts. Her chest was tight, her body felt exhausted from the emotional toll of the day. The patient was stable, the surgery a success, but Mallory knew there was another battle waiting for her. One that had nothing to do with medicine or patient care. It was a battle within herself, and she wasn't sure she was ready to face it.

She walked down the corridor toward the staff lounge, her footsteps slow and deliberate. She couldn't escape the nagging feeling that there was something she had to confront—something that had been waiting for her to acknowledge it.

As she passed the lounge doors, she glanced over her shoulder, as if expecting to see Kara standing there. But there was no one. She sighed softly and turned back to walk the long hallway, the weight of Ember's warning still heavy on her shoulders. You deserve love, Mallory. Don't let fear stop you from getting it.

The words echoed, and for the first time, Mallory felt the truth of them. But as much as she wanted to believe it, she wasn't sure she had the strength to let go of her fear. Not yet.

With each step, the tension in her chest only grew, the unresolved feelings between her and Kara pressing in from all sides. Would she face them? Would she allow herself to take the risk, or would she keep running from the very thing she wanted most?

Mallory didn't have the answer. All she knew was that for the first time in a long

while, she couldn't shake the feeling that she was at a crossroads. And whatever choice she made now could change everything.

8

KARA

Kara's boots crunched against the charred earth as she surveyed the scene. The wildfire had broken out the night before, fueled by the dry conditions and strong winds that had swept through the area. Now, in the daylight, it was a monster. Flames leapt in every direction, crackling hungrily, sending embers into the sky like fireflies. It was the kind of inferno that could devour an entire town in a matter of hours if left unchecked.

Kara, though, was steady. Calm. Her crew had been working for hours already, and they were tired—physically and mentally. But Kara had a gift for keeping people grounded when in chaos, for drawing on every ounce of her strength and focus to give the team direction. They looked to her for reassurance, and she delivered, no matter how much adrenaline was coursing through her veins.

“Cass, take your team and head to the north ridge. We're going to need to get ahead of this fire,” she instructed, her voice strong but steady, never betraying the urgency of the situation.

Cass nodded, already heading toward her crew. Kara turned to the rest of her team, meeting each of their eyes. Her presence alone seemed to settle them. She didn't need to raise her voice. She didn't need to panic. Kara was in control, and her team trusted her to make the right calls.

“Keep the lines tight, watch your backs,” Kara continued, always the leader. “We're not out of the woods yet. But we will be.”

The crew nodded, moving with the precision of well-oiled machinery, each member of Kara's team knowing their role, their job, and their place in the effort to stop the fire from spreading further.

Kara's heart hammered in her chest as she scanned the horizon. The flames were relentless. They roared in the wind like living creatures, creeping toward the forest's edge where homes stood—homes with families inside. The thought gnawed at her, the weight of it. She couldn't afford to let her emotions get in the way of the mission, but they were there, always lurking beneath the surface. Each decision she made affected lives. She needed to make sure she chose wisely, to ensure no one else would have to suffer.

Her radio crackled, Chief Becky Thompson's voice pulling her focus back to the task at hand. "Kara, we've got a break in the south sector. We're losing containment."

"Dammit," she muttered, turning toward her crew. "Change of plans. Sara, get the reinforcements ready. We're going south."

They worked quickly, the rhythm of their movements smooth and practiced. Kara's mind was already calculating the next steps, analyzing the shifting winds, the current containment lines, and the geography of the area. She didn't just react—she anticipated. And as her team moved into position, she could feel the pulse of the fire, its heat against her skin, its crackling roar threatening to drown out her thoughts.

9

## MALLORY

The hospital had a waiting room filled with people, and it was always good to stay updated in case there were major events unfolding that would bring more patients. As Mallory swiped through the headlines, one news story caught her attention. The

Phoenix Ridge Wild Fire. The footage from the scene was captured live, and as the camera zoomed in on the flames, Mallory's heart skipped a beat. And then she saw her.

Kara.

There she was, standing tall against the smoke and chaos, her fire gear filthy, her wild brown hair pulled back into a tight ponytail under her helmet, but a few strands still managed to break free and whip around in the wind. Her eyes were sharp, scanning the fire's edge, calculating her next move with an intensity that Mallory admired. She watched as Kara barked orders to her crew, moving effortlessly between them, offering encouragement, guidance, and leadership with every step. There was a quiet strength to Kara, a sense of assurance that commanded respect.

Mallory's chest tightened. Mallory felt a wave of panic rise in her. Kara was out there, in the thick of it, in the firestorm, and Mallory couldn't do a thing to help. She couldn't protect her, couldn't keep her safe.



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The screen zoomed in on Kara once more as she maneuvered around the fire's perimeter. Mallory could see the tension in her face, the weight of the responsibility she carried. Her heart broke for her—because Mallory knew that Kara carried that burden alone, and she could guess just how much it cost her.

Mallory closed the news feed and opened her message app. Her hands trembled as she typed a quick message to Kara. Be careful out there. Please.

She hit send before she could second-guess herself. She didn't know what else to say. The fear in her chest was suffocating, but the admiration for Kara, for the woman she was, ran deep. She was proud of her, proud of the way Kara gave everything she had, no matter the risk. But it terrified Mallory, too. Terrified her because every time Kara went out there, she risked her life. And every time, Mallory would have to be reminded of the danger that lurked in her world, the danger that Mallory would never escape.

The text was sent. Mallory sat back in her chair, her mind reeling, her thoughts a storm of worry and longing. She wanted to be close to Kara, wanted to understand her, to hold her. But the fear of losing her again gnawed at Mallory's insides, twisting with every thought. Could she ever overcome the fear? Could she ever truly let herself love Kara, knowing how dangerous her world was?

She leaned her head back against the chair, closing her eyes for just a moment, feeling the ache in her chest grow deeper. The flames, the heat, the smoke—they were so far away, but yet a constant presence in Mallory's mind. And with them, Kara, fighting on the front lines.

And Mallory realized, with a start, that she might never be able to let go of that fear. But at the same time, she couldn't stop herself from caring. She couldn't stop herself from wanting more.

10

## KARA

Kara sat on the edge of the empty fire truck, her helmet resting at her side, the smell of smoke still thick in the evening air. The fire had been contained after hours of grueling work, and her team was in the process of wrapping up. But Kara couldn't quite shake the adrenaline buzzing beneath her skin. The fire had been ferocious, and there had been moments when she wasn't sure how things would play out. Yet, they had made it through. They had saved homes, protected lives, and brought the blaze to a halt. It was, as always, a victory, but that didn't mean it had been easy.

She reached for her phone, knowing Mallory had likely been watching the news coverage. Her pulse quickened slightly at the thought of her, as it always did. Kara had seen Mallory's message on her phone earlier, causing that familiar ache to stir in her chest. It was impossible not to notice the pull between them. But the complexity of it—Mallory's hesitancy, her fears—made things harder than they should be. Kara had never been one to shy away from hard things, but this felt different.

Kara unlocked her phone and quickly typed a simple message: I guess you saw the news?

She wasn't sure what she expected. Maybe a casual response, maybe something more. She didn't know. What she did know was that Mallory had been on her mind far too much, and she wasn't sure how much longer she could keep pretending that she wasn't drawn to her in ways she couldn't control.

Kara's phone buzzed with Mallory's reply, and she felt a smile tug at the corners of her mouth. She read the words slowly, letting them sink in.

I saw. You're incredible, Kara. I was worried.

The words were simple, but they hit her deeper than she expected. She had always known Mallory was special—intelligent, strong, and kind. But it was moments like these that reminded her of how much she wanted to be close to her. To feel that connection, even if it terrified them both.

Kara quickly typed a response, trying to keep the tone light, even though a part of her was already wrapped up in the emotions swirling inside her.

I'm fine, Mallory. You don't have to worry about me.

She read it over once, then twice, before sending it off. But deep down, Kara knew the words weren't enough. They never were. Mallory's worry was rooted in something deeper. Kara could feel it—feel the tension building between them, the unspoken fears that held them back. She wanted to tell Mallory it was okay, that she didn't have to be afraid. But she wasn't sure how to say it without pushing Mallory further away.

Mallory: It's not that I don't trust you, Kara. It's just... this life you lead, it's dangerous. Every time you go out there, I wouldn't be able to help but wonder if I'm going to lose you. I can't do that again.

Kara felt a knot form in her stomach as she read Mallory's message. It wasn't what she had expected, but it was real. Raw. Mallory was scared. And Kara understood that, even though it stung.

Kara: I don't need you to protect me, Mallory. I've made my choices, and I can

handle them. You don't have to worry about me, and you don't have to shut me out because of your fears.

The words were sharp, but Kara couldn't help it. She was frustrated—frustrated by how hard it was for Mallory to understand that Kara had made her peace with the risks. It wasn't about Mallory protecting her; it was about trusting that Kara knew what she was doing, that she had chosen this life. But she also understood that Mallory's fears weren't something she could just push aside. She could feel the hurt in her response, but she couldn't bring herself to soften the blow. Not yet.

Mallory: I know you can handle it. I just... I don't know how to stop being scared.

Kara didn't reply right away. When she finally did respond, her words were softer.

Kara: It's okay to be scared, Mallory. I just need you to trust me. Trust that I'm here for you, just like I need you to be here for me. We both need to take risks if we want something real.

When Mallory didn't respond, Kara worried that the conversation had become too heavy, and she'd scared Mallory off. Needing to lighten the situation and buy herself more time with Mallory, she sent a more playful text.

Kara: If I didn't know better, I'd think you were worried about me getting too hot... but then again, you're probably into that."

Kara was thrilled with the near-immediate response:

Mallory: I think you're the one who likes to play with fire, Kara. Always have, always will.

Much to Kara's relief, the tension in their conversation began to melt, replaced by

something lighter, flirtatious.

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Kara: Maybe you'd like to see me up close, get a better look at what I'm really capable of.

Mallory: You're tempting fate, Kara. But I can't say I don't like it.

Kara: I bet you're blushing right now. And you look beautiful when you blush. Am I right? Kara teased.

Mallory: Blushing? I don't know what you're talking about. But if anyone's blushing, it's you, imagining all the ways I might respond.

It didn't take long for Kara to reply, her boldness shining through every word.

Kara: Oh, I'm not imagining. I'm very good at picturing exactly what I want.

Mallory: Is that so? And what exactly are you picturing?

Kara needed no time to think of her response.

Kara: Let's just say it involves your beautiful body, that gorgeous green shirt dress on the floor again, and absolutely no interruptions.

Mallory: Hmm, sounds intriguing. But I don't know... I might be too busy for all that. You know, saving lives and all.

Kara: Saving lives, huh? Funny, because you've been on my mind 24/7, and I'm not sure how much longer I can wait for you to rescue me from my own thoughts. Kara

laughed at her own attempts to flirt.

Mallory: You seem awfully confident. What makes you think I'd rescue you?

Kara paused, her thumbs poised over her phone. How to respond to keep Mallory thinking about her? Kara took her time before answering.

Kara: Because, Doc, you're not the kind to leave someone hanging. Especially not me.

It had started as playful banter, something that allowed them both to dip their toes into the intense chemistry that had been building for weeks. But now, maybe they were close to crossing a line. A line she wasn't sure Mallory was ready to cross.

The night had fallen, and the air was cool, a welcome relief after the suffocating heat of the flames. Kara leaned back against the truck, her eyes on the stars above, her mind still racing from the adrenaline of the day. She wanted to be back with her team, doing the work she loved, but this sudden exchange with Mallory had her in its grip.

Her phone buzzed again, and her stomach fluttered with the anticipation of Mallory's response to her last text. For the briefest moment, her heart swelled with hope, thinking that maybe Mallory was ready to let her in. But when she read the message, the words hit her with an unexpected force.

Mallory: We're not getting anywhere like this, Kara. I don't want this to be just about the chemistry. Because we both know how strong and undeniable that is. I want something real. And I do feel it with you. But I'm scared.

Kara stared at the screen, her heart pounding, the weight of Mallory's vulnerability pressing on her chest. She could feel it in her bones—the fear, the hesitation, the walls Mallory had built around herself. Kara knew all too well what it was like to

guard yourself, to keep your emotions locked away out of fear of getting hurt. But this? This was different. She wanted Mallory. She wanted to show her that she could be trusted, that she wasn't going anywhere. But the uncertainty in Mallory's words made Kara's own feelings of doubt rise to the surface.

She typed quickly, wanting to reassure Mallory, wanting to bridge the gap between them. She didn't have all the answers, but she knew that she could offer her heart, and that had to count for something.

Kara: I'm not going anywhere, Mallory. And you know I feel it too. I want something real with you. But you need to decide if you want to take the risk with me.

She hit send, the words lingering in her mind even as the message left her phone. She knew it wasn't enough. She knew Mallory's fear ran deeper than just this conversation. But Kara was tired of waiting for Mallory to come around. She was tired of hiding her feelings, of pretending that the pull between them wasn't strong enough to break through the walls they'd both built.

The stars outside were brighter now, their light flickering in the night sky, as Kara sat in silence with her team. She knew Mallory's hesitation would be the hardest thing to overcome. She had seen it before, felt it before—people held back because they were afraid. But she also knew that the longer Mallory waited, the more time they would lose. She could feel the weight of their unspoken words pressing down on her chest.

Kara wanted Mallory. There was no denying it. But she also knew that she couldn't force Mallory to take that leap. She had to wait for her to decide. And as she sat there, the fire now just a memory in the distance, she wondered if that was the hardest part. Waiting.



## MALLORY

Mallory sat in the small office tucked away in the corner of Phoenix Ridge Hospital, staring at the pile of patient files in front of her. It was supposed to be a quiet afternoon. She could feel the unease coiling in her chest, a tight knot that refused to loosen. The source of it, as always, was Kara.

She'd tried to push her thoughts about Kara aside, focusing on work, diving into the routine that helped her feel grounded. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw Kara—saw the way she commanded attention with every step, the way she was so unflinchingly strong yet tender. Mallory wanted to be with her, more than anything. But the fear... the fear of getting too close, of opening up to someone only to lose them, had kept her from taking that step.

Her phone buzzed on the desk, interrupting her thoughts. The screen lit up with Josephine Mars's name.

Mallory smiled to herself. Josephine had become more than just a colleague—she'd become a mentor, someone Mallory had turned to for guidance in the most uncertain moments. Josephine was a woman who had been through her own battles, who understood the weight of doubt and the struggle of vulnerability. Mallory knew that, even if she was just a voice on the other end of the line, Josephine's words would always hold weight.

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Taking a deep breath, Mallory answered the call.

“Hey, Josephine,” she said, trying to keep her tone casual, though the tension in her chest betrayed her.

“Hey, Mallory. How’s it going?” Josephine’s voice was warm, comforting.

“I’m... okay. I’m just... thinking,” Mallory replied, leaning back in her chair, her fingers idly tapping against the desk.

“Thinking? About what?” Josephine pressed gently. Mallory hesitated. She wasn’t sure if she was ready to voice the turmoil that had been churning inside her, but Josephine had a way of making her feel heard without judgment.

“I’m still trying to figure out this thing with Kara,” Mallory admitted, her voice lower now, tinged with frustration. “I want to be with her, but I keep holding myself back. I keep thinking... What if it ends like it did before? What if I get too close and it all falls apart?”

There was a pause on the other end of the line, and Mallory could almost feel Josephine’s understanding radiating through the phone.

“Mallory,” Josephine began, her voice steady but kind, “I know you’re scared. I can hear it in your voice. But the thing is... you can’t live in fear forever. Ember’s told me about your shared history, but you can’t keep yourself locked away because you’re afraid of what might happen. You have to trust that the person you’re with will meet you where you are, and if it doesn’t work out, that’s part of life. But the

alternative is living in fear of what could happen, and that's no way to live."

"I'm not sure I can just jump into it," Mallory confessed, her voice small. "It's so hard to shake the fear of losing someone again."

"I understand, really. I'm one of the few who could possibly understand your worries. It wasn't an easy thing to deal with when I first started dating Ember," Josephine said, her tone sympathetic. "But sometimes, the best thing you can do for yourself is to trust, even when it feels scary. You don't have to throw yourself into it headfirst. But you owe it to yourself, and to Kara, to stop hiding from what you want. You deserve happiness, Mallory. You deserve love, even if it means taking a chance."

Mallory's heart pounded in her chest. She knew Josephine was right, but that didn't make it any easier. It didn't take away the fear that had been building up inside her for so long. But for the first time, she realized that maybe it wasn't about waiting for the fear to disappear. Maybe it was about acknowledging it and moving forward anyway. Maybe it was about giving herself permission to be vulnerable.

"Okay," Mallory said, more to herself than to Josephine. "Okay, I'll try. I'll try to let go of the fear."

Josephine's voice softened with approval. "That's all anyone can do, Mallory. Just try. You've got this."

Mallory sat in silence for a moment after the call ended, her mind racing. Josephine's words had struck something deep inside her, something she hadn't realized she was missing. The idea that she didn't have to have everything figured out, that it was okay to take risks, was liberating in a way she hadn't expected. Maybe it was time to take that leap of faith with Kara.

She glanced at the clock. Her shift was about to begin. With a deep breath, Mallory

stood up, feeling a sense of quiet resolve settle over her. She didn't have all the answers, and she wasn't sure how it would all work out. But for the first time in a long time, Mallory felt ready to embrace the unknown, ready to move forward—no longer held captive by the fear that had controlled her for so long.

It wasn't a perfect solution, and there were still doubts swirling in her mind. But with each step she took toward the ER, Mallory felt the weight of her fears begin to lift, just a little. It wasn't much, but it was enough. Enough to give her the courage to face whatever came next.

And maybe, just maybe, that was all she needed.

\* \* \*

Mallory stood behind the counter in the ER, sorting through patient files, her mind drifting back to Josephine's words. The quiet hum of the hospital around her felt like a contrast to the storm of thoughts swirling inside her. Josephine had told her to take a chance, to stop letting fear dictate her choices, but it was easier said than done. How could she let go of the fear, of the uncertainty? How could she take that leap when the consequences of falling felt so devastating?

Her shift had started quietly—too quietly—and Mallory was grateful for the calm. She'd welcomed the chance to think, to breathe, and to prepare herself for whatever the night would bring. But no matter how much she tried to sort through her feelings, one thought kept creeping in: Kara. It had been days since they last spoke, and though she could still feel the lingering tension between them, Mallory knew she needed to make a choice.

The ER doors suddenly swung open, breaking her reverie. Mallory's head snapped up, instinctively looking toward the entrance. A group of firefighters filed in, moving with purpose. But it was Kara at the front, still dressed in her firefighting gear,

covered in soot, her face streaked with ash. She moved with a quiet, commanding energy that seemed to take over the room. Mallory's breath caught in her throat as she watched Kara approach, the wild energy of the fire still radiating off her.

Kara was carrying herself like someone who had just returned from the front lines, and the sight of her, strong and unwavering, stirred something deep inside Mallory. She felt the familiar pull between them—intense, undeniable—but this time it was heavier, charged with something more.

Beside Kara, a fellow firefighter was guiding a stretcher with a patient, the man's body twisted awkwardly as he struggled to breathe. The air in the ER seemed to thicken as Kara moved, her focus sharp as she led the way. The patient was critically injured, his breathing shallow from inhaling smoke, and the urgency in Kara's movements was unmistakable. She was in her element, calm amidst the chaos, giving orders in that voice of authority Mallory knew so well.

Mallory couldn't take her eyes off Kara. She watched as Kara quickly handed the patient off to a doctor, her hands steady, her expression intense. There was no hesitation, no panic—just the quiet competence of someone who had seen this all before. But then, for a brief, heart-stopping moment, their eyes locked across the room.

Time seemed to stretch. Mallory's pulse quickened and her breath caught in her throat. Kara's gaze was intense, unwavering, as if nothing in the room mattered except for the connection between them. Mallory's heart skipped a beat, and in that one instant, it was as if everything else—the ER, the patient, the steady hum of activity—faded away.

Kara's look held for a moment longer than usual, and in the brief silence that followed, Mallory felt something shift. Something powerful. The air between them seemed to crackle with tension, a magnetic force drawing them together despite the

distance.

Mallory's chest tightened. She knew the pull, knew the attraction, but in that moment, with the chaos of the ER all around her, it felt even more undeniable, more impossible to resist. But she could hardly breathe under the weight of it all. The moment passed as quickly as it came, but Mallory couldn't shake the feeling that it had changed everything.

Kara's movements were deliberate as she finished up the paperwork, her hands steady despite the lingering exhaustion from the fire. Her face was streaked with soot, her ponytail slightly disheveled, but there was an undeniable rawness to her appearance—an intensity that seemed to pulse from her very being. She moved with purpose, her gaze occasionally flicking over to Mallory as she went about her business, but Mallory couldn't tear her eyes away.

Mallory felt a flutter of anticipation, a restlessness stirring in her chest. She had tried to push this feeling aside for so long, tried to keep the growing attraction at arm's length, but the more she watched Kara, the harder it became to deny. Kara wasn't just a firefighter; she was a force, a presence that commanded attention even in the most chaotic of situations. And right now, that presence was drawing Mallory in like a magnet.

The patient no longer her concern, Kara turned; her eyes locking with Mallory's. The connection between them sparked, crackling in the air, and Mallory's breath caught in her throat. Kara walked toward her with purpose, and Mallory instinctively stood a little straighter, her heart racing as Kara closed the distance between them.

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When Kara stopped just inches away, Mallory's pulse quickened. There was no escaping her now. The heat between them was palpable, thick in the air. Kara didn't say a word at first, but the silent understanding passed between them, making Mallory's skin flush with a mixture of nervousness and longing.

Then, Kara's voice, low and commanding, slid through the space between them. "I need you to take me somewhere we can be alone," she said, her tone filled with a raw, undeniable desire. "No distractions. No one else. Just you and me."

The words hit Mallory like a rush of adrenaline, the command in Kara's voice stirring something deep within her. The way Kara looked at her—intense, focused—left no room for argument. It was clear this wasn't just a casual request; it was a demand. The certainty in Kara's eyes made Mallory's breath hitch. It wasn't just about the physical attraction; it was about the raw intensity of Kara's presence, the need for privacy that felt urgent, almost desperate.

Mallory's heart raced, her mind spinning. She glanced around the ER, her training kicking in. She was on duty, in a hospital, surrounded by colleagues. This was reckless. This was unprofessional. But as she stood there, inches from Kara, she couldn't deny the pull. The intensity of the moment overpowered any logical reasoning, and the words that had been swirling in her head—the ones she had been holding back for so long—finally found their way to her lips.

"Okay," Mallory whispered, her voice barely audible but filled with more certainty than she had felt in days. The decision was made. She wasn't going to hold back anymore. "Follow me, but act discreet. There's enough awkwardness working with my ex's wife without adding anything else into the mix."

Kara simply drew her finger across her lips, sealing her mouth shut, her eyes aglow with mirth.

The walk through the corridor to her office seemed to take an eternity; all the while her heart was making a determined attempt to escape the confines of her chest. Her mouth was dry, the squeeze of anticipation settling in her stomach.

God, what was Kara doing to her?

Mallory's palms were so sweaty from the heady combination of want and worry of being caught that by the time she stopped in front of her office door, her hand almost slipped from the handle.

Beside the two of them, the corridor was deserted. Mallory deftly unlocked the door, pulling Kara in behind her, and re-locking it. The sooner they were behind closed doors the better.

"So what was it—" Mallory was cut off by Kara slamming a palm against the solid wooden door beside her head. Towering over her, she looked simply delectable. Mallory could smell lingering smoke on her, could see the smudges of soot across her face. Beyond the smell of smoke was sweat- the unmistakable scent of Kara. This disheveled look was one Mallory could certainly appreciate more often.

"You know, I've been waiting weeks for this appointment, Doctor Storm," Kara said, a smirk gracing her lips.

"And what seems to be the issue?" Mallory asked, continuing the playful line Kara had chosen.

"Well, I've been having some trouble here." Kara took Mallory's hand, pressing it into her breast through her T shirt.



Mallory's breath hitched, her tongue darted out, gliding across her dry lips. She watched as Kara's gaze tracked the tiny movement eagerly.

"Hmm, so like this?" Mallory asked as she squeezed, excitement filling her as Kara stifled a gasp. "What about this?" she said, bring her other hand up to capture her other breast.

"Fuck, yes. Exactly there, Doctor."

"Yes, I've heard about this before, massage is usually?—"

Mallory found herself unable to speak as Kara swooped forward, claiming her mouth in an aggressive kiss.

"Sorry, we'll have to do this another time. I can't wait any longer, I've been wanting to do this too long."

Mallory felt Kara slide her hand down to her pants, unclasping them with practiced ease, and drop both them and her underwear down her legs. Mallory reached up to her white coat, eager to unbutton it.

"No, leave it on."

Kara's eyes were gleaming with desire, and Mallory could see her chest heaving. Before she could really comprehend it, Mallory found herself lifted in Kara's strong arms; carried across the room and set down on her desk. Kara dropped to her knees before her.

Fuck, she wanted this, wanted Kara.

Letting her head drop back, Mallory reveled in the feeling of Kara's rough calloused

fingers traveling up the soft skin of her inner thighs. It felt amazing, so why had she ever denied herself this?

A short gasp escaped her as she felt soft hair tickle her skin, before hot breath ghosted across her wanting pussy.

The warmth of Kara's mouth engulfed her entirely; it took all of her self control not to thrust up into it. Kara must have felt it too, as she let out a knowing chuckle, and moved her hands to rest atop Mallory's thighs, holding her in place.

Mallory wound her hands into Kara's thick hair, relishing in the softness. She sank into the sensations as Kara flicked her tongue back and forth across her clit, before languidly trailing through her folds. Time lost its meaning as Mallory gave in to Kara's ministrations, waves of pleasure wracking through her body. Kara gave her no relief, content to take her time exploring Mallory's pussy with her mouth; enjoying the slow pace. A guttural moan sounded from Mallory as Kara once again abandoned her clitoris to push her tongue inside her.

"Fuck, you're too good at this. We can't be too loud."

Kara's head inched up, fingers taking her tongue's place as she replied.

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Mallory moaned loudly as she felt Kara's fingers pushing deep inside of her, opening her wide.

"Oh, fuck..."

"Well next time, I'll just have to carry you back to mine. You can be as loud as you like there. In fact, I'll make you scream so loudly you'll be hoarse for days."

"Is that a promise?"

"Of course."

"I'll hold you to it. Fuck, don't stop. Fuck me, please," Mallory desperately needed to feel Kara's fingers fucking her.

"But, of course, doctor."

Kara looked up at her meeting her gaze and grinned and Mallory felt the fingers inside her beginning to thrust, firmly, deeply, deliciously.

She felt the beautiful pressure each time as the pads of Kara's fingers hit her G spot.

She felt her legs beginning to shake as Kara's fingers fucked her harder and faster.

"Oh, my god.."

Se felt Kara's hot mouth envelope her clitoris and begin to suck.

Mallory could feel the tightness building deep inside her. God, she was so close.

With a muffled moan her climax blew through her, and she felt herself gush hot liquid.

As she opened her eyes she saw Kara grinning up at her.

“You are so fucking sexy when you come, Dr. Storm.”

Mallory watched as Kara slowly and carefully withdrew her fingers, cupping her palm carefully.

“Look at the juice from your beautiful orgasm in my hand.” Kara showed her the small pool of liquid in the palm of her hand.

Mallory felt herself blushing at the sight of it.

“It would be a shame to waste something so beautiful,” Kara said, her voice sexy and husky as hell.

Mallory couldn't take her eyes off Kara as she put her hand to her mouth and reached her tongue out licking every last drop of Mallory's orgasm from her hand. Her brown eyes were fixed on Mallory as she did it.

It was the most erotic thing Mallory had ever seen.

12

KARA

She had just finished her shift, and after a long day of firefighting another small

wildfire that had broken out, all she wanted was to unwind and let the weight of the fire, the smoke, and the adrenaline fade from her shoulders. The familiar neon sign of The Ridge flickered against the evening sky, and Kara pushed the door open with a sigh of relief.

The low murmur of conversation and the faint clink of glasses filled the air as she stepped inside. Her eyes quickly adjusted to the dim light, and she scanned the room. She spotted Scotti and Ember sitting at their usual booth in the back corner, each with a drink in hand.

Kara walked over, her footsteps slower than usual, worn down from the day's work. She was grateful for the company, but something lingered in her chest, a weight that hadn't quite lifted. As she reached the booth, Scotti grinned up at her, eyes sparkling with mischief, while Ember gave her a more reserved nod.

"Look who finally decided to show up," Scotti teased, shifting over to make room. "How's the hero feeling today?"

Kara slid into the booth, tossing her jacket over the backrest. "Tired. Exhausted, actually," she said, taking the offered drink from Scotti. It was a gin and tonic, sharp and crisp, and she took a long sip, letting the cold liquid slide down her throat.

"Another one of those near-death rescues, huh?" Scotti prodded, her grin never wavering. She was always the first to ask about the details, and Kara had grown accustomed to her pushy, playful questions.

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Kara leaned back in the booth, letting her shoulders relax for the first time since she'd left the station. "Yeah, something like that. The fire was pretty intense, but we got it under control. No one got seriously hurt." She paused for a moment, tapping her fingers against the glass.

Ember, who had been silently listening, raised an eyebrow at her. "You look like you're still carrying it, though," she observed. Kara glanced at her, meeting her dark eyes for a beat longer than she intended.

"Just tired," Kara said quickly, but Ember wasn't buying it.

"Right," Scotti cut in with a knowing smirk. "Tired or not, I'm more interested in hearing about your night." She leaned forward, her elbows resting on the table. "Come on, Kara, spill it. How did it go with Mallory?"

Ember threw her hands up to cover her ears. "You know I'm not convinced Mallory would want me of all people to be hearing this—matter of fact I'm not sure I want to hear it either!"

"Don't worry, I won't scar you, Ember. No reenactments tonight!" Kara laughed in reply.

"Spoilsport," Scotti sulked, pulling a face in Ember's direction.

Kara shifted in her seat, running her hand through her hair, trying to figure out how to phrase it. "It was good," she started, though the word felt too small to capture what she was feeling. "We talked. A lot. More than I expected."

“More than you expected?” Scotti repeated, raising an eyebrow. “Isn’t that what you wanted? To, you know, connect with her? So how’d it go?”

Kara let out a breath, her fingers drumming against her glass. “Yeah, I mean... wedidconnect. But it’s different with her, Scotti. She’s not like the other women I’ve been with. She has... baggage. And I get it. Hell, I have my own baggage too.”

Ember, who had been silent up until now, gave Kara a long, assessing look. “It sounds like you’re starting to care for her,” she said quietly, her voice thoughtful.

Kara winced slightly. She wasn’t sure why she had mentioned it, but Ember’s words hit too close to the truth. She did care. In fact, she was starting to care more than she was ready to admit. “Yeah, I guess so,” she muttered. “But I don’t want to push her too hard. I’m just... figuring out how to take it slow with her.”

Scotti scoffed, tossing back her drink. “Taking it slow?” she repeated, her voice incredulous. “Kara, come on. You’ve never been one to take things slow. You go for what you want, and you get it. Look at all the women you’ve had before—hell, half the town knows your name. You want Mallory? Go get her.”

Kara shifted uncomfortably in her seat, but she didn’t have an answer to that. She knew Scotti was right in some ways—she had always gone after what she wanted, unapologetically. But Mallory wasn’t like the others. Kara had been pushing and pulling with her, trying to figure out how much space to give her while still moving toward something deeper. And now, more than ever, Kara realized she couldn’t force Mallory into anything. It was up to Mallory to decide how fast this relationship would move, and Kara had to respect that.

“I know,” Kara said, her voice quieter now. “I want her, Scotti. But I’m not going to mess it up by rushing her. If I push too hard, she’ll just shut down. I need to give her space.”

Ember's voice broke through the tension in the air. "I get it, Kara," she said softly. "But be careful not to pull back too much. There's a balance between giving someone space and letting them slip away. Don't wait too long to make your move. You don't want to miss your shot."

Kara looked at Ember, the weight of her words settling into her chest. She was right. Patience was important, but so was action. She couldn't sit on the sidelines forever.

"I'm not waiting too long," Kara said with a slight smile. "I'll figure it out. I just need to give her time to trust me."

Scotti grinned and raised her glass in a mock toast. "Well, whatever happens, Kara, I want all the juicy details when you do seal the deal."

Kara laughed, though the tension in her chest didn't completely lift. She was navigating new territory, and that made her more uncertain than she liked. But she had made her decision: She would be patient with Mallory. She would wait for the right moment, and she would be ready to take that leap when Mallory was ready.

As the conversation turned to other things, Kara couldn't help but feel the weight of the moment settle in her chest. She wanted Mallory, yes, but more than that, she wanted to build something real with her. Something that wouldn't fade like her past relationships. Something that had the potential to last. And for that, she was willing to wait.

There was a lull in the conversation as Scotti left the table, heading to the bathroom; Kara watched her leave before returning her attention to Ember.

"While it's just the pair of us," Ember began, her tone gentle, "Obviously you know the history between me and Mal. Part of the reason we didn't work out was me not giving her grace to come to grips with the reality of our work. At the time I had no



idea the fallout would leave her as scarred as she is now.”

“I know that, Ember. I wouldn’t still be friends with you if I thought you had hurt her on purpose, that’s not like you.”

“Thank you, though that wasn’t quite what I was trying to get at. You want her. She wants you. Scotti is right that you shouldn’t let her walk away from what you have together. But you need to be careful, Kara. Don’t rush this. You can’t push Mallory too hard, especially after everything that’s happened between you two. She’s not like the women you’ve dated before. She can be brave, but she needs you to help her be brave, help her see that the connection between you is worth facing her fears.” Ember clocked Scotti heading back in their direction and leaned back in her chair. “Well I’ve said my piece, I truly hope it works out for the both of you.”

Kara sighed, resting her head back against the booth, looking out across the bar for a moment. She could feel the weight of Ember’s words sinking in, trying to find their place in her mind. The urge to follow her instincts—to push forward, to make things happen—clashed with the quiet voice inside her that told her to slow down, to let Mallory take the lead.

“Am I rushing her, though?” Kara asked, her voice low, more to herself than to Ember. She looked over at her friend, whose dark eyes were fixed on her, unblinking, as if she were reading every thought in Kara’s mind.

Ember hesitated for a moment before answering, her gaze softening. “I’m just saying... don’t make the same mistake you’ve made before. Sometimes, the most intense chemistry isn’t always the best foundation for a relationship. You need to let Mallory come to you, on her terms. She’s been hurt before. Let her decide when she’s ready to open up.”

“I just don’t want to screw it up,” Kara admitted quietly, the words feeling heavier

than she expected.

“You won’t,” Ember reassured her, giving her a small smile. “But you’ve got to trust her and trust yourself. Let Mallory lead when she’s ready. And if she’s not ready yet, then... be patient. And remember, patience doesn’t mean waiting forever. Just give it time.”

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Kara took a deep breath, her resolve slowly hardening. She knew Ember was right, but part of her still wanted to take the reins, wanted to be bold, to make things happen now. The conflict simmered inside her, but she nodded, accepting Ember's advice even if it didn't come with the certainty she craved.

Scotti, upon returning to the table, sensed the shift in Kara's mood and lightened the air with another playful tease. "So, are you going to let Mallory keep you on the sidelines, or are you going to take that leap? Because I think we all know you're dying to find out what happens next."

Kara grinned despite herself, the fire of determination flaring once again in her chest. She didn't have all the answers, but one thing was clear: she wasn't going to give up without trying. The question was no longer whether Mallory was the right person for her—it was how far she was willing to go to make it work.

"Guess I'll figure it out, won't I?" Kara said, her voice steady, even if her heart was still racing. The ball was in her court now. All she had to do was find the courage to play it.

Kara sat back in the booth, a glass of whiskey recently delivered in front of her, the amber liquid catching the dim light of the bar. The laughter of Scotti and Ember still echoed in her mind, but her thoughts had drifted inward, away from the banter and teasing. The decision was made now, her resolve slowly settling in, but it wasn't as simple as she had hoped.

Patience.

That was what she needed to show Mallory. The word had a bitter taste at first, a feeling of restraint that Kara wasn't used to. She had never been the type to sit back and wait for things to unfold, to let someone else dictate the pace of a relationship. But Mallory wasn't like anyone else. Mallory was different, and Kara knew it deep down. She wasn't just another woman to chase, another conquest to win. Mallory had layers—layers that Kara had only begun to understand—and those layers needed time, space, and gentleness.

Ember's words from earlier ran through her mind, still ringing with a quiet truth. You've got to let Mallory lead when she's ready. It wasn't advice that came easy to Kara. She wasn't the type to wait around for permission. But when she thought about Mallory, about how she had let her in just a little, how she had kissed her, how she had let the walls down in small moments—Kara knew she couldn't rush that. She couldn't be the one to push Mallory past her limits. Not after everything she had been through.

Mallory's history with relationships wasn't something Kara could ignore. She had seen the way Mallory pulled away, how quickly she closed herself off, and Kara knew that a part of that was fear. Fear of being hurt. Fear of trusting again. Fear of letting someone else in. Mallory was scared. And if Kara wanted to have a chance with her, she had to be patient. She had to prove that she could be trusted. That Kara wasn't like the others.

As much as Kara wanted to take control, to move things forward quickly, she knew that wasn't the right path. She couldn't rush Mallory; it wouldn't work. The last thing she wanted was to ruin the fragile bond they had started to build. So, she'd wait. But she wouldn't wait in silence, locked in the limbo of indecision. Kara would be present. She would give Mallory the space she needed, but she would make sure Mallory knew she was there, ready and willing when the time came. She wasn't going anywhere. She wasn't giving up on them.

As the night drew to a close, Kara finished her drink, the liquid warm and smooth in her throat. She placed the empty glass on the table and stood, stretching as she prepared to leave. Scotti and Ember were still talking, but Kara had already started to feel the pull of the night outside. The cool air would clear her mind, help her think.

Before she left, she took one last look at her friends, her resolve firming. She knew what she had to do. She had to be patient. She had to respect Mallory's boundaries, even if it meant waiting longer than she wanted.

As she stepped out into the night, the cool air hitting her face, Kara took a deep breath, letting the crispness clear her head. She was ready for this—ready to be the kind of person Mallory needed, the kind of partner who could wait, who could give her the space she needed to heal and trust again.

It wasn't going to be easy. She knew that. But Mallory was worth it. And Kara was willing to wait, no matter how long it took.

13

## MALLORY

Mallory leaned back in her chair; her body heavy with the kind of exhaustion that came from endless back-to-back shifts. The quiet hum of the hospital, the faint beeping of monitors, and the low chatter of nurses created a false sense of calm that Mallory knew would be shattered at any moment. It always was. Her fingers hovered over the keyboard, the half-finished patient chart glaring at her.

She tried to focus, but her thoughts wandered again—to Josephine's advice, to Kara's magnetic presence, to her own gnawing fears. She didn't want to admit how much those conversations had been circling in her head. She could still hear Josephine's voice, firm but kind: Take the leap, Mallory. You can't let fear hold you back forever.

Her phone buzzed, startling her out of her thoughts. She glanced at the screen and frowned. “Doctor Storm,” she answered, her tone brisk.

“This is dispatch. We’ve had a partial building collapse at the south end of town. Multiple casualties reported. We need you on-site for triage.”

Mallory’s heart leapt into her throat. Building collapses were the stuff of her nightmares—chaotic, unpredictable, and dangerous. She gripped the phone tighter, already reaching for her medical bag. “I’m on my way.”

Her pulse quickened as she pushed through the ER doors and into the cool night air. This wasn’t the time to let her emotions take over. Whatever awaited her at the site, she had to be ready.

\* \* \*

The first thing Mallory noticed as she approached the collapse site was the smell—smoke, dust, and the faint, acrid scent of burning materials. It hung heavy in the air, making her throat tighten and her eyes sting. Her shoes crunched against the asphalt as she jogged the last few blocks, weaving through the tangle of parked emergency vehicles.

The scene before her was a symphony of chaos. Fire trucks lined the street, their lights flashing in dizzying patterns that cut through the settling dusk. Ambulances were parked at odd angles, their back doors flung open as medics worked frantically to stabilize the injured. Police officers directed traffic and cordoned off the area, shouting instructions to onlookers who crowded too close.

The collapsed building loomed in the background, a haunting silhouette against the hazy sky. Portions of the structure had crumbled entirely, while other parts leaned precariously, as if deciding whether to stand or fall. Smoke curled from the wreckage,

mingling with the dust that coated everything in a fine gray layer.

Mallory's breath hitched as she took it all in. It was one thing to hear about these scenes; it was another to stand in the middle of one. But there was no time to freeze. She tightened her grip on her medical bag and pushed forward, scanning the area for the triage zone.

That's when she saw her.

Kara stood near the edge of the debris field, her fire gear streaked with soot and her helmet resting under one arm. Even from a distance, Mallory could see the tension in her shoulders, the deliberate way she moved as she barked orders to her team. Kara's voice carried over the chaos, sharp and commanding, directing firefighters to reinforce a section of unstable debris.

For a moment, Mallory forgot to breathe. The Kara she saw now was a force of nature—focused, confident, and utterly in control. She looked like she belonged here, in the thick of the chaos, bending it to her will.

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As if sensing her gaze, Kara turned. Their eyes met, locking across the tumult. Mallory felt the pull instantly, the magnetic connection that seemed to exist only between them. Despite the layers of dirt and exhaustion etched into Kara's face, there was a flicker of something softer in her eyes, something that steadied Mallory's racing heart.

Kara gave her a brief nod, a silent acknowledgment that they were in this together. It wasn't much, but it was enough. Mallory felt a spark of reassurance that she hadn't known she needed.

She nodded back, squaring her shoulders and heading for the makeshift triage area.

The triage zone was a whirlwind of activity. Folding tables and portable floodlights had been set up haphazardly on the street, and medics were darting between patients with an urgency that left no room for error. Mallory jumped in without hesitation, snapping on gloves as she approached a paramedic who was bent over an unconscious woman.

"What do we have?" Mallory asked, crouching beside her.

"Mid-thirties, found pinned under debris. Possible spinal injury and severe contusions on the left side. BP's dropping."

Mallory nodded, her hands already moving. She worked quickly, assessing the woman's injuries and barking instructions to a nearby EMT. The chaos around her faded into the background as she focused entirely on stabilizing her patient.



The triage area was a frenzy of movement. Mallory worked with calm efficiency; her hands steady as she stitched a gash on a teenager's arm. Around her, medics called out updates, rushing to and from patients laid out on stretchers or makeshift mats on the ground. The air was thick with the mingling scents of smoke, dust, and blood, but Mallory barely noticed.

“Doctor Storm!”

She turned sharply at the sound of her name and spotted a firefighter jogging toward her. Her gear was streaked with soot, and her voice carried an urgency that set Mallory's pulse racing.

“Captain Harris needs you over by the northeast corner. There's a victim trapped under debris, and she says we'll need you the moment they're freed.”

Mallory didn't hesitate. She handed off her current patient to a medic, grabbed her kit, and followed the firefighter through the maze of wreckage. The closer they got to the collapse site, the heavier the air became, filled with the grind of machinery and the muffled cries of victims still trapped beneath the rubble.

She spotted Kara immediately as she stood side by side with Captain Cass Harris. Even amidst the chaos, Kara's presence was commanding. She stood at the edge of a jagged pile of debris, her helmet on, shouting instructions to her team. They worked in synchronized chaos, maneuvering heavy tools to lift a collapsed beam that had pinned someone beneath it.

“Kara!” Mallory called, her voice cutting through the din.

Kara turned, her eyes locking onto Mallory with a mix of relief and focus. “Over here!” she said, motioning her closer. “We've got a woman trapped. We're almost through, but she's in bad shape—broken leg, maybe worse. We need you ready as

soon as we get her out.”

Mallory nodded, her heart thudding. She dropped to her knees beside the rubble, pulling on gloves as she surveyed the scene. The woman was partially visible under the wreckage, her face pale and streaked with dirt, her breaths shallow and rapid.

“Hang tight,” Mallory said softly, leaning in to make eye contact with the woman. “We’re going to get you out.”

The woman’s gaze flickered, filled with fear but also a glimmer of hope.

Kara crouched beside Mallory, close enough that their shoulders brushed. “We’re lifting this beam now. Be ready,” Kara said, her voice low but steady.

“Understood,” Mallory replied, glancing at her. Kara’s face was streaked with soot, her jaw set with determination. She was a pillar of strength, and Mallory felt an unexpected wave of gratitude that she was here.

“On three!” Kara shouted to her team, stepping back to guide the operation.

The firefighters heaved in unison, the beam groaning as it was lifted inch by inch. Dust and debris rained down, making Mallory squint against the cloud that rose around them.

“She’s clear!” Kara called.

Mallory darted forward, sliding on her knees to reach the woman. Her hands moved instinctively, checking for a pulse, assessing injuries. “She’s in shock,” Mallory muttered, grabbing supplies from her bag. “Kara, hold this flashlight steady for me.”

Kara knelt beside her, taking the flashlight without hesitation and angling the beam

exactly where Mallory needed it. They worked together seamlessly, as if they'd done this a hundred times before.

The woman groaned as Mallory stabilized her leg with a splint. "You're doing great," Mallory said, her voice calm and soothing. She glanced up at Kara, who was holding the light steady, her focus unwavering.

"We need to move her to the triage area," Mallory said.

Kara nodded, signaling to her team. Within moments, a stretcher was brought over, and together, Mallory and Kara lifted the woman onto it with care. As the firefighters carried the stretcher away, Mallory exhaled, her muscles trembling from the intensity of the moment.

The dust and noise of the site began to settle, if only briefly. Mallory wiped a hand across her forehead, smearing dirt across her skin, and took a moment to catch her breath. Her lungs burned from the smoke, and her hands ached, but there was no time to dwell on her exhaustion.

She turned, scanning the site for Kara. She didn't have to look far. Kara stood a few feet away, bent over a map spread out on the hood of a fire truck, strategizing with another firefighter. Even from a distance, Mallory could see the tension in her shoulders, the weight of responsibility pressing down on her.

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As if sensing Mallory's gaze, Kara straightened and looked over. Their eyes met, and for a moment, the chaos of the scene seemed to fade into the background. Kara walked toward her, her movements deliberate but unhurried.

"You holding up?" Kara asked, her voice rough from shouting over the noise and breathing in smoke.

Mallory nodded, though her body felt like it might collapse if she let herself stop moving. "I'm fine," she said, though her voice came out weaker than she intended.

Kara's hand reached out, resting briefly on Mallory's arm. The touch was light but grounding, like a lifeline in the storm of the moment.

"You're doing great," Kara said, her tone softer now, the rough edges smoothed by something almost tender.

Mallory felt her chest tighten, a wave of emotions she didn't have the time or energy to sort through crashing over her. But what she did feel—clearly and undeniably—was a sense of safety in Kara's presence.

"Thanks," Mallory said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Kara squeezed her arm lightly before stepping back. "We're almost through this," she said, her eyes searching Mallory's for something unspoken. "Stay close if you need anything."

Mallory nodded, unable to find words as Kara turned and walked back toward the

wreckage. The moment lingered, warm and steady amid the chaos, and Mallory felt a renewed surge of determination. They weren't just fighting the aftermath of a disaster; they were building something fragile but real between them.

With a deep breath, Mallory squared her shoulders and turned back to her work, ready to face whatever came next.

\* \* \*

The air was still thick with the acrid smell of smoke when the ground beneath Mallory's feet gave a sudden, violent tremor. Shouts echoed across the collapse site as debris shifted and groaned under the pressure of an aftershock. Mallory's heart jumped into her throat as she stumbled, catching herself against a nearby firetruck.

"Kara!"

The name escaped her lips before she could think. Her eyes darted frantically toward the northeast corner of the site where Kara and her team had been working to secure the remaining unstable structure. A sickening crack echoed, and Mallory saw a section of the building crumble, sending a cloud of dust and rubble cascading down.

Amid the chaos, Kara was already moving. She sprinted toward the collapse, her gear clanking as she signaled her team to follow.

"Kara, wait!" Mallory shouted; her voice almost drowned out by the cacophony.

But Kara didn't stop. She didn't even hesitate. Her focus was locked on a victim—trapped in the newly fallen debris, their faint cries for help barely audible over the noise.

Mallory's chest tightened as she watched Kara dive into the unstable structure. It was

reckless, dangerous, and exactly what she should have expected from someone like Kara.

“Damn it,” Mallory whispered, gripping her medical bag tightly. She wanted to run after her, to pull her back, but she knew she would only get in the way. Instead, she stood frozen, torn between admiration and fear, her pulse hammering in her ears as seconds stretched into agonizing eternity.

Inside the wreckage, Kara and her team worked with furious efficiency. Mallory could see glimpses of them through the haze—Kara’s strong frame illuminated by flashlight beams as she maneuvered carefully through the rubble.

“Come on,” Mallory whispered, her knuckles white as she clutched the strap of her bag.

Finally, Kara emerged, her arm wrapped protectively around a man who was coughing violently, his face pale and smeared with grime. Kara’s helmet was askew, her face streaked with sweat and soot, and her movements were labored as she half-carried, half-dragged the victim to safety.

Mallory’s legs moved before she realized it, closing the distance between them in a rush.

“Here!” she called to the medics, gesturing for a stretcher. As they took the victim from Kara, Mallory turned her attention to her.

“Kara, are you hurt?” she asked, her voice tight with a mix of urgency and concern.

Kara waved her off, still catching her breath. “I’m fine,” she rasped, her voice rough from smoke inhalation. “Focus on him.”

But Mallory didn't miss the way Kara winced slightly as she straightened. Her heart twisted, but she let it go for the moment. The victim needed her more.

As Mallory worked to stabilize the man's breathing, she couldn't stop her eyes from flickering back to Kara. Even in exhaustion, even bruised and dirtied, Kara stood tall, her presence unshakable.

And Mallory felt something shift inside her—a realization that her fear of letting someone in might pale in comparison to the fear of losing someone like Kara.

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Hours later, the chaos of the site began to wane. The last victims were being loaded into ambulances, and the steady churn of activity was finally giving way to a weary stillness.

Mallory stood near the triage area, leaning against a supply crate. Her body ached, her hands were raw, and her scrubs were caked with dirt. But her mind was a whirlwind, replaying the day's events, the near-misses, and most of all, the image of Kara rushing headlong into danger.

The sound of boots crunching over gravel pulled her from her thoughts. She looked up to see Kara approaching, her fire gear looking even more battered in the dim light. Her helmet was tucked under one arm, and her face, streaked with soot and exhaustion, was softened by a small, reassuring smile.

"Hey," Kara said, her voice low and warm. "How're you holding up?"

Mallory huffed a tired laugh, pushing a strand of hair out of her face. "I think that's my line."

Kara stopped a few feet away, her eyes scanning Mallory with a mixture of concern and admiration. "You held your own out here," she said. "I knew you would."

The words, simple as they were, hit Mallory harder than she expected. She felt a lump rise in her throat, and she swallowed it down, forcing herself to meet Kara's gaze.

"You're incredible, you know that?" Mallory said, her voice quieter now. "What you did back there..."



Kara shrugged, a faint smirk tugging at her lips. “Just doing my job.”

But Mallory shook her head. “No. It’s more than that. You... You risked everything.”

Kara’s expression softened, and for a moment, the weight of her usual confidence seemed to lift. “It’s what we do. And I knew you’d be here, ready to step in if anything went wrong.”

Mallory’s breath caught, her chest tightening as the words sank in. It wasn’t just about the risks Kara took or the lives she saved. It was the trust she had in Mallory, the quiet partnership they’d fallen into without even realizing it.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The world around them faded, leaving only the crackle of distant radios and the faint hum of engines.

Kara broke the silence with a small, lopsided grin. “I should get back to my team,” she said, her voice laced with fatigue.

Mallory nodded, her throat too tight to respond. She watched as Kara turned and walked away, her stride steady despite the day’s toll.

As Kara disappeared into the crowd of firefighters, Mallory let out a shaky breath. Her heart felt heavier, but not in a way that weighed her down. It was full—overflowing with emotions she was no longer sure she could keep bottled up.

And for the first time in a long time, she didn’t want to.

The firetruck's siren still echoed faintly in Kara's ears as she turned onto Mallory's street, her hands gripping the wheel tighter than usual. The city lights reflected off the windshield, casting flickering shadows across Mallory's face. She sat silently in the passenger seat, her posture stiff, her gaze fixed out the window.

Kara glanced at her, noticing the way Mallory's fingers tapped against her thigh in a rhythm that betrayed her unease. It was a small movement, but it felt monumental after the day they'd had. Kara's heart ached for her—she knew the weight of seeing lives hanging by a thread, the adrenaline that masked the fear, and the exhaustion that seeped in once it was all over.

The radio played softly, filling the silence with the soothing hum of an old jazz tune. Kara let it play, sensing that Mallory wasn't ready for conversation just yet. The quiet between them wasn't uncomfortable, though it was heavy with unspoken words, with things Kara wanted to say but couldn't find the right moment to voice.

When they reached Mallory's apartment, Kara parked along the curb and cut the engine. The silence was more pronounced now, the hum of the radio replaced by the distant sounds of the city. Kara turned to Mallory, ready to offer a quick goodnight and leave her to process the day in her own space.

But Mallory didn't move. She sat still, her hands resting in her lap, her eyes fixed on the dashboard as if she were searching for something—courage, maybe, or the right words to break the quiet.

"I, uh..." Mallory's voice was softer than Kara expected, almost hesitant. She finally turned to face her, and Kara was struck by the vulnerability in her expression. "Do you... want to come in for a drink? Just... to unwind?"

Kara hesitated for a moment, her mind racing through possible outcomes. Mallory's invitation felt like more than a simple offer—it was a crack in the carefully

constructed walls she kept around herself. Kara wasn't sure what lay on the other side, but she wasn't about to let fear stop her from finding out.

"Sure," Kara said, her voice steady despite the flutter in her chest. She climbed out of the car and followed Mallory up the steps to her apartment.

\* \* \*

The warmth of Mallory's apartment enveloped Kara the moment they stepped inside. It was a stark contrast to the cold, chaotic scene they'd left behind. The space was small but thoughtfully arranged, with cozy furniture, soft lighting, and a few framed photos on the walls. A faint scent of lavender lingered in the air, calming and inviting.

"Make yourself comfortable," Mallory said, her voice carrying a slight tremor as she slipped off her coat and hung it by the door. She disappeared into the kitchen, leaving Kara alone in the living room.

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Kara took in the space, her eyes scanning over the bookshelves crammed with medical texts and novels, the neatly folded blanket draped over the arm of the couch, and the small collection of houseplants thriving near the window. It was such a stark contrast to Mallory's usual polished demeanor—it felt more personal, more real.

When Mallory returned with two glasses of wine, Kara was seated on the couch, her elbows resting on her knees as she examined a framed photo of what looked like a younger Mallory with an older couple—her parents, maybe.

“Here,” Mallory said, handing Kara one of the glasses. She sat down beside her, keeping a few inches of space between them. Kara noticed how Mallory's hand trembled slightly as she took a sip of her wine.

“Thanks,” Kara said, taking a sip of her own. The wine was rich and smooth, its warmth spreading through her chest. She set the glass down on the coffee table and leaned back, letting herself sink into the plush cushions.

“You've done a good job with this place,” Kara said after a moment, her voice light and casual. “Very... you.”

Mallory raised an eyebrow, the corner of her mouth quirking up into a faint smile. “What's that supposed to mean?”

Kara shrugged, feigning innocence. “It's just... neat. Organized. Very professional, but with a cozy twist. Like you.”

Mallory rolled her eyes, but the faint smile lingered. “I think that's the most

backhanded compliment I've ever received."

Kara chuckled, the sound breaking some of the tension in the room. "It's a compliment, I swear. I mean, look at these plants. They're thriving. You've got to have some kind of magic touch."

"Or I just water them regularly," Mallory said dryly, though her expression softened.

Kara reached over, her fingers brushing against the glossy leaves of a nearby monstera. "Still impressive. I can barely keep a cactus alive."

Mallory laughed, a genuine, melodic sound that made Kara's chest feel lighter. "Maybe I'll give you some pointers," she said, her voice warmer now.

As the conversation drifted to lighter topics—books, hobbies, and the quirks of life in Phoenix Ridge—Kara couldn't help but notice the subtle shifts in Mallory's demeanor. She was more relaxed now, her shoulders no longer as tense, her smile coming more easily. But there was still a shadow of something beneath the surface, a weight Kara couldn't ignore.

"You okay?" Kara asked gently, her tone softening.

Mallory hesitated, her gaze dropping to her glass of wine. She turned it slowly in her hands, the liquid swirling like her thoughts.

"I'm fine," she said after a moment, though the words felt hollow.

Kara didn't press her, but she didn't look away, either. She simply waited, giving Mallory the space to speak if she wanted to.

Finally, Mallory sighed and set her glass down beside Kara's. "It's just been a long

day,” she admitted. “Seeing all of that—people trapped, injured... It’s hard not to think about how fragile everything is.”

Kara nodded, her expression understanding. “Yeah. It hits you sometimes, doesn’t it? How quickly things can change.”

Mallory looked at her, her eyes searching Kara’s face as if looking for something she wasn’t sure how to name. “How do you do it?” she asked quietly. “Face that every day and still... keep going?”

Kara leaned forward, resting her forearms on her knees as she considered the question. “You find a reason,” she said simply. “Something that keeps you grounded. For me, it’s my team. My family. And, sometimes, it’s just knowing that even if I can’t save everyone, I can still make a difference for someone.”

Mallory’s gaze softened, and for a moment, the room seemed to shrink around them, the air charged with something unspoken. Kara wanted to reach out, to close the gap between them, but she held back, sensing that Mallory needed to set the pace.

“Thanks,” Mallory said after a beat, her voice quieter now. “For coming in. For... being here.”

Kara smiled, her heart swelling with the knowledge that Mallory wanted her company. “Anytime,” she said, and she meant it.

Mallory sat cross-legged on the couch, her wine glass cradled in her hands as she stared into the deep red liquid. The light from the small lamp on the side table bathed the room in a warm, golden glow, the kind of light that made everything feel softer, more forgiving.

Kara was beside her, one arm draped over the back of the couch, her body angled

toward Mallory as if instinctively trying to shield her from the weight of the world. She hadn't said much since Mallory started talking, but that was part of Kara's magic—knowing when to speak and when to simply be there.

Mallory's voice was quiet when she finally broke the silence. "It's not something I talk about often. Or... ever, really." Her fingers tightened around the glass as if it were the only thing anchoring her.

"You don't have to," Kara said softly, her voice a steady counterpoint to the uncertainty in Mallory's. "But I'm here if you want to."

Mallory let out a shaky breath, her shoulders rising and falling with the effort. "I think... I think today just cracked something open in me. Seeing those people trapped, wondering if they were going to make it... It was like this ugly reminder of how little control we really have." She paused, her lips pressing into a thin line. "And I hate that. I hate feeling helpless."

Kara nodded, her expression calm but attentive. "It's a hard thing to face. But it's also human."

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Mallory glanced at her, her eyes glossy but resolute. “I don’t know if I can be that... human. Not the way you are. I’ve spent so much of my life trying to be... untouchable. Invulnerable. Like if I don’t let anyone in, they can’t hurt me. But it’s lonely. And exhausting.”

Her voice cracked on the last word, and she looked away, blinking quickly.

Kara resisted the urge to reach out, sensing that Mallory needed to get through this moment on her own terms. “You don’t have to be untouchable all the time,” she said gently. “You can let people in and still be strong. Sometimes, letting someone in is the strongest thing you can do.”

Mallory gave a hollow laugh, shaking her head. “That’s easy for you to say. You make it look effortless.”

Kara raised an eyebrow, her lips quirking into a wry smile. “Oh, trust me, it’s not. I’ve had my fair share of walls. Hell, I’ve probably built a few fortresses in my time.”

Mallory looked at her, curiosity flickering through the haze of her emotions. “Really?”

“Really,” Kara said, her tone softening. “I wasn’t always like this. There was a time when I didn’t trust anyone. Not with the big stuff, anyway. I’d let people in just enough to think they knew me, but never enough to really see me. It was safer that way—or at least that’s what I told myself.”

“What changed?” Mallory asked, her voice tentative but genuine.



Kara leaned back, her gaze growing distant as she sifted through memories. “There was a fire a few years ago—nothing like today, but bad enough. We lost someone. A rookie. I was her captain, and I couldn’t save her.”

Mallory’s breath hitched, her hand instinctively reaching for Kara’s arm. Kara didn’t flinch, but the memory darkened her features.

“For a long time, I blamed myself. Shut everyone out because I thought they’d just see me as a failure. It wasn’t until one of my teammates—my best friend, Scotti—called me out on it that I realized I was pushing people away to protect myself. And in doing that, I was making everything worse.”

She turned to Mallory, her eyes steady and sincere. “It took time, but I learned that letting people in doesn’t mean you’re weak. It just means you’re human. And being human isn’t a bad thing.”

Mallory’s throat tightened as she listened, the weight of Kara’s words settling into her chest. She hadn’t expected Kara to share something so personal, and the raw honesty of it left her breathless.

“I’ve been doing the same thing,” Mallory admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. “For as long as I can remember, I’ve kept people at arm’s length. I tell myself it’s because I’m focused on my career, but really... it’s just fear.”

Kara tilted her head, her expression encouraging but not pressing.

Mallory took another sip of her wine, as though the liquid courage would steady her. “Fear of failure. Fear of being hurt. Fear of losing control. I’ve seen how messy life can get, and I’ve always thought if I could just keep everything... contained, I’d be safe.”

“But?” Kara prompted gently.

“But then you came along,” Mallory said, her eyes meeting Kara’s. “And you’re... different. You make me feel things I don’t know how to handle. And that scares the hell out of me.”

Kara shifted closer, the couch creaking softly beneath her. She reached out, her fingers brushing against Mallory’s in a tentative, grounding gesture. “You don’t have to handle it alone,” she said, her voice low and steady. “I’m not going anywhere. And I’m not asking you to change overnight. Just... let me in, a little at a time. We’ll figure it out together.”

Mallory stared at their hands, her heart pounding in her chest. It felt like a leap off a cliff, but there was something in Kara’s eyes—something solid and unshakable—that made her believe she wouldn’t fall alone.

“Okay,” Mallory whispered, her voice breaking on the word. “Okay.”

Kara smiled, a warmth spreading through her chest. She could see how much it had taken for Mallory to say that, and it made her want to protect this moment, to make sure Mallory knew she was safe here.

“You take care of everyone else, you need to let me take care of you this time,” Kara said, as she gently took Mallory’s chin in her hand, tilting it to look her in the eyes. “You look exhausted, Mal.”

“Probably not as worn out as you, though; you’ve been in a literal hell-scape all day, it doesn’t feel fair for you to have to look after me.”

“I want to look after you. Let me show you.” Gently she slid her hands under Mallory’s form, picking her up, holding her close.

The room was dark, lit only by a dim reading lamp, but in the scant light Kara felt Mallory relax in her arms. She sat them both on the bed, with Mallory facing away from her, leaning back into Kara's strong body. She wrapped her arms around Mallory, unfastening the buttons of her work clothes, and gently peeling them from her skin. As she went, she planted gentle kisses across every inch of her skin, massaging any tight muscles along the way. Once Mallory was fully undressed, she tried to push her to lie beneath the covers but Mallory stayed upright.

"I know I need rest, Kara, but after today, I need you too."

"You can have me all you like," Kara said, her voice heavy with want.

Kara idled herself, stroking Mallory's hair as the doctor slowly undressed her, feeling each layer stripped from her and dropped to the floor. Once she was shirtless, she felt Mallory flicking across her nipples every few strokes, and looked down to see her glancing up with a smirk.

"Hmm, I seem to remember promising you I'd make you scream yourself hoarse next time I had you to myself, but I might have to table that promise until next time." Now fully undressed, Kara pulled the pair of them back onto the bed, drawing the comforter over them. Seeing Mallory's disappointment she continued, "Don't worry, I'm not finished with you yet."

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Their strokes were slow, languid; both from their shared tiredness but also in the knowledge that they had each other. There was no reason to rush.

Kara drew around Mallory's nipples, enjoying the feeling of them hardening at her touch. She pulled herself into Mallory's neck, kissing slowly up its length and across her shoulder; feeling Mallory gently exploring her simultaneously. Unlike their previous encounters, which had been urgent, primal, raw. This was different. They knew they had one another, they weren't going to lose this. Closing her eyes, Kara felt her way up and down Mallory's body, pausing at her breasts and pussy, feeling Mallory do the same in return. Until she could take it no longer and dove her fingers between Mallory's warm folds, wet from her desire. She was desperate for this too. Kara slipped one finger inside her, then two, as she drew circles around her clit with her thumb. A shudder of need rattled through Mallory's body before Kara felt Mallory's fingers pushing inside her pussy too. In unison they moved, slowly, ever so slowly, whispering nothings in the darkness.

Eventually their crescendo hit, washing over the pair of them as they held one another, their breathing perfectly in sync. Kara pulled Mallory into her chest, laying a kiss into her silky hair.

\* \* \*

The piercing shriek of the station alarm jolted Kara out of a restless sleep. Her eyes snapped open, and for a split second, she stared at the ceiling, disoriented. Then, the gravity of the sound clicked into place, and adrenaline coursed through her veins. She rolled out of her bunk, her body moving on instinct honed by years of experience.

“Warehouse fire. Outskirts of Phoenix Ridge,” the dispatcher’s voice crackled over the intercom as Kara grabbed her gear. The mention of the location made her pause for half a breath. She knew the place—a sprawling, decrepit structure that had long been a fire hazard waiting to happen.

The team filed into the engine with practiced efficiency, their banter subdued, replaced by a grim determination. Kara slipped into the passenger seat, her mind already mapping out possible scenarios. Her captain’s instincts kicked in: organize, assess, execute. The fire wouldn’t wait, and hesitation was a luxury she didn’t have.

The drive felt both agonizingly slow and too fast. Outside, the world was cloaked in the inky stillness of early morning, the kind that amplified every sound—the wail of sirens, the roar of the engine, the quiet murmur of her crew discussing tactics. As they neared the site, Kara caught sight of the fire in the distance, its glow reflecting off low-hanging clouds like a malevolent sunrise.

When they arrived, the scene was pure chaos. The warehouse was an inferno, flames licking hungrily at the night sky. Thick, black smoke billowed upward, carrying the acrid stench of burning wood and chemicals. The building was a skeleton of its former self, parts of the roof already collapsed and others threatening to follow. Emergency vehicles were scattered like toys, their lights strobing red and blue across the scene. Civilians—workers, perhaps, or people who had been nearby—huddled behind hastily erected barriers, their faces pale and frightened.

Kara stepped out of the engine, the heat hitting her like a physical force. Her gear felt heavier than usual, but she shoved the discomfort aside. She turned to her crew, her voice steady despite the roar of the flames.

“Scotti, take the north side with your team. Check for anyone trapped and report back. Cass, you’re with me on the east side. We’ll sweep the first floor and see if we can figure out the source of this thing. Stay sharp—this building’s a maze, and it’s

not going to be forgiving.”

The team nodded, their trust in her evident. Kara didn’t take that lightly. She adjusted her helmet, her gaze lingering on the warehouse for a moment longer. It loomed over them like a beast, its structure groaning under the strain of the fire.

As they approached, the heat became almost unbearable. The air was thick and stifling, each breath a reminder of the danger they faced. Kara’s eyes scanned the scene, cataloging every potential risk—the sagging beams, the erratic bursts of flame, the telltale signs of an impending collapse. Her gut churned as she caught a whiff of something chemical beneath the smoke. She made a mental note to warn the others to be careful with their air supplies.

\* \* \*

Inside, the world was a hell-scape of flickering light and shadows. The flames created an ever-shifting dance of brightness and darkness, making it difficult to navigate. The heat was oppressive, pressing down on them like a weight. Kara moved with purpose, her every step deliberate. Cass and the rest of the team stayed close, their communication reduced to clipped words and hand signals.

The first signs of danger came sooner than expected. As they cleared a corner, Kara noticed a support beam leaning at a precarious angle, its base scorched and weakened. She gestured for Kara to stop, her instincts screaming at her to backtrack.

“Structural instability,” Kara said into her radio, her voice calm but firm. “Scotti, watch for weak points. We’ve got compromised beams on the east side.”

The crackle of static was followed by Scotti’s acknowledgment. Kara continued forward, her senses on high alert. The building groaned around them, the sound a haunting reminder that their time was limited.

The intensity of the fire made it difficult to think, the constant roar filling Kara's ears and vibrating in her chest. Sweat dripped down her back despite the protective layers of her gear. She focused on the task at hand, compartmentalizing her fear and exhaustion. They reached what appeared to be an office area, its door partially caved in. Cass worked to clear the debris while Kara checked for signs of life.

"Nothing here," Kara reported, her eyes scanning the smoke-filled room. She turned to Cass, her expression unreadable behind her mask. "Let's move on."

They pressed deeper into the building, their progress slow but steady. Kara couldn't shake the feeling of unease growing in her chest. The warehouse was too quiet apart from the fire, as though the building itself was holding its breath. She glanced at Cass, who gave her a nod of encouragement.

Suddenly, a loud pop echoed through the space, followed by a cascade of debris from above. Kara instinctively ducked, her heart pounding as a cloud of dust and ash enveloped them.

"Everyone okay?" she called out, her voice tight. Cass coughed but gave her a thumbs-up. Kara's relief was short-lived as she noticed a fresh crack forming in the wall to their left.

"This place is a death trap," she muttered to herself, her grip tightening on her radio.

Despite the growing danger, Kara pushed forward, her determination outweighing her fear. The stakes were too high, and she wouldn't leave until she was certain they'd done everything they could. Her mind flickered briefly to Mallory, an unexpected warmth cutting through the cold knot of anxiety in her chest. Kara forced the thought aside, her focus snapping back to the task at hand.

By the time they reached the next section, the fire had intensified, its heat radiating

like an open furnace. Kara's instincts screamed at her to pull back, but she knew they had to make one final sweep. Her radio crackled with updates from the rest of the team, their voices tinged with exhaustion and urgency.

The explosion came without warning, a deafening roar that swallowed the warehouse in an instant. The force of it lifted Kara off her feet, flinging her backward as if she were weightless. She hit the ground hard, her helmet smacking against concrete as her breath fled her lungs. A cacophony of crashing beams, shattering glass, and roaring flames followed. The world around her was a blur of noise and light, the sharp tang of smoke filling her mouth and nostrils.

Dazed, Kara struggled to orient herself. Her ears rang, muffling the shouts of her team and the crackling inferno consuming the building. When she tried to move, pain seared through her right leg. She gasped, her hands instinctively flying to the source. A heavy beam had fallen across her thigh, pinning her to the ground. The jagged edge of the wood bit into her gear, and she could feel the heat radiating from it.

Panic surged through her, but she fought it down with practiced discipline. Kara had been in tight spots before, but none quite like this. The air was thick with smoke, and each breath felt like pulling fire into her lungs. She shoved at the beam with all her strength, gritting her teeth as pain shot up her leg. It didn't budge.

"Cass! Scotti!" she shouted, her voice hoarse. The words barely carried over the chaos around her. She strained to hear any response, but all she got was the ominous groan of the warehouse shifting under its own weight.



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Forcing herself to focus, Kara reached for her radio. Her hand trembled as she fumbled with it, the device slick with sweat and grime. She pressed the button. “This is Captain Brandon. I’m pinned by the building collapse—east side, first floor. Beam on my leg. Request immediate assistance.”

The radio crackled, but the reply was unintelligible, drowned out by static and the relentless roar of the fire. Kara cursed under her breath, her pulse pounding in her ears.

She leaned her head back against the concrete, closing her eyes for a moment. The smoke was getting thicker, the air hotter. Her breaths came faster despite her efforts to stay calm. In the growing haze, her thoughts began to spiral, and for the first time in years, fear took hold.

Was this it?

The question was unbidden, and it cut through her like the beam crushing her leg. Kara had always accepted the risks of the job, but in the back of her mind, she’d believed she was invincible—or at least untouchable. Now, staring down the very real possibility that she might not make it out, the thought was unbearable.

Her team. Her friends. Mallory.

The last name hit her like a punch to the chest, and she let out a shuddering breath. Mallory’s face filled her mind, unbidden but vivid. The way her lips quirked in that rare, genuine smile. The fire in her eyes when she argued a point. The softness in her voice when she let her guard down, even for a moment.

Kara's chest tightened, and it wasn't just from the smoke.

She thought of the night at Mallory's apartment, the way she'd opened up, baring her fears and insecurities like raw wounds. Kara had been so careful, so patient, holding back her own emotions for fear of overwhelming Mallory. She'd wanted to give her the time and space she needed.

But now, with flames closing in and the weight of the beam pressing her into the ground, all Kara could think about was how much she regretted not saying the words she'd held back.

Mallory, I love you.

The admission reverberated in her mind, raw and unspoken. Kara clenched her fists, frustration and sorrow bubbling up inside her. She had spent her whole life being strong, being the one others relied on. But now, with death staring her in the face, she realized how much she had left undone, unsaid.

"I'm not ready," she whispered, her voice cracking. Tears blurred her vision, mixing with the sweat and grime on her face. "I'm not ready to leave."

Her fingers tightened around the radio again, and she tried once more. "Kara to anyone—please respond. I'm pinned. East side, first floor."

Silence.

Kara's heart sank. She could hear her team somewhere in the distance, shouting orders and moving debris, but it felt impossibly far away. She pulled her emergency assistance alarm and heard the wailing sound it emitted to let the others know where she was. The fire was growing, the heat becoming unbearable. Her breaths were shallow now, each one a struggle.

She thought of Mallory again, the memory of her smile cutting through the suffocating haze. Kara swore to herself then and there that if she made it out, she wouldn't hold back anymore. No more waiting, no more second-guessing. Mallory deserved to know how much she meant to her.

Another creak from above snapped her back to the present. The building was groaning like a wounded animal, its structure on the verge of collapse. Kara gritted her teeth and shoved at the beam again, screaming in frustration and pain. It shifted slightly but remained firmly in place.

The effort left her dizzy, and she slumped back, gasping for air. Her vision was starting to blur at the edges, black creeping in like ink on paper.

No. Not like this.

Kara's thoughts were a jumble now, a chaotic mix of fear, regret, and desperate determination. She thought of her crew, her family in every way that mattered. She thought of Mallory, her strength and vulnerability, her stubbornness and courage.

If this was the end, Kara wanted them to know she fought.

\* \* \*

The sound of footsteps broke through the haze, faint but growing louder. Kara blinked, trying to focus. A shadow moved through the smoke, and then another. Voices called out, clearer now.

“Kara!”

Relief and disbelief washed over her. She tried to shout back, but her voice was barely a whisper. The footsteps grew closer until a face appeared above her—a

familiar one, streaked with soot and framed by a helmet.

“We’ve got her!” Cass’s voice was sharp, cutting through the noise like a lifeline.

Within seconds, hands were working to lift the beam. Kara bit down on her lip, the pain nearly unbearable as the weight shifted. She felt the pressure release, and then strong arms were pulling her free.

Her leg screamed in protest, but she didn’t care. The cool rush of air as they carried her outside was like salvation as they ripped off her helmet and her mask. Kara gasped, her lungs filling with fresh air. Delicious, beautiful fresh air.

As they laid her on a stretcher, Kara’s eyes fluttered open, her gaze searching the chaos for something—or someone.

Mallory.

Her name lingered in Kara's mind as her vision began to fade, exhaustion and pain dragging her under. One thought remained as the world went dark:

I need to tell her. Tell her I love her.

"She's got a crush injury to the leg and looks like a head and torso trauma too," Scotti reported to the medics, her voice clipped and professional despite the situation.

As the paramedics worked to stabilize her, Kara's eyes fluttered open again, unfocused but searching. Her lips moved faintly, and Scotti leaned closer.

"I love you," she whispered, her voice barely audible.

Scotti's throat tightened, but she nodded. "You're gonna tell her yourself. Just hang on, Kara."

15

MALLORY

Mallory sat at her desk, the faint hum of fluorescent lights above a steady backdrop to the quiet urgency of the hospital night shift. A stack of patient charts lay open before her, their neatly inked lines detailing lives she didn't know but was tasked with saving. Her pen hovered over a note she had been writing when the sharp beep of her pager cut through the silence.

She glanced down at it absently, the movement automatic, but the moment her eyes landed on the name and details scrolling across the tiny screen, time seemed to stop.

Kara Brandon.

The surge of fear hit her like a physical blow, twisting her stomach and tightening her chest. Mallory froze, the words burning into her brain. Warehouse fire. Crush injuries. Critical condition.

Her heart pounded wildly as adrenaline surged through her veins. She gripped the pager tightly, her knuckles white against the metal casing. This couldn't be happening. Not Kara. Not the strong, fearless woman she'd grown to care for so deeply.

But there wasn't time for panic. Taking a deep breath, Mallory pushed herself to her feet, forcing the icy grip of fear into a locked box somewhere in the back of her mind. The surgeon in her took over, smoothing the frantic edges of her thoughts into calm determination. Kara's life depended on her ability to stay composed, and Mallory wouldn't let her down.

She strode quickly to the OR preparation area, her footsteps echoing in the hallway. Nurses and techs were already scrambling into position, the air buzzing with quiet urgency. Mallory scrubbed in, her movements precise but mechanical, the ritual a lifeline tethering her to something steady in the chaos.

The surgical team moved around her, glancing at her with subtle concern. They knew the stakes. It wasn't uncommon for doctors to operate on people they cared about—it was part of the job—but the tension was palpable.

Mallory knew the rules. But Kara wasn't family and she wasn't technically her partner.

Either way, Mallory didn't care. She wouldn't let anyone else take this. Kara was hers to save. She was the best and she was determined to save Kara.

When the OR doors swung open, Mallory turned to see the gurney being wheeled in. Her breath caught in her throat.

Kara lay motionless, her normally vibrant presence diminished to a fragile stillness. Her fire gear had been stripped away, revealing a bloodied uniform beneath. Her leg was crushed beneath a mass of swollen tissue and exposed bone, and her face, streaked with soot and grime, was barely recognizable beneath the oxygen mask.

Mallory's pulse thudded painfully in her ears, but she forced herself to focus. She stepped forward, her gaze scanning Kara's injuries with a practiced eye.

"Severe crush injury to the left femur," a nurse reported. "Blood pressure's low, but stable for now. Internal bleeding suspected."

Mallory nodded tightly, her voice steady. "Let's get her prepped. Start a transfusion. We need imaging of the chest and abdomen to locate the bleed. Stabilize her leg, but don't waste time—we'll address it in the OR."

The team snapped into action, their trust in Mallory evident in their swift, confident movements. She felt the weight of responsibility settle over her, a heavy but familiar burden.

She moved to Kara's side, her gloved hand hovering over her face for a brief moment. The sight of Kara like this—so vulnerable, so far from the indomitable presence she had always been—was almost unbearable.

"Kara," Mallory whispered, her voice soft but firm. "You're going to be okay. I promise."

Her words were for both of them.

As the nurses positioned Kara for the procedure, Mallory felt the full weight of what lay ahead pressing on her chest. She couldn't fail. Not with Kara.

Once the team was ready, Mallory adjusted her mask and stepped into position. The bright surgical lights blazed overhead, illuminating every inch of Kara's injuries. The antiseptic smell of the OR filled the air, mingling with the quiet beeping of monitors and the rhythmic hiss of the ventilator.



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For a moment, Mallory let herself feel the enormity of what was happening. She let the fear surge, let the love she felt for Kara flood her chest and fuel her resolve.

Then, she took a deep breath, steadying herself.

“Scalpel,” she said, her voice clear and commanding.

And the surgery began.

The operating room was a sanctuary of urgency, every surface gleaming under the harsh, sterile light of the overhead lamps. The rhythmic beeping of monitors formed a tense symphony with the muffled voices of the surgical team. Mallory stood at the head of the table, her eyes fixed on Kara’s broken body, the bright surgical drape doing little to hide the severity of her injuries.

Mallory had spent years perfecting the art of detachment in moments like this—shutting out the human connection to focus solely on the task. But this wasn’t just anyone on the table. It was Kara. The woman who had upended Mallory’s carefully guarded world. The woman she wasn’t ready to lose.

“Vitals are stable but fragile,” the anesthesiologist said, her voice breaking the heavy silence.

Mallory nodded, her gaze sweeping over Kara’s body. “Let’s start with the internal injuries. If we don’t stop the bleeding, nothing else will matter. Suction, please.”

The team sprang into action around her, each member moving with well-practiced

precision. Mallory's hands were steady as she made the first incision, her mind honed in on the task. Yet, beneath the focus, emotions churned like an undertow, threatening to pull her under.

For a fleeting moment, the sterile environment of the OR faded, replaced by the memory of Kara's laughter echoing in her apartment. The way her eyes softened when she looked at Mallory, her teasing smile that always seemed to disarm her.

Mallory blinked hard, banishing the thought. Not now.

"Suction," she repeated, her tone clipped but calm.

The nurse handed her the instrument, and Mallory guided it carefully, clearing the blood to expose the damaged tissue beneath. Kara's abdomen bore the brunt of the explosion—torn muscle, ruptured vessels, and angry bruises that spoke of the violence she had endured.

She worked methodically, stitching vessels and repairing tears with the precision of a master craftsman. Her hands moved almost of their own accord, a testament to years of training and countless hours in the OR.

But her mind wasn't so easily disciplined.

What if this was the last time she'd see Kara alive? What if she couldn't save her?

A surge of fear gripped Mallory's chest, her breath catching in her throat. She glanced up at the monitor, the steady blip of Kara's heartbeat grounding her.

"You've got this," she whispered to herself, too softly for anyone else to hear.

"Doctor Storm?" a nurse asked, breaking her reverie.

“Clamp,” Mallory said firmly, extending her hand. “Let’s keep moving.”

The team worked in tandem, their movements fluid and efficient, but Mallory could feel the weight of their watchful eyes. They knew this wasn’t just another patient to her.

As she continued repairing the damage, flashes of memory broke through her concentration. Those moments fueled her resolve, each one a reminder of the woman fighting for her life on the table. Kara wasn’t just another patient. She was everything Mallory had been too afraid to admit she wanted.

“Bleeding’s controlled,” Mallory announced, relief creeping into her voice. “Let’s stabilize the leg.”

Her gaze shifted to Kara’s mangled limb, a grim testament to the collapse. The fractures were severe, the muscle and skin shredded by the weight of the debris. It would take hours of reconstruction to give her even a chance at recovery.

Mallory forced herself to focus, leaning on the part of her that was all logic and skill.

“This will be the hardest part,” she said, addressing the team. “Let’s keep her stable. Every second counts.”

Mallory began the painstaking work of stabilizing the shattered bone, placing pins and aligning fragments with the precision of a sculptor restoring a masterpiece. Sweat beaded at her temples beneath her surgical cap, but her hands remained steady.

“She’s lucky to have you, Doctor Storm,” the scrub nurse murmured as she passed an instrument.

Mallory’s chest tightened at the words. Was it luck? Or was it something far more

terrifying—a responsibility she couldn't bear to fail?

“I’m just doing my job,” Mallory replied, her voice betraying none of the turmoil beneath.

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But as the hours stretched on, that turmoil became harder to ignore. Every time Kara's vitals wavered, Mallory's heart clenched. Every time the monitors beeped erratically, a flicker of doubt pierced her focus.

And yet, she pressed on, pouring every ounce of her skill, her will, and her love into the work.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the last suture was placed. Mallory stepped back, her hands trembling with exhaustion. Kara's leg was stabilized, the bleeding controlled. Her vitals, though still fragile, were holding steady.

"She's stable," Mallory said, her voice thick with emotion.

A collective sigh of relief swept through the room.

Mallory turned to the anesthesiologist. "Keep her monitored closely. Notify me immediately if anything changes."

The team nodded, their respect for her evident in their expressions.

Mallory removed her gloves and mask, leaning against the counter as the weight of the moment settled over her. Her body ached, her mind spun, but one thought rose above the rest: Kara was alive.

She allowed herself a single, trembling breath before leaving the OR. There was still a long road ahead, but for now, she had done everything she could.

As she stepped into the hallway, the memories returned—the laughter, the strength, the quiet moments of connection. Kara wasn't just another patient. She was the person Mallory couldn't imagine losing.

And tonight, Mallory had fought with everything she had to make sure she wouldn't.

As Mallory stepped out of the operating room, her legs felt like they might buckle beneath her. The sterile, humming quiet of the hospital hallway was a far cry from the chaos of the OR, where her mind had been razor-focused, keeping her emotions locked away in the deepest corners of her heart. But now, in the stark silence of the corridor, with the weight of the world still pressing on her shoulders, she let herself breathe.

Her heart was still pounding in her chest, a reminder of the intensity of the surgery, the constant threat of failure that had hovered over every movement she'd made. But it wasn't just the operation that was weighing on her. As the adrenaline of the moment faded, the torrent of emotions she had fought so hard to suppress flooded back in full force.

Kara. The woman she loved. The woman who had been torn apart by the explosion, her body broken and battered, her life hanging by a thread in that sterile room. Mallory leaned against the cold wall, her palms flat against the surface, as if she could physically hold herself together.

Her breath caught in her throat as memories of the moments she'd spent with Kara—laughing, talking, even the silences—flashed through her mind. Kara's smile, so effortless and warm, seemed like a distant dream now, eclipsed by the image of her in that hospital bed, battered and unconscious.

The fear that had been creeping around the edges of her thoughts—the fear that she might not get another chance to tell Kara how she truly felt—rushed in like a flood.

Mallory had spent so much of her life running from emotions, locking them behind the walls of her career, hiding behind the sterile, technical world she'd mastered. But with Kara, it had all felt different. She had allowed herself to believe in something more. Something that wasn't about logic or skill or control. It was about trust, and vulnerability, and connection.

But now? Now she couldn't shake the terror that she might never get the chance to say the words that had been lodged in her chest for so long.

I love you. The thought echoed through her mind, but it felt so foreign, so terrifying, that it almost choked her. She had only said that out loud to one other person, and while she meant it at the time, her feelings in the past paled to how much she felt for Kara. And now, with the possibility of losing her hanging in the balance, the weight of that unsaid confession threatened to crush her.

Mallory swallowed hard, trying to steady herself. The OR had demanded everything from her—every ounce of focus, every scrap of energy—but now, alone in the hallway, she was faced with the reality of the situation. She could feel the tremor in her hands as they gripped the edge of the counter, the tightness in her chest that seemed to constrict her every breath.

What if it was too late? What if Kara didn't make it through the night?

The thought was unbearable, and Mallory immediately pushed it away, forcing herself to think rationally. Kara was strong. She was a fighter. Mallory had seen it in her every day since they met—her quiet determination, her resilience. She had no doubt that Kara would pull through this, no matter how bad the odds seemed.

And yet... what if? The what ifs seemed endless, swirling around in her mind like a storm. What if her own fear had kept her from being truly honest with Kara? What if her hesitation, her refusal to confront her own feelings, had caused more distance

between them than she had realized?

She closed her eyes for a moment, leaning her forehead against the cool metal of the door frame. Her mind reeled. She had pushed Kara away in so many ways, even if she hadn't meant to. She had held back when it came to their connection, wrapped herself in layers of protection because she feared what it might mean to give her heart away. And now, Kara was lying in a hospital bed, fighting for her life, and Mallory couldn't help but wonder if she had waited too long.

Would Kara know that Mallory had cared for her from the very first moment they'd met, even if Mallory hadn't said it? Would Kara understand that the distance Mallory had kept between them had never been about her, but about Mallory's own inability to trust that kind of love?

A nurse passed by, her footsteps quick and purposeful, and Mallory forced herself to take a steadying breath. She had to move forward. She had to stay strong—for Kara, for herself, for the team that had relied on her to hold it together. But as she pushed off the wall, her body felt like lead. Her legs were unsteady, as though the gravity of the situation had finally caught up to her.

She wandered down the hallway, her footsteps echoing too loudly in the silence, trying to pull herself together, to remember who she was and what she had done. She was a surgeon, damn it. She had saved lives before, and she could save Kara too. But her own voice of reassurance sounded hollow, the weight of the truth pressing down on her with every step.

What if this was the moment that defined everything between them? What if she had never said the words, had never truly let herself feel the depth of what was growing between them? She had taken it for granted, assuming that there would always be more time. But time wasn't a guarantee.



The idea that Kara might never wake up, that she might never be able to apologize for her hesitation, terrified Mallory more than she could have ever imagined. Every part of her ached with the fear of losing Kara, not just because she couldn't bear the pain of her absence, but because she knew that they had something real—something rare—and she had been too afraid to fully embrace it.

Mallory reached the nurses' station and looked around, her gaze unfocused, until she saw Scotti, one of Kara's teammates. The firefighter looked up at her, her expression tight with concern.

"Doctor Storm," Scotti said softly, her voice betraying none of the anxiety that was clearly eating at her. "How's she doing?"

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Mallory swallowed hard, forcing herself to appear composed as she glanced down at her hands, still trembling slightly. “She’s stable for now. We got through the worst of it. The next few hours will be crucial.”

Scotti’s jaw tightened, her eyes hard with worry. “She’s a tough one, Doc. She’ll pull through. She always does.”

Mallory nodded, the words doing little to ease the gnawing fear inside of her.

“I hope you’re right,” she whispered. And for the first time, Mallory allowed herself to truly believe in the possibility that they could have more time. That she would get to tell Kara everything she hadn’t said yet.

But as she stood there, watching Scotti walk away to deliver the update to Kara’s team, Mallory knew that even if she had that time, she would have to face the deepest fear of all: that Kara might not feel the same way.

But that was a worry for another time. For now, all Mallory could do was wait and hope that Kara would wake up. That she would have the chance to speak those words aloud. To tell Kara the truth before it was too late.

16

KARA

Kara’s head felt heavy, her mind sluggish, as though she was floating in and out of some half-formed dream. The sharp beeping of monitors was the only sound that cut

through the haze, a constant reminder that she was no longer in the chaos of the warehouse. But where was she? And what had happened?

Her body felt wrong—her leg ached, her chest felt tight, and her throat was dry. Panic flared briefly, but the sensation was quickly smothered by the comfort of something soft, something warm. It took Kara a few moments to realize that someone was holding her hand, their fingers entwined with hers, offering a silent reassurance.

She tried to speak, but her mouth felt parched, the words stuck somewhere deep inside her. Her lips trembled as she made a sound, a low, unsteady groan. It was enough to stir the person by her side.

“Kara?”

The voice was a soft, gentle whisper, and yet it cut through the fog of her confusion like a lifeline. She strained to focus, her eyelids fluttering open.

At first, everything was a blur. The sterile white of the hospital room, the flickering lights above her, the IV drips in her arm—all of it was distant, out of reach. But through the haze, she saw her. Mallory.

Kara’s heart skipped a beat as she locked eyes with the woman sitting beside her. Mallory was leaning forward slightly her hair tied back, her face drawn with exhaustion but illuminated by a quiet, almost fragile relief. The pale light of the hospital room made her features seem more delicate, but it was her big dark brown eyes that held Kara’s attention. They were filled with worry and care, tinged with something more, something deeper.

“Mallory...” Kara’s voice was barely a rasp, the word coming out in a whisper that barely made it past her cracked lips.

Mallory's eyes widened, and she let out a breath as though she had been holding it for too long. She tightened her grip on Kara's hand, her thumb stroking gently over Kara's knuckles.

"Hey, you're awake," Mallory said softly, her voice thick with emotion. "I was so worried."

Kara blinked slowly, trying to focus on Mallory's face, on the reassurance that Mallory's presence brought. But there was too much pain, too much disorientation, and her body refused to cooperate. Her head throbbed, and the weight of what had happened felt too heavy to lift from her chest. She could remember the explosion, the blast that had thrown her into the dark, suffocating pain, the dust, and the crushing feeling of helplessness.

"Kara?" Mallory's voice broke through her thoughts. "Can you hear me? It's okay, you're safe now. You're in the hospital."

Kara tried to speak again, but the words came out in a barely audible rasp, the air thin and shallow in her lungs. She didn't know what to say, didn't know how to ask what had happened or how long she'd been here. She wanted to say something—anything—that would ease the gnawing anxiety in the pit of her stomach.

But Mallory's face was enough. That soft, kind expression of relief. Mallory was here, and that alone made everything seem a little less frightening.

"Mallory..." Kara said again, this time a little more firmly, but it was still barely above a murmur. She squeezed Mallory's hand, and the warmth of her touch felt grounding, real. "What happened?"

Mallory's gaze softened, and her thumb continued its slow, rhythmic movement over

Kara's hand, soothing her in a way that no words could. There was a brief pause before Mallory spoke, her voice low and steady.

"There was a fire, Kara. A warehouse... You were trapped. You... you're okay now. You're safe. They brought you in, and we've been taking care of you."

Kara's mind raced, fragments of memories returning, the chaos, the sound of crackling flames, the heat that felt like it had burned her skin. But everything felt distant, almost surreal, like a nightmare that hadn't fully dissipated. She blinked, trying to force the memories into something coherent, but her body was still too weak, her head too foggy to make sense of it.

Pain surged through her leg, a deep, throbbing ache that made her wince. She shifted slightly, trying to move, but it only seemed to make the pain worse. A groan slipped from her lips, and Mallory's grip on her hand tightened, her fingers pressing firmly into Kara's skin.

"Shh, don't move," Mallory urged gently, her voice full of concern. "You're okay, Kara. You're safe. Just stay still. You're in the hospital. We're going to get you through this. I'll get you some more pain meds."

Kara's breath came faster, shallow and ragged. She wanted to believe her, wanted to believe that she was safe, that she'd make it through this. But the fear still lingered, a shadow hovering just behind her thoughts. What if it had been too late? What if she hadn't made it out of that fire? What if?—

"I'm here," Mallory said softly, her voice like a balm, soothing Kara's troubled mind. "I'm not going anywhere."

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Kara's eyes searched Mallory's face, the exhaustion and vulnerability in her own gaze matching what she saw in Mallory's. She saw the small tremble in Mallory's lips, the subtle way her shoulders sagged with the weight of what had happened. Mallory had been so worried—Kara could see it now, in the way her eyes were red-rimmed and the way she held herself so still, like she was waiting for Kara to break.

Kara didn't know what to say. Words felt so inadequate in this moment, when all she wanted to do was reassure Mallory, to tell her that everything would be okay. But she couldn't speak with certainty, not when her own body felt so fragile, so broken.

But there was one thing she could do. One thing that felt right.

With what little strength she had left, Kara squeezed Mallory's hand and gave her a small, shaky smile. "I'm... I'm glad you're here."

Mallory's face softened, and her breath caught slightly, as if the simple words meant more than they could ever convey. She didn't say anything at first, just continued to hold Kara's hand, her thumb tracing gentle patterns on the back of her hand.

And in that moment, despite the confusion and the pain, Kara felt something inside her ease—a weight lifting from her chest. There was so much more left unsaid between them, but right now, this quiet moment, the two of them together in the stillness of the hospital room, was enough.

The quiet hum of the hospital room filled the space between them as Mallory remained seated by Kara's side, her hand still holding Kara's gently but firmly. Despite the sterile white walls, the beeping of machines, and the sterile scent of antiseptic that seemed to permeate the air, the world outside this room felt distant and irrelevant to Mallory. The only thing that mattered was the woman lying in the bed before her—Kara, bruised, battered, but alive.

Kara's eyes were still heavy with the remnants of sleep, her body exhausted from the trauma, but she was awake, and that was enough for Mallory, enough to chase away the panic that had clawed at her heart just hours before. She had feared the worst, had feared walking into this room and finding that Kara's fight hadn't been enough to keep her here, that the fire had taken her. But she hadn't. Kara had fought through it. And now, sitting here, Mallory could finally exhale.

But there was a weight still pressing against her chest, a heaviness she couldn't shake. Mallory had been able to keep her emotions buried during the long hours while Kara had been in surgery, but she hadn't been able to ignore the fear that had gripped her from the moment she heard Kara's name on the emergency call, the fear that she would lose her before she could tell her what had been growing in her heart for months.

Mallory shifted slightly in her seat, the movement catching Kara's attention. She tried to speak, but her throat felt dry, constricted as though the words had gotten caught somewhere inside her.

"I—" Mallory swallowed hard, her voice strained. "I don't know what I would've done if I'd lost you."

Kara's gaze softened, her tired eyes lifting to meet Mallory's with a mixture of warmth and understanding. She wanted to speak, but the effort was too much right now. Instead, she gave Mallory's hand a gentle squeeze, her silent reassurance more

powerful than words ever could be.

“I’ve been so afraid, Kara,” Mallory continued, her voice barely a whisper, laced with vulnerability. “Afraid of everything... of being too late, of being the one who’s not strong enough, of losing you before I could even tell you—before I could even admit to myself—what I feel for you.”

She blinked, her emotions raw, her heart laid bare in a way she’d never allowed herself before. The confession hung between them, heavy and palpable. She didn’t dare look away, didn’t dare break the moment. If she did, she might lose her courage.

“I’ve spent so much time keeping people at a distance,” Mallory continued, her voice faltering. “I’ve been afraid to let anyone in, afraid of what it means to care for someone. But then I... I let myself care for you. And I was scared of that. Scared of what it could cost me. And when I saw you... when I saw you lying there, when I thought I might lose you... I realized how much I couldn’t live without you.”

Kara’s breath caught, and despite the exhaustion in her voice, she managed to speak, her words coming out a bit hoarse. “Mallory...”

The sound of her name on Kara’s lips was enough to pull Mallory from the tight grip of her fear. She looked down at their hands, both clasped together, and she felt a slight shift inside her, a release of the tension she hadn’t realized had been there.

“You know,” Kara continued, her voice low, raspy, but filled with affection, “I’ve been afraid too. But not of what you think.” She paused, her lips twitching slightly with the effort of speaking, the pain in her leg distracting. “I’ve been afraid of losing us—of losing what we have before we even really got the chance to explore it.”

Mallory’s throat tightened, but the knot in her chest seemed to loosen just a little at Kara’s words. She could hear the sincerity in Kara’s voice, could see the truth of it in



the way Kara was looking at her—vulnerable, just as Mallory had been.

Kara's hand tightened around hers again, her fingers cool but strong. "But we'll face it together," Kara said softly. "Whatever comes, we'll face it together. We can do this. You don't have to be afraid."

A flood of relief washed over Mallory, and she closed her eyes for a moment, letting the rush of emotion wash over her. When she opened them again, she found Kara watching her, the faintest hint of a smile tugging at the corner of her lips.

"Love's not something to fear," Kara said quietly, her voice thick with emotion. "Even when the future's uncertain. Especially then. Because we've got each other. And that's enough for me."

Mallory's chest tightened again, but it wasn't from fear this time. It was from something else, something warmer, something that made her feel both grounded and free all at once. She gave Kara's hand a gentle squeeze, her own smile tugging at the corners of her lips despite the exhaustion that still weighed heavily on both of them.

"Yeah," Mallory whispered, her voice thick with emotion. "Me too."

The words didn't feel like enough, but they were all she had. And in that moment, they were everything.

Kara's eyes softened, and she shifted in her bed slightly, her body still too weak to do much more. But Mallory could see it in her—see the strength that still lived in her, even after everything. And she knew, without a doubt, that they could face whatever came next. Together.

Mallory sat beside Kara's bed, her fingers interlaced with Kara's, the quiet beeping of monitors the only sound filling the stillness. The past few days had been a whirlwind

of emotions, of fear and relief, of moments that had left Mallory questioning everything about what she wanted from life. But now, as she looked at Kara—injured but still here, still with her—the questions seemed irrelevant. All she could think about was the truth that had been buried deep inside her for so long.

She had been so afraid to admit what she felt, afraid of the vulnerability it would bring, of how it might change everything between them. But now, in this quiet, intimate moment, as she stared at Kara's face—bruised but beautiful, eyes still heavy with exhaustion—she realized that the fear she'd been carrying wasn't stronger than the need to finally say what had been building inside her for far too long.

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“I... I love you,” Mallory whispered, the words soft but heavy, full of hesitation, full of everything she’d never been brave enough to say. “I should have told you sooner,” she said, the words spilling out, as if they were all the things she had been holding inside, things she had been too afraid to say until now. “I love you, Kara. I’ve loved you for a long time, and I... I don’t want to be afraid anymore.”

There was a long pause, the quiet of the room suddenly more pronounced. Mallory held her breath, terrified that her words had been too much, too soon. That she had laid herself too bare, just as Kara was still recovering from the ordeal that had nearly taken her life.

But Kara didn’t look away. Her golden brown eyes, heavy with exhaustion and pain, softened with something else—something that Mallory recognized. Understanding. Her heart raced as she waited for Kara’s response, the silence between them stretched thin with anticipation. Her eyes never left Kara’s face, watching the faintest flicker of emotion cross her features. Her breath caught in her throat, her chest tightening as if waiting for something—anything—that would tell her Kara had heard her, had felt it too.

And then, just as the quiet began to suffocate her, Kara’s lips curled into a slow, gentle smile.

“I love you too,” Kara replied, her voice low but filled with a quiet certainty. Her eyes, though weary, were bright with something Mallory recognized immediately. It was the same look she’d seen before—the same look that had drawn her in, made her heart race, and made her realize that this woman, no matter the circumstances, had become the most important person in her life.

Mallory's heart swelled at the words. They were simple, but in that moment, they were everything. They were a balm for the wounds she hadn't even known she was carrying.

Kara's voice was soft but steady when she finally spoke again, her words wrapped in the warmth of something much more than just reassurance. "I don't want you to be afraid anymore either, Mallory."

Kara's smile was small, fragile from the pain in her body, but it was there. It was real. And it was everything. She squeezed Mallory's hand, the gesture filled with so much more than just the act of holding on. It was a promise. A reassurance. A silent acknowledgment of what Mallory had just said.

She inhaled deeply, her fingers tightening around Kara's hand, grounding herself in the reality of the moment. All the fear, all the hesitation, all the doubts that had plagued her heart over the past few days seemed to dissolve. This was real. They were real. And for the first time, Mallory could breathe easily, knowing that whatever came next, they would face it together.

The weight of the past few days, the fire, the fear of losing Kara, the uncertainty that had plagued both of them, seemed to lift with that simple exchange of words. They were no longer hiding from the truth. They had crossed that threshold, and there was no going back.

Kara's fingers, though still weak, grasped Mallory's hand more tightly, pulling her a little closer. Her smile deepened, despite the exhaustion that still clung to her.

"Mallory," Kara said softly, her voice thick with emotion. "I was scared too. But now, now I'm not. Not with you." She paused, the words coming slowly, carefully. "We don't know what's coming. We don't know what the future holds, but we'll face it. Together."

“I’m not afraid of you, Kara. I’m not afraid of us. I’m just afraid of losing it... losing you.”

“You won’t lose me. I’m here. We’re here.” She winced slightly, the pain sharp in her leg, but she didn’t pull away. Instead, her eyes softened, filled with that same quiet strength that Mallory had come to admire. “We’ll face whatever happens. But we will face it together. That’s what matters.”

Mallory’s breath hitched again, a sob threatening to rise in her chest, but she held it back. She didn’t need to say anything else. Kara had already said it. They were in this together. And that was enough.

The room felt different now. The sterile walls, the machines, the faint hum of hospital life outside—it all faded into the background. There was only Kara. Only Mallory. Only the quiet, steadfast bond that had formed between them, something unspoken but undeniable. They were a team, a unit, facing whatever came next with the strength of their love and trust for each other.

Kara’s eyes closed briefly, her exhaustion overwhelming, but she didn’t let go of Mallory’s hand. Instead, she squeezed it once more, the final sign of her unwavering promise. “I’m not going anywhere,” she whispered, her voice rough but full of resolve. “We’re in this. Together.”

Mallory nodded, a small smile tugging at her lips, her heart full of hope for the first time in a long while. “Together,” she whispered back.

And for the first time, Mallory believed it completely.

Mallory couldn't remember the last time she'd had this kind of peace. Her mind, usually full of patients, surgeries, and her own internal monologue, was quieter than usual. It had been a few weeks since Kara had been discharged from the hospital, and though the memory of the warehouse fire still lingered—both in the city and in her own heart—there was something soothing about this time. Kara was out of the hospital, still healing but alive. She was with Mallory, and for now, that was enough.

Despite the serenity of the drive, Mallory couldn't help but feel the slight weight in her chest, a mixture of gratitude and anxiety. She'd been a surgeon long enough to know that recovery wasn't always linear. Though Kara seemed strong on the outside, Mallory knew she was still recovering—physically and emotionally—from the trauma of the fire. They were both still processing what had happened, but the quiet moments like this one made it easier to breathe, to remind herself that they could face the future together.

Kara, her focus entirely on the road, was in much better spirits than Mallory had seen her in weeks. Her posture was relaxed, and her hand on the wheel was steady. She looked like herself again—no longer weighed down by pain or the exhaustion from the hospital. She was smiling more, and the careworn expression that had been present in the aftermath of the fire seemed to have lifted, at least for now.

"You okay?" Kara asked after a while, her eyes glancing over at Mallory with an affectionate smile.

Mallory nodded, though she wasn't sure the answer was as simple as yes. She wanted to be present, to let herself enjoy this peaceful moment, but old habits died hard. The doctor in her still watched Kara with a careful eye, making sure she didn't push too hard too soon. But as Kara's grin widened, the carefree ease she wore reminded Mallory of the woman she'd first met—determined and full of life, a little wild but always strong.

“I’m good,” Mallory finally said, giving Kara a soft smile in return. “This place—it’s perfect.”

Kara’s smile widened, and her fingers drummed lightly on the steering wheel. “Told you,” she said, almost smug. “I come here to clear my head, you know. It’s always been my spot.”

They continued driving in silence for a few more minutes before Kara pulled the car into a small, hidden parking area by the edge of an old boardwalk leading to a pier. The trees around them were thick, blocking the view from any other passersby, and the sand stretched out ahead of them in wide, uninterrupted swaths. The soft rumble of the ocean was a stark contrast to the noise that had filled their lives before—sirens, alarms, urgent shouts—everything that seemed to be ever-present now seemed far away.

Mallory stepped out of the car and immediately took a deep breath. The air felt different here—fresh, untarnished by the pollution or rush of the city. It was like stepping into another world, one where none of the worries or uncertainties of life could reach them. For the first time in a while, Mallory felt her shoulders relax, her mind calming as the horizon stretched endlessly before her.

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“Come on,” Kara said with a mischievous grin, already out of the car and maneuvering toward the boardwalk. She was a pro with her crutches—which didn’t surprise Mallory at all. “We can get closer to the water.”

The waves lapped gently at the pier as they made their way unhurriedly toward the end. Kara stopped and was standing just ahead of her, watching the horizon with a quiet intensity that Mallory had learned to recognize as her way of thinking, of processing.

“It’s been too long since I’ve been here,” Kara said, her voice low but light, filled with a kind of longing Mallory hadn’t expected. She glanced over her shoulder at Mallory, her smile still playful. “This place... it’s where I come when I need to breathe.”

“I never knew that about you,” Mallory said, her voice thoughtful. “I guess I never asked. I always assumed you were the kind of person who thrived on action, on adrenaline.”

Kara chuckled, but there was a hint of sadness in the sound. “I do,” she admitted, her voice steady despite the weight of her words. “But sometimes... it’s too much. I guess we all need a place to breathe, huh?”

Mallory nodded. “I get that.” She paused, her own thoughts turning inward. The past weeks had shifted something inside her. They’d shaken her, forced her to confront the depths of her own fears and vulnerabilities. It had been a process—painful at times—but necessary. The fire, Kara’s injuries, the endless worry—those things had left scars, but they’d also brought clarity.



“I’ve been thinking a lot about that,” Mallory confessed, her voice soft as she glanced over at Kara, catching her eye. “About the fire, about you getting hurt. I was so scared, Kara.” Her heart seemed to clench as she spoke the words out loud. “Scared of losing you. Scared of what it would mean if I couldn’t keep you safe.”

Kara’s expression softened, her lips pulling into a gentle smile. “I’m still here,” she said simply, her hand finding Mallory’s, their fingers brushing together before intertwining.

Mallory squeezed Kara’s hand in return, a tightness in her chest easing. “I know,” she whispered. “But I was also scared of something else—something I’ve spent most of my life running from.” She took a breath, steadying herself, before continuing. “I’ve always kept people at arm’s length, built walls around my heart. I’ve never let anyone get too close, not really. Not like this. Not like I feel with you.”

Kara’s gaze was soft, understanding. She didn’t interrupt, didn’t rush Mallory. She just listened, her presence a steady anchor as Mallory laid bare her most vulnerable truths.

“I think trust is the hardest part,” Kara said after a long pause, her voice quieter now, more thoughtful. “I’ve always been good at doing things on my own, at keeping my distance. But now, with you...” She hesitated, as if weighing her words. “I need to trust. To trust you. And to trust myself.”

Mallory nodded slowly, feeling the same weight. “I’ve always been the one who’s in control,” she admitted. “I like to know what’s coming, to have a plan. But with you, I’m learning that I can’t always control everything. And maybe that’s okay.” She squeezed Kara’s hand. “Maybe that’s what love is—letting go, being vulnerable, and trusting that the person beside you will catch you when you fall.”

Kara’s smile was small but genuine, her eyes reflecting the same quiet understanding

Mallory felt. “We will catch each other,” she said softly. “And we’ll face everything together. Whatever comes, we’re in this together.”

There was a finality to her words, but also a reassurance. They didn’t need to know exactly what the future held. They didn’t need all the answers right now. They just needed each other. And as they stood on that pier, the weight of the world seemed a little less heavy. Together, they would find their way.

As the sun dipped lower in the sky, casting long shadows across the sand, they settled into the lone bench on the pier as their conversation began to shift. The past—Kara’s injury, the fire, the fear of losing one another—felt distant now. They had faced those moments, and though the scars would always remain, they had found something even more important in the process: the realization that they could survive anything, as long as they did it together.

“So, what now?” Kara asked, her voice steady but filled with the hint of curiosity, as if the question was one she had been holding for a while. “What does the future look like for us?”

Mallory looked at her, meeting her gaze. The warm glow of the setting sun reflected in Kara’s golden brown eyes, making her look almost ethereal. For a moment, Mallory felt a lump form in her throat, realizing how far they had come—how much they had both been through to reach this point. “I don’t know,” Mallory said softly, her voice uncertain, but not with fear. “I’m still figuring that out.” She paused, taking a deep breath. “But I know that whatever I choose to do, I want you by my side.”

Kara smiled, a soft, knowing smile, one that didn’t need words to convey the depth of her feelings. She turned her gaze toward the ocean, the colors of the sky blending into the water in soft hues of pink, lavender, and gold. “I want that too. I want to be with you. And I want to live a life that’s... balanced.” Her voice wavered slightly, but her words were strong. “I want to go back to firefighting, but this time, I want it to mean

something different. I've learned that life is fragile, and the people I love—my friends, my family—are the most important thing."

Mallory's heart swelled with pride. She had seen Kara's strength before—her resolve, her resilience—but this was something deeper. It was vulnerability, it was honesty, and Mallory felt an overwhelming sense of respect for the woman next to her. "You're incredible," Mallory murmured. "I've always known you were strong, but I never realized just how deeply you think about things."

Kara chuckled softly, her hand tightening around Mallory's. "I guess we all have our moments of clarity. That fire really taught me something. The people I love—my team, you—they matter more than any call or any fire."

Mallory nodded, her smile warm. "I'm proud of you," she said, her voice thick with emotion. "And I'll support whatever you choose. I want you to be happy."

The air between them felt full of possibility. Kara's words echoed in Mallory's mind, and for the first time in a long while, she felt like she could breathe without the constant weight of uncertainty. Her mind wandered to their future, to the life they could create together. She thought about the mornings they'd share, the quiet dinners, the comfort of simply being in each other's presence. She imagined a future that wasn't so clouded with fear and worry, but instead one where they could face each day knowing they had each other.

The conversation shifted then, slowly, as they discussed the more practical aspects of their lives. They spoke of moving in together, a tentative idea that neither of them seemed to want to rush into, but one that they both acknowledged could be the next step. There was no pressure in the way they spoke, no expectation that they had to act quickly or decisively. The idea of living together wasn't about rushing; it was about trust, about taking the next step when they both felt ready. And they knew that they would take it at their own pace.

Kara leaned back against the bench, her hand resting on Mallory's as she looked out toward the ocean. "We'll get there when we get there," she said, her voice calm and steady. "No need to force anything. But I think..." She glanced over at Mallory, her eyes soft, filled with something that Mallory couldn't quite place but made her heart skip. "I think we're on the right path."

Mallory didn't say anything at first, just let the words settle into her chest. Her hand tightened around Kara's, and she rested her head on her shoulder, feeling the warmth of her body next to hers. "I think we are too."

They sat there in silence for a long while, the sound of the waves lapping at the shore and the distant calls of seagulls filling the quiet. As the sun sank lower, the sky deepened into rich purples and oranges, and the beach seemed to glow with a serene, golden light. It was a perfect moment—one of peace, of certainty, of knowing that whatever the future held, they would face it together.

"It feels like... a fresh start," Mallory said, looking out at the waves crashing against the shore, "Like we can just be here, without the world pulling us in different directions."

"It's perfect, right?" Kara said, her voice tinged with something deeper—affection, perhaps, or the recognition that this moment meant more than just a day at the beach. "We've been through so much, Mal. But this... this feels like it could be something good for us. Something real."

"It's perfect," Mallory whispered, her voice steady as she met Kara's gaze, a smile curling on her lips.

They were sitting at the edge of the beach, with nothing but the ocean and the sky surrounding them, and for the first time in so long, Mallory felt completely seen.

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There was no need for words now, just the quiet rhythm of their breathing, the steady pulse of the waves. It was as though they had finally found their footing in the midst of all the chaos, standing side by side, vulnerable but strong. Both of them had been tested in ways they never could have anticipated, and yet here they were, still standing, still choosing each other.

### EPILOGUE

#### 5 YEARS LATER

The sun dipped below the horizon, casting a warm glow over Phoenix Ridge. It was a peaceful evening, the kind that seemed to promise hope and a future full of possibilities. Mallory stood on the balcony of their apartment, the cool evening breeze tousling her hair as she looked out at the view of the city. The streetlights were beginning to flicker on, and the distant hum of traffic was a constant reminder of the life they had built in this place.

She smiled to herself, a contented feeling in her chest as she watched the city. Five years ago, life had felt uncertain—riddled with fear, questions, and unknowns. But now, with Kara by her side, everything had shifted. The trust, the love, and the commitment they had slowly built over time had turned into something unshakable. Something real.

Kara appeared beside her on the balcony, a coffee cup in her hand, the slight limp from her previous injuries still there but no longer as pronounced. Kara's smile was easy and full of warmth as she leaned against the railing beside Mallory.

“I was thinking about taking a few days off next month,” Kara said, her voice low and easy. “Maybe we can finally get away to that cabin you’ve been talking about.”

Mallory laughed softly. “It’s been a while since we had a real vacation, hasn’t it?”

They had grown so accustomed to their routines—Kara’s job at the fire department, Mallory’s hours at the hospital—that they’d both forgotten how to take time for themselves. The idea of being somewhere quiet and away from the noise of the city felt like a much-needed reprieve.

“Maybe we can invite Ember and Josephine along. They could use a break too,” Mallory said, thinking about their friends who had been there for them through thick and thin.

Kara’s grin widened at the mention of their friends. “I think they’d love that. I’ll run it by them, but something tells me Ember will be all in.”

Their friends had become family in the years since Mallory and Kara had started dating. Ember and Josephine had been a stable source of help for the pair of them. With Natalie now in middle school, Kara still couldn’t believe she was eleven, Ember was busy with her business fixing up cars. Josephine was still working tirelessly to keep Phoenix Ridge hospital running smoothly. They all made an effort to support one another, whether it was celebrating birthdays or offering a listening ear on difficult days.

And then there was Scotti, who was married to Dr. Naomi Crane, another surgeon working in research at the hospital where Mallory worked. Scotti had been the steady friend, the one who reminded them both to take a breath. Now, Scotti and Naomi had a young daughter, Romily, and they were a perfect example of love and balance, even with their demanding careers.

“You know,” Kara said, taking a sip from her coffee, “it still feels surreal sometimes. How far we’ve come from where we started.”

Mallory nodded, the familiar warmth of Kara’s touch against her back bringing her a sense of peace. “I know. It feels like another lifetime, doesn’t it?”

Five years ago, Kara had been recovering from her injuries, and Mallory had just begun to understand what it meant to love without fear. They had gone through struggles—some personal, some professional—but they had faced it all together. There had been moments of doubt, moments where they both wondered if they were strong enough, but they had come out the other side. And now, standing here with Kara, the woman she loved, the woman who had become her best friend and partner, Mallory felt the kind of contentment she’d always longed for.

“I never thought I’d find someone who would get me the way you do,” Mallory said softly, her voice filled with emotion.

Kara looked at her, her eyes soft and understanding. “Same here. I never thought I’d find someone who would make me want to be better. You make me better, Mallory.”

They stood there for a moment, the sound of the city below them fading into the background as they simply took in the comfort of one another’s presence.

\* \* \*

The warm evening air wrapped around the backyard, the smell of grilling burgers, hot dogs, and vegetables filling the air. Mallory and Kara had outdone themselves with the barbecue, a spread of food that reflected their growing confidence as hosts and the easy comfort they shared with their friends. The backyard was alive with laughter, the clink of glasses, and the soft hum of conversations that drifted on the breeze.

Kara stood by the grill, flipping the burgers and checking the skewers of vegetables with the practiced ease of someone who had spent many summers doing this. Her sleeves were rolled up, revealing the faint marks and scars from her fire-fighting career, but none of them bothered her now. She grinned at Mallory, who was setting the table with a variety of side dishes, the fresh scent of corn on the cob mingling with the smoky aroma of the grill.

“Everything’s looking perfect,” Mallory said, wiping her hands on a dish towel as she turned to look at Kara. Her voice was light, but her eyes sparkled with pride. She had been nervous at first about hosting such a big gathering, but Kara’s calming presence had made everything feel natural. They’d come so far from the quiet dinners in their apartment to this—hosting friends, making memories, and finding joy in the small things.

“Of course it is,” Kara replied, tossing a burger patty onto the grill with a satisfied sizzle. “I’m an expert at this by now.”

Mallory laughed softly, stepping back to admire the setup. The picnic table was adorned with fresh flowers, and the lawn was scattered with blankets and lawn chairs. Some of their friends had already settled in, and the atmosphere was one of ease—no pretenses, just the kind of gathering that made everyone feel like they belonged.

Ember and Josephine were first to arrive at the table, plates in hand, Natalie trailing behind them glued to her phone. Ember, ever the enthusiast, piled hers high with food, while Josephine, more reserved but equally appreciative, took a more modest helping. The two shared a laugh, their connection clear as they playfully bickered about who had grabbed the last piece of grilled zucchini.

“Thanks for the invite,” Josephine said to Mallory, her eyes warm. “This feels like a much-needed break from everything.”



“Of course,” Mallory replied, smiling back. “We’re glad you’re here. You’re family.”

Nearby, Scotti and Naomi had just settled down with their daughter, Romily, who was already running around, her tiny feet kicking up the grass as she played with a colorful beach ball. Scotti, ever the protective mother, kept an eye on her, while Naomi laughed along with her. Their daughter had a contagious energy, and everyone took turns playing with her. Mallory caught a glimpse of Scotti’s face—a look of peace she hadn’t always seen before, the kind of calm that came from knowing she had a good life, full of love and support.

Romily, with her unfiltered enthusiasm, darted over to Mallory and Kara, her tiny hands outstretched as she asked if they could play. Kara bent down to pick her up, her hands strong yet gentle as she hoisted the little girl onto her hip. “What do you want to play, Rom?”

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Romily's eyes sparkled. "Catch!" she declared, pointing toward the empty space of the lawn where a game of catch was already starting to form. Ember and Josephine had already taken their positions, tossing a football back and forth while Scotti had a few more burgers on her plate and leaned back to enjoy the moment.

"Your turn!" Romily exclaimed, grinning up at Mallory with an infectious joy.

Mallory caught the ball with a chuckle, throwing it to Ember, who caught it easily and tossed it back. The game was lighthearted, the kind of play that made time feel like it slowed down. For a few minutes, they forgot about the complexities of life and simply existed in the moment—throwing, catching, laughing.

The sun was starting to dip lower in the sky, painting the clouds in soft pinks and oranges. The drinks were flowing, and Mallory and Kara took their glasses of iced tea and lemonade, clinking them together in a quiet toast. It wasn't for anything special, just a moment to celebrate where they were and how far they had come.

Ember looked over at them with a raised eyebrow. "You two are making us look bad," she teased, nodding at their effortless connection.

Kara grinned. "Just trying to keep up with you all," she teased back, tossing a playful glance at Josephine, who was caught up in a conversation with Naomi about their most recent casework.

As the evening unfolded, the laughter grew louder, the stories more outrageous. The group's bond felt unbreakable, like a thread that had woven itself tightly together over time. Kara and Mallory joined in the conversation, with Kara showing off a trick

she had learned during her recovery—an impressive display of fire-eating, which made everyone clap and cheer.

Josephine was the first to challenge Kara to a one-on-one game of horseshoes. “I bet I could beat you,” Josephine said with a smirk, tossing the ring to the side as she readied herself.

Kara laughed and accepted the challenge, her competitive spirit alive. “You’re on. But don’t say I didn’t warn you,” she teased.

With the sun setting in the distance, the backyard glowed with strings of fairy lights, casting a warm, inviting ambiance over the gathering. The air had cooled, and the laughter of their friends and family filled the space. It felt timeless—like nothing could ever interrupt this moment of peace and connection.

\* \* \*

Later, after dinner, as the final game of cornhole wrapped up, the group gathered around the fire pit, a light breeze keeping them all comfortable as they roasted marshmallows and made smores. The fire crackled, and the flickering flames illuminated their faces, each one reflecting a quiet happiness that spoke volumes.

Mallory sat beside Kara, her legs tucked under her, feeling more at home than she ever had. Kara’s hand found hers again, warm and steady. They exchanged a glance, their fingers intertwining effortlessly.

“We did this,” Kara said softly, her voice low and filled with quiet pride. “We built this life. This family.”

Mallory nodded, her heart full as she looked around at their friends—Ember, Josephine, Scotti, and Naomi. They weren’t just friends. They were a testament to what happened when love, trust, and time worked together to create something

lasting. And it was only just beginning.

“Together,” Mallory agreed, a smile spreading across her face as she squeezed Kara’s hand.