



Embers of Love

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Description: What happens when her hot one night stand from a dating app turns out to be her mum's best friend?

Ember Thompson is the thrill seeking wild child firefighter daughter of Phoenix Ridge's legendary Fire Chief Becky Thompson. When Ember meets a mysterious older woman on a dating app, she thinks it is just for one night of fun.

Only, they both enjoyed themselves so much on that one night and don't want to stop there.

It is all going well until Ember finds out that her mysterious new lover is none other than her Mum's new best friend- the new Head of Phoenix Ridge Hospital Doctor Josephine Mars.

Josephine and Ember embark on a passionate affair, but what will happen if Chief Becky Thompson- Ember's Mom finds out what is going on?

Meanwhile, Forest fires threaten Phoenix Ridge and as always, Ember is at the heart of the danger. Can she handle the heat both in and out of the fire?

Total Pages (Source): 52

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EMBER

Today, to Ember Thompson, Phoenix Ridge was the most beautiful city in the world. Not in the way of being the prettiest, the cleanest, or the most advanced. Its beauty went beyond all that. It was its people, the culture, the terrain, the smell of fuel, and the scream of loud combustion engines in themidsummer'sheat surrounded by the vast desert that ensconced the city and hundreds of other car enthusiasts who showed up to the watch the cars compete against each other in the most beautiful sport known to man. Drag racing.

“Whoo-hoo!” some excited spectator screamed nearby.

Ember winced slightly, leaning away from him. Phoenix Ridge was maybe a little too loud sometimes. Nobody said it was perfect, but that was part of the charm. She sat in her car, chugging down a cold can of Coke to stave off the heat. Everyone was dressed in shorts and t-shirts, except for the few eccentric kids who wore hoodies with the hood up no matter the weather.

Thunk! Thunk! Thunk! Somebody banged on the trunk of her car with their palm, causing her to wince again. She stuck her head out the window, irritated. Everyone knew not to touch Joan carelessly. The '76 Z28 Camaro was a jewel. She stumbled upon the car three years ago and had taken a great risk in buying it from the seller. The car wasn't in perfect condition, but Ember saw her potential. All Joan needed was a little love. Ember poured her heart and soul into the car, and it turned into a work of art.

“Hey!” she yelled. “Hands off my ride.”

The man grinned at her, showing teeth. “What? This rust bucket? I’m surprised she hasn’t ended up in the junkyard yet! Get your ass to the strip, you’re running next after these guys. Swift Hog’s ready to race ya.”

Ember sat back in her car, shaking her head. She’d seen her opponent working on his car shortly before the races began. He was an older man, probably in his mid-sixties, and all of his hair had gone grey. Old man Farcy had been racing these deserts longer than Ember had been alive. She would never question his driving skills, but Swift Hog was a terrible name. However, who was she to judge? Actually, she was totally going to judge. Cars were the single most amazing things human beings had ever invented. They deserved to have great names. Not Swift-freaking-Hog. Especially not the legendary American Buick GNX.

All her stray thoughts fled the moment Joan’s engine came alive with a healthy rumble. The sound got everyone’s attention right away. Folks turned to stare at her ride. She couldn’t help smiling and waving at the few of them she recognized. Yeah, Phoenix Ridge was absolutely the best city in the world because it was home to all of her favorite people.

If her mother saw her right now, she would be livid. The daughter of Becky Thompson, the chief of Phoenix Ridge Fire Department engaging in drag races of all things. Anybody who didn’t know her would be surprised to even see her at events like these, let alone have her own drag racer, but Ember didn’t see the issue. These races were perfectly legal, after all.

Farcy pulled into the track next to her, his modified Buick screeching loudly even though he’d barely touched the throttle.

That engine’s gonna explode before we hit the finish line.

The judges ran final checks to ensure they both followed safety protocols. She was decked out in a full protective suit, complete with a fire jacket, pants, and a helmet. Most of it wasn't required for the "domestic class" she was racing in, but she took safety very seriously.

The track official made sure they were both ready. He raised his hands in the air, signaling to both racers that it was almost time to go. He brought them down dramatically. Ember was off like a bullet. Joan jumped slightly from the starting line. She wobbled a bit on the launch, but Ember predicted it and corrected her course in time. As soon as the Camaro was stable, she focused all of her attention on the road ahead.

This was it. This was the time she truly came alive. When there was nothing but her, Joan, and the road in front of them. All of her worries faded away. Her mind became rejuvenated from the experience. Ember felt like she was ready to take on the world from the driver's seat of her car. She felt protected and safe. Nobody else could catch her here, not even the wind. It was a dream that had fallen right into her grasp.

As she approached the finish, she looked in the rearview mirror to see how big of a lead she had on her opponent. Farcy had barely gotten halfway down the track. There was a large plume of smoke coming off his hood that sparked into flames as she watched. Instincts took over. She slammed on the brakes hard, slowing the car down significantly. She spun the wheel rapidly, sending the car into an oversteer as she made a quick U-turn, crossing the track to the next lane and sped back the way she came.

"Oh God, please no," she prayed.

Some of the spectators had jumped over the borders and made their way onto the drag strip, attempting to crowd around the car. Nobody knew what the hell they were doing. Some tried to get the hood open to put out the fire, and others tried to get the old man out of the car, but none of them succeeded.

She pulled the car to a stop in front of the burning Buick and jumped out in a blink, her fire extinguisher ready in one hand and a crowbar in the other.

“Get out of the way! Step away from the car!” she yelled authoritatively over the din. That got a reaction. Most of these people here were townsfolk. Almost all of them knew who she was. She was the closest firefighter. She took in the situation quickly. As always, with emergencies and accidents, there were far too many people gathered around. There needed to be no more than two individuals helping; everyone else was simply getting in the way.

“Cut the seatbelts! Use a pocketknife! I have one in my pigeonhole! Be careful not to cut him!” she instructed the men helping Farcy.

She dumped the extinguisher on the ground and pried the hood open with her crowbar. She braced it against the hood to keep it open before she picked up the extinguisher once more. Thick smoke and heat slammed into her, blinding her momentarily. Ember was trained for this, though. She already knew where to aim the extinguisher. She let it loose on the burning engine while she assessed the rest of the car to make sure the fire hadn't spread anywhere else.

“Holy shit!” Farcy swore.

Apparently, he'd finally managed to get himself out of the car. He didn't like the look of his engine bay, but at least he was alive. Ember made sure the fire had completely died down before she let up on the extinguisher. She waited still and watched. Fires were tricky things to handle, and one could never be too cautious. One thing her mother always said was, “It's easier to recover from being too cautious. If you're not cautious enough, you won't live long enough to learn your lesson,” and Ember held on to that principle. Somewhat.

“Thanks, kiddo,” Farcy said, grimacing at his car. “Glad you were here to take a hold

of things. Those guys were choking me in there until you told ‘em to cut the seatbelts.”

Ember merely nodded. She was still on high alert. This was work mode, and there was no room for chit-chat until she was certain everyone was safe. The chances of cars exploding, like in the movies, were actually very low, but it wasn't zero.

With the situation handled, more and more people started to gather around. That was her cue to hightail it out of there. She returned to her car and drove off the drag strip. They were already making plans to move the car off the strip and clear it for the next batch of racers. Incidents like these happened all the time when it came to drag racing.

“That was so cool!” a teenage boy flashed her a bright smile

“Hey, Mandy.” Ember offered the girl a tired smile.

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The adrenaline was wearing off. The heat and stress accumulated through the day were starting to set in. Thankfully, that was her final race for the day. She planned on recovering her tools and heading home right away.

“You were like an actor in a movie! The way you turned your car around and came back to save his life!”

Mandy was a bit of a talker, but she was such a sweet girl. Ember could never bring herself to be tired of her company.

“Is there some secret serum they give all you firefighters that makes you all so badass?” The girl looked like she had stars in her eyes.

“I don’t know about everybody else, but I certainly didn’t get any of it. Where’s your mother?”

“Oh!” Mandy looked around rapidly. “She was standing next to—there! She’s talking to that old lady with the baseball hat.”

Ember started packing up her things. She was almost done when Mandy’s mother came over to talk to her.

“Hey, that was a good thing you did back there.”

Ember stuck her head out of her truck. “Oh, yeah. Thanks, Kathy.”

The two of them had attended the same high school together, though Kathy was her

senior. They remained friends ever since. Kathy graduated and had a family, while Ember went on to become a firefighter. Ember suspected Kathy had a crush on her at some point, but nothing ever really came of it. They were both happy for each other anyway, and the friendship was easy since Mandy adored Ember.

“Heading out already?”

“Yeah, you know how it is.”

“Not really,” Kathy laughed. “You’re always running somewhere in that beautiful car of yours.”

Ember couldn’t resist the urge to glance at Joan. She truly was a beautiful car. Of course, what Kathy said hadn’t gone over her head completely. She tried not to think about it too much. Life had been lonely lately. Sure, Phoenix Ridge was great, and all her friends and family were here, and they were great. But she couldn’t help but feel like something was missing.

“See you around, then.” As predicted, Ember hopped into her car and ran.

Shortly after she got home, her phone rang.

MOM flashed up on the screen.

She must be calling to ask about the fire accident. Of course, her mother would’ve heard about it. Even if she wasn’t the chief of the fire department, her mother seemed to know someone everywhere. Hardly anything ever happened in Phoenix Ridge without her knowing about it.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Hey, sweetie,” her mother’s worried voice came through the phone. “I just heard about the incident. I hope you’re okay.”

“Yeah, I’m good. It wasn’t my car that caught on fire.”

“Okay,” her mother replied. “That’s good to hear.”

Uh oh. Ember recognized that tone. Becky was about to attempt to discourage her from going to drag racing events for the millionth time. Ember wasn’t ready to have one of those arguments again. Not after the exhausting day she just had. It didn’t feel right to be arguing with her boss/mom on her day off.

“Hey, can I call you later. I gotta go do... stuff.” Ember cringed. That was a terrible lie. Lying had never been her strong suit. And that wasn’t entirely a bad thing, but it wouldn’t have hurt to have some skill, even at telling little white lies.

“Riiiiight,” her mother drawled. “That’s alright. I know you don’t want to talk about it. I’m glad you’re okay at least.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“I love you, Ember,” Becky said, and Ember smiled to herself. She knew her mom loved her. They might have their differences sometimes, but she was grateful for her mom’s love.

“Love you too, Mom.”

The call was brief. Ember plopped facedown on her bed. She would have to return to work the next day. That lent her some energy. She actually looked forward to it. This is not something a lot of people would say, but Ember genuinely loved her job. Not because her mom was a firefighter, too, despite what other people might believe. She

loved saving people from fires just as much as she loved the thrill of running into burning buildings to rescue them. That was something her mom would hate to hear.

Ember was a thrill seeker and that was what she loved the most about her job.

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“Look at our little hero!” Kiera O’Malley hollered the moment Ember walked through the doors. The redhead woman had the thickest Irish brogue Ember had ever heard, even though she was born and raised in Phoenix Ridge. Keira was a firecracker, always raring to go. One could hardly tell it was the end of her shift, and Ember was actually there to relieve her.

“Don’t start with me, Kiera.” Ember rolled her eyes.

“You just can’t help yourself, can you? Saving lives even on your day off?” her coworker asked, her dimpled cheek glowing with her smile.

“How the hell are you so cheery after spending most of the night on duty?”

“She’s a mutant,” Zara answered for her. Zara had been on the night shift with Kiera, and she looked completely tuckered out with thick bags hanging under her eyes. At nearly six foot two, she was the tallest firefighter in the department. She was a gentle giant who was prone to teasing Kiera from time to time. Ember suspected she had a crush on Keira but was hesitant to speak up about it for some reason.

“I am not!” Kiera protested in false outrage.

“You are. There’s even been some research on the subject. Redheads are not like normal people,” Zara said earnestly.

While the two of them bickered back and forth, Ember went into the locker room to change and grab her gear. The morning routine was always the same. Confirm which engine she was assigned to, relieve the person on duty, check all the equipment

to make sure it's functioning correctly, and then wait for a call. Usually, they didn't have to wait long. Something was always going on in Phoenix Ridge. Haley and Leilani arrived not long after she left the locker room and helped with the inspection of the equipment and the fire truck.

Haley was the only firefighter at the station younger than Ember's twenty-eight years, but she was a powerful youngster. Coming from a family of firefighters, Haley knew what she wanted to be when she was five years old and had spent her whole life training for it. She was close friends with Leilani.

Leilani was laughing happily as Haley asked her about her partner, Adaze, their cats, and their weekend together. Leilani had actually saved Adaze from drowning—that was how they met—and they had been together ever since. They made a cute couple. Ember wondered if she would ever have something like that. She'd been in very few relationships in all other twenty-eight years of living. Something about forming connections with people always made her shy away. She ran away quite often, so none of her relationships ever lasted long.

Elle Rodriguez came just in time, completing their four-woman team lead by Captain Hallie Hunter, who Ember had seen arriving earlier. Elle was gruff and not a morning person, but they all knew that and that was fine. Once they finished their checks, they did a session together in the gym and then they showered and headed to the kitchen where Haley put together poached eggs on toast and pancakes for everyone.

The first call out came two hours later. The bells rang out through the station.

"House Fire in the suburbs, down at Yellow Flower Close. Dispatcher says it started from the grill in the backyard and is spread to the house," Captain Hunter informed everyone. She was in the passenger seat next to Elle, who was behind the wheel. Elle was always the driver when she was on shift.

These types of fires wereridiculously common. People often overestimated their ability to keep fire under control. Accidents did happen, though, so itwasn'talways somebody's fault. That was the thing with fire. It was just naturally dangerous, but peoplecouldn'treally do without it.

It was basics, Ember thought to herself. Keep a bucket of water next to the grill and keep the grill away from obvious hazards like a wooden fence or a dried-out patch of grass.

They sped down through the city, sirens blaring. Everyone was calm and collected.They'dalready done this hundreds of times.Conversation was minimal as everyone got into the right frame of mind. Anything could happen. Each call was different. It was exciting but also incredibly dangerous.

They pulled into the neighborhood, and right away, Ember spotted the location of the fire despite still being a few blocks away. They could see the smoke over the top of all the bungalows tightly packed together. The crowd confirmed they were in therightlocation. Thankfully, everyone heard them coming and cleared a path.

“Shit,” Leilani swore from the back.

“Accurate,”Ember agreed. The fire washuge—much bigger than to be expected from the information they had. The house was most certainly well on fire.

Captain Hunter snapped out instructions and Ember donned her helmet and hopped down the moment the firetruck came to a stop. Everyone knew the drill. They worked together seamlessly to get a hose set up and water going on the fire.

Elle hooked them up to the nearest hydrant.

“Thompson—you are in charge.” Captain Hunter nodded to Ember. Ember was

hoping for promotion so was gaining practice leading the team at incidents.

She slipped easily into leadership. She had been learning about fire her whole life and doing the job long enough. You didn't grow up with the famous Becky Thompson as a mom and not know your shit when it came to fighting fires.

“Is everyone accounted for?!” Ember asked.

It was still important to search the building, but Ember wanted to know whether to prioritize that or put the fire out first. The latter was going to take a bit longer. If there was somebody trapped inside, they were in danger of dying from suffocation or smoke inhalation.

The family looked greatly distressed and largely in shock. Disasters could do that to a person. Ember badly wanted to console them, but it was an emergency situation. They needed to act right away and recoup their losses later. Better to save what they have right now.

The father snapped to attention.

“Yes, everybody got out?—”

“Timmy's still inside!” one of the children screamed.

“Who's Timmy?” Ember asked, checking to make sure all of her equipment was strapped correctly.

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“Timmy’s our cat!”

“It’s alright, Henry,” the father tried to get the child to calm down. He turned to Ember, looking apologetic. “The cat would’ve gotten out by now. It’s alright.”

They’ve already accepted the loss? Not on my watch

“I’m going in! There might be a cat trapped inside!”

“What?!” Haley looked surprised but Ember grinned back, pulling her breathing mask on. “Silva—you are with me.” She nodded at Leilani and Leilani obediently put her own mask on. “Johnson, Rodriguez—sort the water.”

“Ember! Wai?—”

Ember ran through the door followed by Leilani. She was immediately engulfed by the smoke. One of the worst things about entering a burning building was the visual obstruction. Inexperienced folks could easily get disoriented. The house itself wasn’t large. Ember knew it wouldn’t take too much time to clear all the rooms.

They quickly checked downstairs, and Ember decided if the cat was down there it was not going to be alive. If Ember had to bet, the cat would be hiding somewhere upstairs. The stairs were not compromised by the fire so she nodded and indicated to Leilani and they made their way upstairs. Ember broke through a couple of windows with her axe to clear some smoke so they had some visibility. There was no fire up here apart from the back windows.

No sign of the cat in the first two bedrooms. She burst into the third room upstairs. The last room was the one in the back. Since the fire had started in the backyard, it was likely this portion of the house was the most affected. Floors might be compromised. Ember moved carefully checking the floor as she went but without hesitation.

The fire had gutted most of the rear wall. The glass in the window had shattered from the heat. Despite the crackling flames, she heard the cat right away. He was meowing for help from somewhere in the room. It didn't take long for her to locate the cat, hiding away under the bed. It was curled up in the corner, eyes wide with terror as she dropped to her knees.

Ember tried to reach for him, but he was too far inside, and her gear made it difficult to crawl further under the bed. She didn't have much time. She had to be careful as she could hear the fire in the room below. She didn't want to risk it coming through the floor.

With no time to waste, Ember grabbed the entire bedframe and lifted it up. All that time in the gym was paying off. The sudden lack of cover terrified the cat. It freaked and made a dash for the closet. Ember tried to reach out and grab it, but she was too occupied with the bed frame. Chasing the cat again would cause her to lose more time that she didn't have.

"Got it!" Ember heard from behind.

Leilani rushed in and scooped the cat up in her arms before it could find a new hiding place.

Perfect. Leilani is a cat lesbian—I knew she was the best bet for a cat rescue.

"Let's go!" Leilani called to her.

Relieved, Ember let go of the bedframe, letting it lean against the opposite wall as they moved as fast as they could out of the room. The instant she stepped out of the room, there was a loud crack and part of the floor came away where the bed frame had been. Ember didn't stop to see what else was damaged. The sound of destruction only spurred her to move faster. They flew down the stairs and out of the house with the cat in a blink.

Ember made her way toward Haley, Elle, and Captain Hunter while Leilani brought Timmy back to the family. From there, now they had the hydrant connected and the big hose out, all it took was getting the hose around the property, going through the neighbor's house to get to the back, where they blasted the house with high-pressure water. It took another quarter of an hour before they put it all out completely. Ember directed operations and all went smoothly.

They were in the middle of packing things up when one of the kids rushed in to give Ember a hug.

"Thank you! You saved Timmy!"

Ember laughed, ruffling the kid's afro. "Just doing my job."

"You're becoming something of a local hero, Ember Thompson," Captain Hunter commented, observing them with a raised eyebrow. "That was some next-level cat heroics today."

Ember understood she had made a bold decision to save a cat, which luckily had worked well. It wasn't really against protocol, but she knew that not every captain would agree that saving a cat necessitated the level of response that Ember and Leilani had given.

"Sorry about that," Ember apologized, acknowledging her fault. Leilani glanced at her

and looked away guiltily.

“I love cats, Ember. I would have made the same call. I just might have been a bit more cautious in the building,” she said, searching for the right words. “But, when you love someone, there’s—it’s just different. You want to protect yourself more. You’ll understand when you find someone.”

Ember didn’t reply, but the words stuck with her. Would she ever find someone? She cared about the lives she saved, and she had had some flings in her time, but she had certainly never been in love in the way that Leilani was with Adaze. Or Captain Hunter was with Kaia. Or Elle was with Maya Monroe, the doctor. For Ember, this job was about thrills, and her personal life was about thrills, and that was all just fine.

“RUNNING INTO A BURNING BUILDING TO SAVE A CAT! WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?!”

Everyone near the chief’s office winced at the sound of her voice. She was pissed alright. Chief Thompson always saved her top level of pissed for Ember. That was the wonderful thing about your mom being the big bad boss. However, it was a rare sight. Chief Becky Thompson was normally known for being level-headed and good-natured. Until it came to her daughter.

“I was just doing my job,” Ember replied, her voice steady.

“And you couldn’t wait to confirm it was safe to go into the burning house for a cat?” Ember should have known. Her mom had never been a big cat fan. Ember preferred dogs if she was honest, but she knew how much people loved their pets and she felt like saving a cat was nearly as good as saving any other family member.

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“The cat could’ve died.”

Becky ran her hand through her reddish blonde hair in frustration. Ember could tell there were words she wanted to say but couldn’t, chiefly because of the position she held. She knew, more than anyone else at the fire station, what the duty of a firefighter was. Even if it was a cat, every life was important. This was what they signed up for.

Ember’s mother paced back and forth in her office for a few seconds before her mind settled.

“Good work today, you can return to your duty,” Becky said stiffly.

“Thank you.” Ember rose from her seat and made for the door.

“One day you’ll understand why I’m so worried about you.” The door shut behind her. Ember did understand why her mother was worried. But what was she to do? Quit her job?

“Ember!” Leilani called out to her. “It’s lunchtime.”

Leilani Silva was that one firefighter who always made sure everyone was properly fed during lunch. She enjoyed spending time in the station kitchen putting together a feast.

Ember had gotten lunch on her way back to the station after they were done with the first call of the day. She grabbed it from the truck and joined everybody else.

“So,” Haley nudged her, wiggling her eyebrows. “That’s two saves in two days; you’re breaking your own record, Ember Thompson.”

“Old man Farcy was fine. It was just his car on fire. I didn’t save anyone, I just put an extinguisher on a car engine.”

“Still counts,” Elle mumbled. “Car could’ve exploded.”

“You’ve been watching too many movies,” Ember responded.

“You saying race cars aren’t prone to explosions?” Haley asked.

“Well.” Ember gave it some thought. “Anything is possible. There have been instances of explosions but not like in the movies. What you should be worried about in situations like that are flying engine parts. Those can do some serious damage.”

“I can imagine that.” Haley nodded.

“Hope the chief wasn’t too upset with you?” Leilani ventured cautiously. She’d also been chewed out for running into the burning building with Ember.

“It’s fine. We do this all the time.”

Leilani replied, “You put your life in danger all the time. Sometimes, it looks like you have a death wish.”

“I’m not suicidal. If that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I know.” She didn’t push it any further. Leilani had no such compunctions. “The problem is that you’ve been single for too damn long, girl.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” Ember bit into her bagel. She moaned at the heavenly taste. It was worth making a pitstop.

“I think she has a point,” Haley said.

Ember’s shoulders sagged in defeat. “It’s that bad, huh?”

“Yup,” Haley said, looking away in embarrassment.

Leilani faced her squarely. “We all noticed you’ve been looking more and more like a lost puppy each day you show up for work.”

Ember took a sip of her Coke. “Hard to find someone when I spend most of my time here with you guys.”

“And that’s why you have dating apps.”

Ember was already shaking her head before Leilani was done talking. Dating apps were a huge no-no for her. It was too much work. Too many women who were just catfishing, and she couldn’t be bothered with that. She’d heard too many horror stories from people who used them. She wanted to meet someone organically.

“It’s not as bad as you might think,” Haley hedged on. “I’ve seen some great couples who met thanks to dating apps.”

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That was probably true.

What the hell, nothing to lose, thought Ember to herself.

“Okay, I’ll give it a shot.”

Leilani looked surprised by her response. “You made up your mind very quickly.”

“I realized I was just being scared. I’ll try it out, at least.”

“Excellent!” Haley clapped in delight. “Let’s do it right now.”

Ember was seized by trepidation once more.

“What if nobody finds me attractive? What if I don’t get any matches?”

Everyone froze and stared at her in surprise. Haley was the first to break in laughter.

“What the hell are you talking about?! You’re hot, you know you are, Ember.”

“She’s not joking,” Leilani agreed with a gentle smile. “You look great, Ember. You’ll get plenty of suitors. Anyway, all the girls love a firefighter.”

“Anyway, you guys know I’m like Leilani. I like hot older women. Hot older women don’t use dating apps.”

“EMBER!” Haley cried. “No more excuses. I bet there are plenty of hot older women

on there!”

“Alright, alright... I’ll download it.” Ember gave into the inevitable.

True enough, soon after they established her profile, Ember had gotten multiple responses before her shift ended. She looked over some of the profiles, but none of them really interested her. Many of them lived outside Phoenix Ridge, and she didn’t want a long-distance relationship.

Eventually, she started scrolling, checking out other profiles herself. She wasn’t content to merely sit around and wait for the right partner to find her. She wanted to go out and search by herself. Most of the people she saw had the same problem, or a lot of them looked like they wanted something she couldn’t quite provide for them. Then, she stumbled upon one profile that held her attention.

“Suzanne 45,” Ember said the name out loud, loving the way it rolled off her tongue. The image was of a mysterious woman in a business suit with a glass of wine. Because of the angle and the way her hair fell, you couldn’t see her face. Hot mysterious older woman—check.

Live a little, Ember thought to herself. You could do with getting laid.

Suzanne’s profile read “Just looking to have fun.” Ember found that to be exactly what she was looking for as well. At least for now.

2

JOSEPHINE

Dr Josephine Mars felt incredibly guilty. She’d sworn the Hippocratic Oath, graduated top of her class all those years ago, received all those awards for excellence

as a doctor and a surgeon, only to get to this point in her life where saving lives didn't feel as fulfilling as it used to anymore.

It might have had something to do with the fact that most of her patients these days were from the upper class in the exclusive private hospital she worked in. Too many of them too wealthy to even appreciate their own lives. What was the point of bringing someone back from the brink of death only for them to overdose the following week? Sure, they were alive, but most of them were dead inside.

"It's not something you should feel guilty about. You've spent decades of your life serving the people. It's about time you did something for yourself."

Becky Thompson, as usual, always had very reasonable, very logical responses to all of her problems. It was one of the reasons the two of them had remained friends for so long, in spite of the distance. Well, not too long. They met at an emergency response summit in New York about five years ago and instantly connected. They decided to stay in touch after that.

They were on a late-night call, one of many they usually had. With how busy both their schedules were, it was the only time they had to actually talk and unwind. Becky Thompson, well actually, Chief Becky Thompson, was the head of the fire department at Phoenix Ridge. She knew what it was to serve, having spent most of her life as a firefighter. Those words, coming from her, carried a lot of weight.

"I've had enough of the wealthy patients we have here. And the men in positions of power. It has been a constant battle against them my whole life."

"Have you ever considered moving out of New York? You might like it at Phoenix Ridge," Becky suggested out of nowhere.

"What?!" Josephine laughed. Her friend must have been joking. The idea of moving

out of the city she was born and raised in was completely outlandish.

“Consider it. Phoenix Ridge is up and coming. Women hold many of the positions of power. I think you might like it a lot.”

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They eventually ended their call. Josephine went back to her normal routine, but her friend's words never left her mind. It snuck up on her in moments she didn't expect, right in the middle of work, on her way home, early in the morning when she got up. The thought was like an insistent child that didn't know when to stop. Even though Becky never spoke about it again since that day, she never stopped considering it. Eventually, Josephine found herself applying for Head of Hospital at Phoenix Ridge and tendering her resignation letter at the exclusive hospital she worked at.

It had all happened so fast. She quit her job at the hospital, packed up her things, and had them safely kept in a storage unit.

She gave Becky Thompson a call while she was at the airport, minutes away from boarding the plane to Phoenix Ridge.

“What?!”

It sounded like she had caught the chief at a bad time.

“I'm getting on a flight to Phoenix Ridge,” Josephine squeaked. She knew it was on short notice, but she wanted to do it before she got the chance to talk herself out of it.

“I should be there in six hours. Can you pick me up at the airport?”

“Well...uh...wow! Screw it! I'll be there!” Becky sounded equally exasperated and excited. Josephine had that effect on people.

True to her word, Becky was at the airport to pick her up. She was still dressed in her

fire chief uniform, looking sharp and businesslike, but her rigid face broke into a wide smile the moment Josephine walked into her view. Josephine found herself smiling too, the knot in her stomach unraveled. Perhaps this wasn't such a bad move after all.

"Sorry for bothering you," Josephine apologized. "I didn't want to give myself time to chicken out."

"I understand," Becky smiled. It was a nice contrast to the severe bun in her reddish blonde hair. "But how does your partner feel about all of this?"

"Oh," Josephine looked away, staring out at the rugged expanse outside the window. That was a rare sight in New York. The city was so densely packed, even though she got to travel from time to time, it was often from city to city. The outskirts of Phoenix Ridge looked unforgiving but there was a certain beauty to it.

"Eva and I broke up. Sorry I didn't tell you."

The last time Josephine and Becky met in person was at the summit. She was with Eva at the time. Things had ended pretty recently, but in reality, their relationship had been dead for years. So, although a big change, there had been nothing dramatic or heart wrenching about their break-up.

Becky cocked her head. "How long has it been since you...?"

"Well, only a month since the official break up, but honestly, we had been living separate lives for a couple of years at least."

"Wow."

Josephine sighed and slinked down her seat, trying to hide from the world.

“Hey, hey, don’t get like that. It’s fine. We just need to get you back into the dating pool again. It’ll be easier now that you’re in Phoenix Ridge. A new start and all that!”

“I’m not sure I’m ready to get in another relationship just yet.”

“Fair enough.” Becky nodded. “Well, then you can at least have some fun. A couple of years is a very long time for a dead relationship.”

“Fun?”

“Yeah, dating, just for the fun of it. I know it’s not normally your thing but, well, packing up and leaving New York wouldn’t have been your thing either. Since you’re out here, have some fun!”

“Oh god, I would love to get laid! It has been so long,” Josephine laughed after a brief pause. “But I’m not sure I know how to do that. It’s been so long.”

“That’s why we have dating apps, my dear.” Becky laughed. “The girls at the fire station are always messing around on them. Let’s get one downloaded.”

A couple of days later, Josephine found herself scrolling through a dating website. She’d created a profile using a fake name and an ambiguous photo of herself. For some reason, the thought of somebody she knew stumbling upon her on a dating website terrified her. At least with a different name, she could always deny all knowledge.

“Suzanne is such an obviously fake name,” Becky had joked the day she set up her account.

“Yeah,” Josephine shrugged. “Doctor Josephine Mars sounds even more fake, though. It shouldn’t be a problem.”

Josephine ignored most of the matches she got. Some of them looked like men hiding under women's profiles. Even she could spot these types in spite of her relative inexperience. In the end, only one person caught her attention. Emma 35. Emma had tousled reddish blonde hair and a wild look in her strong brown eyes. Emma was fiercely attractive.

And before she could stop herself, her fingers were dropping Emma a message.

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“This is a bad idea,” Josephine said to herself on the ride to the restaurant where she and Emma had agreed to meet. She’d never had the chance to visit the place since she arrived in Phoenix Ridge, too busy as she was handling her new employment at Phoenix Ridge hospital. They were eager to have her, naturally. They didn’t have a lot of doctors with her level of qualification—or reputation, for that matter.

The taxi pulled into The Golden and she instantly fell in love with the place. Contrary to what one might expect, it wasn’t filled with gaudy golden designs and decorations. The themes weren’t too on the nose. It felt more like walking into the sunset. The golden hues were subtle and tasteful. It was an open space area, letting in ample fresh air and very little noise. She was more than happy to see that the place wasn’t overly cluttered. That had happened too often in New York.

Josephine walked into the restaurant, feeling rather self-conscious. She’d worn a form-fitting pencil skirt, heels, and instead of the blouses she might wear for work, she had gone with a beautiful blouse made of sheer material. She hadn’t worn anything like this for years. She knew her lace bra and the shape of her breasts were easily visible through it and she realized she liked that. It was rather risqué, but it fit well with what she intended for her evening. This was a new version of Josephine who was pursuing fun, and fun tonight was a date with a beautiful, younger woman. She might have lied about her own age on the app, but only by a few years, and anyway, she was lying about her name and job too. Wasn’t that what everyone did on dating apps? She stood at the entrance, hoping she could have no trouble finding her date.

“Suzanne?”

It took a moment before she realized that was the name she used on the dating website. Josephine whirled around, coming face to face with her date.

“Emma?”

The young woman flashed her a playful smile. Emma was gorgeous. Her profile picture didn't quite show how tall she was. She was a little under six foot, and powerfully built with a wild mane of beautiful reddish gold curls. Her incredible physique made Josephine wonder what she did for a living. Perhaps she was a personal trainer, or an athlete.

“Hi there,” Emma had a confident and sexy voice. The kind that rarely ever had to repeat herself. “Our table is over that way.”

Josephine allowed herself to be led to their table. Her mind was in the clouds. Everything felt so surreal since the moment she arrived in Phoenix Ridge. Part of her had been expecting that feeling to go away when she met her date. It would break the illusion, finally. Her date would be the one thing that finally let her down in this beautiful city. She had been so wrong.

She couldn't stop looking at Emma's ass in the tight pants that she was wearing. Emma's body was awakening something within her that she hadn't felt in a long time. Desire. Raw, unfiltered desire was flooding through her.

Sex had been something she hadn't thought about for a long time. But she was certainly thinking about it now.

“You seem distracted,” Emma commented, tucking her hair behind her ear. Her hair was reddish gold in some lights. Reddish brown in others. Josephine pondered it. It was messy but so beautiful. Such a contrast to the immaculate way Josephine liked to present herself. Emma's fingers in her hair was such a simple gesture, but it captivated

Josephine's attention.

"I'm sorry," Josephine said.

"You don't have to be. It was merely an observation. I just wanted to know what's on your mind, am I not what you expected?"

"What? Well, no. Not at all. But, in a good way." Josephine blushed furiously. It wasn't often she felt wrong footed in life, but this woman was throwing her off balance for sure. "Your profile picture didn't do you justice, that's all."

Emma smiled and she was radiant. Her smooth skin shone bright and golden in the light. It was the most beautiful thing ever. The glow of the lights hitting her face, it made her look like an angel.

Her emotive brown eyes flashed alluringly. Josephine couldn't remember the last time she found someone so attractive.

"Neither did yours," Emma responded. "Well, actually, the one thing yours was was intriguing. It certainly gave you an air of mystery. But, well. I like your face." Emma met her gaze and her hand reached and touched Josephine's chin, and Josephine felt electricity sparking through her from the touch of her long, strong fingers.

"Did you move to Phoenix Ridge recently?" Emma asked.

"Yes, I moved recently," Josephine replied. She felt a loss where Emma's hand had been. "I used to live in New York."

"Oh, the big city huh?" Emma looked genuinely interested. "What's it like over there?"

“Claustrophobic.”

Emma laughed showing off her lovely white teeth. Her smile was neat, but not overdone and too perfect like all the New York women and their expensive cosmetic dentists. “Yeah, I imagine so. I’ve lived in Phoenix Ridge all my life.”

Josephine smiled. Conversation is flowing surprisingly smoothly for someone I’m meeting for a one-night stand, she thought.

Am I really going to have a one-night stand? New city, new me and all that. The messages with Emma had been flirty and suggestive, and Josephine remembered a time years before where she had met women and just followed her desires exactly where they lead her.

They talked until they were one of the few couples left in the restaurant. Time seemed to fly by in a blink. They hadn’t talked about work. Emma clearly assumed Josephine to be the businesswoman she had claimed to be on her profile. Josephine felt like the mystery nature of what they were doing didn’t warrant probing into Emma’s real life, so she didn’t. Josephine found herself conflicted. Torn between the conversation she was enjoying and finding out what exactly it was Emma was promising beneath her knowing brown eyes. In the end, they had to leave before the restaurant closed.

“Did you drive?”

“No,” Josephine shook her head. Her date smiled broadly.

“I did, come on.”

Josephine wasn’t sure what exactly she was expecting her date’s car to be. A Camaro was definitely not it. The car looked incredibly well maintained for something that was built decades ago.

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“Wow.”

“You like it?” Emma asked, turning to look over her shoulder.

“I love it. It’s a beautiful car.”

“Her name’s Joan. She’s incredible.”

Josephine felt her eyebrows raise slightly, Emma was like no woman she had ever met before—so different from her immaculate, uptight ex and so different to all of the women she had dated in New York over the years.

They got into the car. Josephine reached for the seatbelt but found it a little more complicated than the cars she was used to.

“Hold on, I’ll get that for you.” Emma reached around to help her put it on. Her perfume engulfed Josephine. Her natural scent lingered tantalizingly underneath, making her swoon. Something deep, woody, and earthy. It was perfect. Josephine unconsciously found herself taking deep breaths. It drew her in until she found her lips almost touching Emma’s neck.

Her date had stopped moving when she noticed. Josephine could hear her breathing quicken too. The moment seemed to stretch on forever yet it was somehow too brief. Emma pulled back and sat in her seat, putting her seatbelt on as well. She cleared her throat.

“Hang on,” she warned before turning the ignition. The roar of the engine as it came

to life made her jump slightly in her seat.

Emma chuckled. “Joan is a bit loud.”

“Do you race Joan?” Josephine asked as they pulled out of the parking lot faster than anticipated and screeched around the corner.

“Yeah, how can you tell?”

“It’s the way you drive.”

“Oh?”

“It’s...”

“What?”

Josephine smiled. “I guess it’s a bit attractive.”

“Just a bit?”

“You like to tease, don’t you?” Josephine shot back.

Emma smiled broadly and Josephine enjoyed the tiny chip missing from her front tooth. “Only when I like someone.”

Josephine felt lust burning inside of her. She wanted to have sex with Emma, that was for sure.

“Do you want to come back to my hotel room at The Grand with me?”

Emma's fierce brown eyes fixed on her own. "I thought you would never ask." She flung a sharp right on the steering wheel, and Joan roared through the city, and Josephine couldn't remember the last time she had felt this alive.

Josephine couldn't get the door of the hotel room open fast enough. Emma was behind her, surreptitiously running her hands over her body, feeling up her curves. She struggled to contain the moans that threatened to escape her lips.

The key missed the lock three times before she finally slid it in and the door opened. She turned around and pulled Emma inside, pressing her lips against hers in a deep kiss. She heard the door close behind them and then the latch as it locked. Their lips remained locked together as they made their way to the bed, shedding their clothes on the way until they were wearing nothing but their underwear.

As much as Josephine had worried she would have forgotten what to do with a woman sexually, it had come back to her remarkably quick. Her mouth kissed as though on instinct and her hands moved without conscious thought. She felt wetness between her legs. She was turned on. Very turned on. Of that, there was no doubt.

Josephine got on top as her date seemed content to let her take the lead and she was enjoying herself. She was happy she had her best lingerie set on from La Perla. The quality of the white lace was just unmatched. She wasn't sure if Emma cared about lingerie quality as much as she cared about car engine parts, but never mind. She felt sexy in it and that was what mattered. She straddled Emma on the bed. She felt Emma's tight stomach for a second against her clitoris and she moaned. Emma wore masculine underwear—black Calvin Klein. Of course she did. She ran her hands over Emma's thick shoulders, feeling the strong muscles tensing up underneath her fingers. Emma didn't remain idle, she felt Emma's strong hands moving all the way up her hips to the small of her back, stopping briefly to cup her ass, giving it a firm squeeze. This time, Josephine moaned out loud. She couldn't keep it down any longer. It had been far too long since she'd felt this pleasure, and Emma was hitting

all the right buttons, reawakening a part of her that had been lying dormant for years.

Emma ran her hand up her back, ending at the area between her shoulder blades. She pulled Josephine harder against her body, deepening their kiss. It felt like she was trying to merge them into one and she was pulling her tight against her hard enough to achieve just that. Josephine could feel her own large breasts pressed into Emma's much smaller ones. Everything about Emma was turning her on. She was some kind of sweet, sweet blend of masculine and feminine and it turned Josephine on like nothing else.

Josephine found her own hands burrowing underneath Emma to help free her of her Calvin Klein bra. She pushed the front of it up, freeing her firm breasts and then continued to drag it off over Emma's head as she enjoyed Emmas erect little nipples being exposed. Emma's arms were quickly seeking behind Josephine's back and seconds later her La Perla lace was on the floor and her breasts fell free. Now in the open air, her nipples quickly hardened. Josephine couldn't resist the temptation, she wanted to take her time, but the sight of the younger woman's beautiful body exposed below her was driving her crazy. She dipped her head taking one of Emma's small brown nipples in her mouth and sucking.

Oh, how I have missed this.

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Now it was her date's turn to let out a loud moan. Josephine felt strong arms wrap around her, pulling her in closer and encouraging her. She obliged, sucking harder on one nipple and then the other. She teased with her teeth and tongue. She sucked and enjoyed the swell of the nipple within her mouth.

This is everything I wanted. I can't believe I've been missing this for so long.

Emma gasped, arching her back further to get more of her nipple into Josephine's mouth.

The sex with her ex had died soon after they moved in together. It had never been too exciting anyway. They had gotten together for reasons that Josephine could barely remember now. She had been suitable. (How very boring). Their lives had entwined.

It didn't take long before Emma's Calvin Kleins and Josephine's beautiful lace panties joined her bra on the floor. Normally, she might have felt a little self-conscious at this point, but with Emma, it all felt so natural, like they had done this before. Emma easily matched her rhythm as their bodies moved, grinding against each other, moaning into each other's mouth.

She reached down and cupped her hand over Emma's pussy, pushing between her legs, eliciting another gasp from her. Josephine took that as consent to proceed. She gently ran her fingers through Emma's wetness, relishing the way it made her quiver in pleasure. She repeated the motion, sliding up and down while maintaining the pace. It was driving Emma crazy. Josephine wondered if had been equally as long for Emma as it had been for her. She resolved to make this encounter worth it for both of them. They were only meeting this one time, after all. This was the time to be truly

free.

Emma proved to not be a complacent lover. Her fingers worked their way from Josephine's back, down her bare buttocks, and a finger slid straight inside her wetness. Josephine felt intense pleasure and instantly craved more.

Josephine matched Emma, allowing her index finger to slowly penetrate Emma's pussy. That drew a long, drawn-out moan from her, forcing their lips to separate. She took Emma by the chin and pulled her lips back to hers, silencing her. The young woman underneath her was already quaking. She knew all the signs were there. She was close. Josephine kept up the motion, going in and out with just one finger curling it upwards, feeling for Emma's G Spot with the pad of her finger.

"Yes!" Emma screamed. "Yes!"

That seemed to be the extent of the mental lexicon she had access to at the moment. Words seemed to elude her. Josephine smiled with pride, watching Emma get off aroused her like nothing before. She would have been content with just fucking Emma and watching her come, but Emma wasn't. Emma quickly resumed her motion, adding another finger to the first one. What felt like two or maybe three fingers pushed inside Josephine from where Emma's hand had reached around, and it felt incredible.

Why have I denied myself this pleasure for so long?

She found herself sitting up and riding Emma's fingers, gasping with desperate pleasure. The heat between her legs mounted quickly until she found herself on the precipice of climax as well, much to her own surprise.

"I'm close!" Josephine announced.

“Yes!” Emma murmured.

The two of them felt perfectly aligned, like two gears in a clock. They moved in tandem, each one driving the other toward the climax. The motion felt unstoppable, like the surging of a wave, the orgasm came crashing through both of them at the same time. Josephine stiffened, her mind devolving into blank whiteness as the intensity raged through her.

This had never happened to her before, orgasming at the same time as a partner. But here, with Emma, it had felt easy. As though it was the easiest thing in the world. As though they fit together perfectly.

Emma shook uncontrollably underneath her. Her beautiful brown eyes rolled to the back of her head. Her grip on Josephine tightened like a vice, pulling her in and holding her as close as she could. In that moment, it felt like their two souls had melded together. This was like nothing Josephine had experienced before. Particularly not with someone she had just met. She moved until she was lying next to her lover, their legs still entangled. Emma kissed her greedily once more, her fingers working back between Josephine’s legs. Josephine moaned loudly as Emma’s fingers entered her again and Emma moved downwards dipping her head and reaching her tongue to Josephine’s clitoris.

Josephine knew she was going to explode again and it wouldn’t take long.

“Oh yes... oh my god, yes,” she moaned, leaning her own head back and grabbing a handful of Emma’s wild hair in her fingers to pull her head in closer.

Who is she? What is she doing to me?

She felt Emma’s strong fingers thrusting inside her as Emma sucked her clitoris deeply. Her second orgasm of the night suddenly crashed through her, and she

collapsed backwards into the bed.

“Oh, my god. What you do with your fingers, your mouth. Girl, you are incredible,” she murmured to Emma, who had released her clitoris from her mouth and sat back up on her knees as her fingers slid slowly out of Josephine.

There was a wide smile on Emma’s beautiful face and her messy reddish hair was wild around her strong shoulders.

“Can I return the favor?” Josephine smiled back at her, their eyes connecting.

“I’m sure that could be arranged,” Emma sighed lazily and moved so she was leaning back against the headboard of the bed. Her knees were bent up and she allowed them to slowly fall to the sides exposing her wet and wanting pussy. She never took her eyes off Josephine’s the whole time.

Josephine couldn’t help looking down between Emma’s legs as they parted. Her pubic hair was as wild and red as the hair on her head. Her vulva was swollen and wet and so very beautiful.

Josephine felt her mouth water.

“I bet you taste like strawberries and cream,” Josephine said, smiling.

“Why don’t you take a lick and see?” Emma taunted, opening her legs wider, as though beckoning Josephine in.

Josephine moved to her knees between Emma’s legs, dipping her head so she could please the younger woman with her tongue and mouth. Emma didn’t taste of strawberries and cream. There was a sweet, sexy smokiness to her that Josephine lapped and lapped at, wanting more and more of the taste of her.

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Josephine sucked her clitoris, sucked her labia, one side and then the other. She pushed her tongue inside Emma. She noticed the movements she made that drove Emma crazy and made her moan louder, made her breathing quicken.

“Oh fuck,” Emma growled. “You feel so good... Fuck me with your fingers... Please,” she begged, and Josephine was only too happy to assist.

She used her right hand to push two fingers inside Emma, building a rhythm of thrusts to match the movements of her tongue against Emma’s clit.

“Fuck... fuck...fuuuck!” Emma’s fingers gripped a handful of Josephine’s hair as her body tensed and she exploded in orgasm in Josephine’s mouth and flooded the palm of her hand.

Josephine smiled as she sat up. She raised her right hand to her mouth and licked some of the juice from her palm into her mouth. It tasted like pleasure itself.

“Dirty bitch,” Emma growled as her eyes opened and she came back to earth.

“Oh, you have no idea, sweetheart,” Josephine laughed, feeling alive, truly alive. She had never felt better.

They never came down from the high. Just when Josephine thought they had reached the peak, they broke through it and reached new heights of pleasure she had never felt before. Sex had never felt so good.

“I think I’m starting to like Phoenix Ridge a lot,” Josephine whispered to her lover as

they lay in bed, basking in the glow of their intimacy.

Emma blinked tiredly at her. “Does that mean you’ll stay?”

It was a loaded question, or perhaps Josephine was reading too much into it. Things had felt too intense for what was supposed to be a one-night stand.

“I...I think so.”

Her date smiled happily. She wasn’t sure how exactly she felt. Was that how a hook-up was supposed to feel? Were people able to connect like that and then decide never to see each other again? How was that even possible? Was that what Emma wanted? Josephine didn’t know if she was reading too much into this or not. What if all of that was simply one-sided? For her, this was perhaps a once-in-a-lifetime thing. For Emma, this could’ve been just another Tuesday.

Those thoughts plagued her mind until the exhaustion overcame her worries. It was one of the best nights she’d had in a very long time. She didn’t want it to end on an uncertain note. Not with a one-night stand, not by saying goodbye to the most amazing woman she had ever met.

“I won’t wake up in the morning and find you gone, will I?” Josephine found herself asking.

“Never,” replied Emma, without hesitation.

She contented herself with that for now.

Ember watched Suzanne get dressed into her business wear. She enjoyed watching Suzanne fold her big breasts into a new bra—mauve silk this time—very nice, classy. And step her lovely long legs into matching panties. She rolled on stockings. Suzanne was clearly a lot older than Ember, but so beautifully feminine and classy in a way that turned Ember on so much. Ember enjoyed her eyes—an unusual color—a dark green with flecks of gold. And her perfect hair—a classy smooth caramel color like it was the work of an expensive hair salon. And sexually, well, she had been surprising to say the least. She had devoured Ember as though she was a starving woman at a banquet, and Ember had enjoyed every second. She loved an enthusiastic, confident lover. She watched as Suzanne slipped into last night's pencil skirt and heels and paired them with a much more conservative green blouse that matched her eyes. She was clearly wealthy; Ember had noted the expensive clothing brands and the nicest hotel in the city.

The comfort of the bed almost justified the price tag.

Anyway, her date had to get to work and so did she. It was odd. Ember felt like they were an old couple. She felt so comfortable with Suzanne. She had from the start. Suzanne was warm, intelligent, funny, sexy. Time with her had been a pleasure. The night had passed too quickly. Ember didn't know whether to be happy it happened or sad that it was going to be the last time.

Or was it?

Their messages on the app had suggested “One night of fun.”

It was a huge risk, but she didn't want to watch Suzanne leave without at least trying to confirm that they were going to see each other again.

Suzanne was running a brush through her perfectly neat hair.

“Suzanne?”

There was a brief pause before she turned around to look at Ember.

“Yes?”

There was something about her eyes. Ember was certain Suzanne felt just the same as she did. Last night hadn't been an illusion after all.

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“I would like to see you again. Last night was... It was amazing.”

Suzanne blushed. It was endearing to see such a mature and clearly accomplished woman act so flustered.

“I...but... I’m sure you’re aware, I am way older than you.”

“I don’t care,” Ember replied.

“I lied on the app about my age. I’m actually 49.”

Ember shrugged. “I lied too. I’m only 28”

“Emma!!! What? Oh god.” Suzanne was more flustered now.

“I don’t care about the age gap,” Ember said again.

She’d been prepared for that. It was obvious Suzanne was beating herself up over their age difference. At the restaurant, she caught Suzanne glancing around furtively while they were eating. She was worried about what people were going to think.

Stuff like that had never bothered Ember. It didn’t matter to her what someone’s age was or what job they did or anything like that. It was simple for Ember. If she liked them, she liked them. And she liked Suzanne.

“Well.” Suzanne finally looked her in the eye. “I would love to see you again.”

Ember's heart fluttered. Quite an insane development from what was supposed to be a one-night stand. But she was not going to let something so beautiful slip away into nothing but a memory, and constant recurrent what if as she tried to move on from what was lost.

Ember got out of bed, letting the sheets fall off her naked body. A body that Suzanne had appreciated greatly throughout the night. Even now, she felt Suzanne's green eyes roam up and down her form, the desire clearly evident in her eyes. She walked with her usual swag in the swing of her hips as she approached Suzanne and pulled her into a warm kiss. It was a different kiss from what they shared last night when the heat of passion threatened to consume them. This time it was slower, more intimate.

When she pulled away, she found herself already missing feeling of Suzanne's lips.

"See you again soon."

Suzanne smiled warmly. "Soon."

Ember plopped back down on the soft bed, letting out a heavy sigh. Suzanne had left her with the room to let herself out in her own time. She was happy and sexually sated. A feeling she had forgotten existed until now. Ember found herself smiling into the pillow. Suzanne's perfume lingered on the material. The scent was floral and intoxicating, with something else layered underneath, bergamot maybe? She could still taste Suzanne on her tongue. Last night hadn't been merely a dream however surreal it all felt.

She felt a little guilty, using a fake name and lying about her age when she signed up on the dating website. But then, Suzanne had lied about her age too, so maybe it wasn't a big deal. She resolved not to let that ruin the memory of what they had. When it came to it, she'd reveal her real name to Suzanne and apologize for the deceit. She had a feeling it was going to be a good day.

She went back home to take a shower and got ready for work. She got there a little later than usual, still on time, but Haley beat her to the station today. Ember could see her car in the parking lot.

“Okay, Ember.” She tried to school her expression. “Can’t let everyone know you got laid last night.”

Once she felt she looked normal again, she got out of the car with her duffel bag and made her way to the fire station.

“Sup, Ember, you got that freshly fucked glow on ya,” Kiera said the moment she walked.

“What? I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Ember feigned ignorance, walking past her. She took a few steps then stopped.

“Is it really that obvious?”

“Yup,” Kiera smiled broadly. A triumphant look on her face.

Ember shook her head. How the hell is she so chipper this early in the morning? Zara, just coming off the night shift looked ready to drop where she stood. Ember found her changing in the locker room, her eyes were red with exhaustion and lack of sleep.

“You don’t look so good,” Ember commented, observing her colleague.

Zara smiled at her. “I’m good, just a little tired. Last night was exhausting as hell. We got a call to the same house, twice. Drunk partygoer managed to set her apartment on fire twice in one night. Then a neighborhood transformer blew up, taking out the entire street. It was a giant mess putting out the fire and helping the power crew.”

Ember winced. “Sounds like fun.”

“Oh yeah, it sure was,” Zara replied, indulging her sarcasm. “What about you?”

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“What about me?” Ember asked, confused.

“You’re different this morning. More alive—you’ve got a glow about you.”

Ember was suddenly very interested in the contents of her locker. She pulled out her fire gear and made to leave with the stuff.

“Must’ve been a nice date,” Zara added, the edge of her lips hinting at the ghost of a smile.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about!”

She bolted as quickly as she could to avoid further questions only to have Haley ambush her at the fire truck with a million questions. That was the thing about a team of firefighters. Nothing was ever private. She didn’t have a choice, she had to spill the details. It was oddly comical, as they did their daily checks on the fire truck, while chatting about Ember’s love life.

“You are totally into her, aren’t you?” Haley could always tell what Ember was really thinking.

“Umm, yeah. Well, definitely yeah. She is totally hot. And smart. We got along well. Laughed a lot. It felt comfortable with her. I liked her.”

“Like, how much older is she exactly?” Haley asked, excitedly.

“Well, that’s the thing.”

“EMBER!” Haley admonished.

Ember laughed.

Luckily, they were interrupted by the blaring siren.

“We got a call!” Elle announced, coming down the stairs in a hurry. She hopped into the driver’s seat, and they were off in moments.

“What are we dealing with?” Ember asked.

“Medical emergency! Senior citizen downtown had a stroke and we’re the closest!”

Firefighters were often called in during medical emergencies. Their firetruck was equipped with nearly everything else an ambulance would have. This time, Rory Brooks jumped on the truck. She had the most experience in providing first aid and medical care.

“Huh,” Elle hummed as they approached the house. “No crowd this time. Means we can do our job in peace.”

True enough, there was only a couple of people waiting for them outside. Rory was out of the truck and on her way to see the patient right away, snapping out instructions to get the stretcher ready. Everything about their job was based on time. It would literally mean the difference between life and death, so they needed to move as quickly as possible.

They rushed to get the unresponsive woman on the stretcher while Rory tended to her. The unit’s other rescue vehicle arrived and since it operated more like a traditional ambulance, they loaded the woman on it and they were driving away in minutes. Sirens blared as they made their way to Phoenix Ridge hospital. One of the

patient's daughters rode with them, fretting over her mother while Rory and Haley worked to keep her stable.

"Ma'am," Ember called out as she noticed the lady was getting in the way. "Could you sit down, please? Your mother's going to be fine, but they need room to work."

The woman tried to force herself to take a seat. Ember went to join, taking her hand. She understood the woman's worry. If something had happened to her own mother, she'd be losing it too. Her relationship with her mom was tempestuous at times because they were too alike in some ways, but Ember loved her very much. Becky had always been there for her. She had never had a second parent on the scene. Becky was the strongest single mom Ember could imagine. How she had balanced that with rising to the very top of her chosen career was an admirable feat in itself.

Ember wasn't good at things like these, but she could offer the woman some comfort.

"It's okay."

"I don't know," the woman wailed, tears welling in her eyes. "She doesn't look so good."

"She's in good hands. Rory's one of the best."

As she heard her name, Rory raised her head and smiled at them before she went back to making sure the woman had her oxygen mask put on properly. Ember spotted the hospital building outside as they pulled. It was time to start moving. She got the side door open then helped Haley and Rory maneuvered the stretcher out and through the emergency room entrance.

The place was abuzz with activity as always. Nurses and doctors in their scrubs were rushing back and forth, a few of them approached the firefighters with the stretcher to

take the patient off their hands. There was already a protocol in place for all this. Rory updated them on the lady's condition while Ember waited and listened to the idle chatter around her. She knew some of these people but stopping to chat while she was on the job wasn't her thing.

While she was waiting, someone walked past her. A familiar perfume wafted over her. Floral, with a layer of Bergamot underneath. It tickled a very recent, very sensual memory. Suzanne. She turned sharply, trying to catch a glimpse of the person wearing it. But there were so many people about, she had no way of telling who exactly it was. Too quickly, it was already gone, and she didn't want to go around stopping random people.

"Damn it, Ember. You're losing your mind over this woman," she chided herself.

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“We need to move,” Elle said urgently, walking in to join them. “We just got another call.”

Ember took one more look around before she followed her colleague out the door. She felt silly. One night with a beautiful woman was all it took to have her distracted while on the job. That was not it, though, if she was being honest. There was something about last night with Suzanne. Everything felt so...right.

Ember shook the thoughts away. What was she thinking? What if Suzanne didn't want to start a relationship. That was exactly the point of the two of them hooking up. They just wanted to have fun. But...that didn't mean they had to hook up just once, did it?

By the end of her shift, Ember was tired to her bones, but it was a good day, all things considered. No fires, some emergencies, mostly injuries but nothing too serious. She was looking forward to a warm shower and a nap. Maybe she would text Suzanne. That thought sent a thrill of excitement coursing through her. It was quickly followed by apprehension. Ember squashed it.

“Hey, Ember. Are you headed home?” Her mom stopped her just outside the locker room.

“Yeah, done with my shift.”

Her mother nodded. “Yeah, I know.”

Ember chuckled. That was one of the side-effects of having her mom as her boss.

“So, I have this new friend who just moved into town from New York. She is the new head of the hospital. Remember I told you about her, Josephine Mars; she’s a surgeon. We talk a lot on the phone. Well, she’s moved here now and doesn’t know anyone. I’ve been meaning to introduce you to her, she’s such a sweet soul. You’re going to love her.”

Ember shook her head. She vaguely remembered her mom going on about these Wednesday evening phone calls with her New York surgeon friend. She was certain she wasn’t going to like any of her mother’s friends. Well, okay. That was the introvert in her speaking. Her mom was cool, so were her friends. She seemed particularly excited about this one for some reason.

“Sure, I won’t mind,” Ember replied, summoning some enthusiasm for her mother’s sake.

“Perfect. We’re all so busy most of the time but I’m sure we can meet up one of these days.”

Ember shrugged. It wasn’t a bad idea. Maybe that was exactly what she needed to keep her mind off Suzanne, at least for a few hours.

Joan was sitting in the parking lot, waiting as she walked up. Like all car lovers, Ember stopped briefly to admire how beautiful Joan was before she got in and started the engine. The familiar rumble greeted her, getting another smile out of her. She put the car in gear and pulled out of her parking spot. She accelerated onto the main road, easing her way into the traffic before she settled in for the drive home.

Her home was about a fifteen-minute commute from the fire station. She could’ve gotten somewhere closer, but that would have put her too close to her mother. Ember loved her mom, but she didn’t want her mother dropping by at the house unannounced when she had somebody over, so she got a place a little further away.

She didn't mind the drive; it helped her unwind after work. The familiar feeling of tranquility was setting in when it happened.

Ember heard them coming from nearly a mile away. Street racers. She'd barely paid it any mind until the first driver blew past her in one of those scat packs, going way over the speed limit. The car, a Dodge Charger, had to quickly swerve into her lane to avoid a collision with the truck in front, forcing Ember to slow down to avoid rear-ending them.

She hadn't noticed there was another street racer coming behind her. The driver didn't have enough time to swerve around the truck, but they still tried. The move ended with their car slamming into Joan. The sudden impact rocked Ember in the driver's seat. The car lost control, sliding into a oversteer. She lifted off the accelerator, trying to wrestle the car back under control as it slid sideways. Then another car hit her from behind.

Ember heard the loud screech of tires moments before impact and then the world tumbled. She was thrown in almost every direction as her car somersaulted on the highway. At some point her head slammed into something hard, dazing her. The road blurred by above her and the only thing keeping her in her seat was the seat belt.

Someone screamed in fear or panic. The ringing in her ears soon drowned out the noise of the commotion outside. She tried to stay awake, stay alert but her eyes couldn't seem to focus on anything in particular and darkness was already creeping in on the edges of her vision.

The seatbelt came off, depositing her on the floor. Well, roof of her car.

"It's okay! I got you!"

A pair of arms reached in and pulled her out of the car. She was greeted by clear skies

and a breath of fresh air. She gasped.

“The ambulance is on its way! Hang in there!” The person tried to reassure her. Ember managed a nod. She would’ve liked to assess her injuries, but she could barely manage a coherent thought. She could hear a crowd starting to form around her.

“That’s Ember Thompson!” one of the bystanders yelled. That was the thing about being Becky Thompson’s daughter. The whole of Phoenix Ridge knew who you were.

“Oh God, no!” cried the voice of a young woman. She was hyperventilating.

“Can it!” someone chastised her.

Ember heard the sirens in the distance as the darkness overcame her completely.

When next she opened her eyes, she was greeted by bright fluorescent lights and white walls. The whiteness was nearly overpowering. The hospital. Simply opening her eyes hurt. She elected to keep them closed for a while. The next time she opened her eyes, it was morning again. This time, the lights streaming in through the windows was softer on her eyes.

Ember took the time to take in her surroundings. She was at the hospital. That was no surprise. She’s been in a car accident after all.

“Ember?”

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Ember turned. She didn't realize somebody was in the room with her. It was her mom, who looked like she hadn't slept.

"Mom?" Her voice came out hoarse. The simple act of moving her lips was exhausting.

"Hey sweetie."

Her mother came to her side and ran her hand gently through her hair. She smiled down at Ember, the sides of her eyes crinkling. Ember could feel the relief oozing off her mother.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

Becky laughed. It was on the weaker side. She sounded more exasperated than amused.

"You were in an accident. Worry about yourself more."

They lapsed into silence for a moment before Becky stepped away.

"Doctor Brown assured me that you were going to be fine, but I better let them know that you're awake now."

"I'm okay?" Ember asked. She remembered the accident.

"Yes," Becky nodded confidently. "Thanks to Joan. I'm glad you took all those safety

measures with the seatbelts and the roll cage.”

“Oh,” Ember looked away. “And Joan, is she...?”

Becky frowned. “Joan is in a bad way, I’m afraid. But don’t worry about that for now. Just make sure you’re okay first.”

Ember screwed her face up. She knew Joan was just a car, but she loved her. It had all happened so fast, so suddenly. One moment she was driving home and the next her car was tumbling down the highway.

“Hey.” Her mother took her hand. “Be happy you’re alive.”

Ember nodded. Her mother was right, of course. What was she thinking? She could always get another car. Another life was not so feasible.

“I’ll be back soon.” Her mother stepped out, leaving her alone with her thoughts. She didn’t have to be alone for long. Her introspections were interrupted by a loud commotion outside.

“Your daughter was in accident?! And you didn’t even give me a call?!” The woman sounded affronted.

“I asked for you, but you were just done with your shift. I didn’t want to make you come back in. She’s alright anyway, thank god.”

“Becky!! I would have come back in and made sure she had the very best doctors we have.”

Her mother sounded strangely subdued. Ember wondered who the hell could talk to Becky Thompson like that. Certainly nobody from Phoenix Ridge. Must be that New

York friend she kept talking about. Josephine something... some weird surname. Mars. That was it. Dr Josephine Mars. The surgeon. They were approaching the room she was in. The conversation quietened as they got close.

The door opened and her mother walked in first. The friend paused at the door, she seemed to be going over something in the clipboard. Ember could see her elegant ankles in heels and a pencil skirt under her doctor's coat. She only stopped for a moment before she entered the room fully, revealing her face.

Ember froze. The doctor glanced at her and went stock still, mirroring Ember's expression.

"Oh, great, you're still awake," her mother said, oblivious to what was happening.

"This is my friend Doctor Josephine Mars. Remember I told you; Josephine has just taken on the job as Head of the Hospital. Josephine, this is Ember, my daughter."

Ember and Josephine stared at each, realizing in the same moment that not only did they lie about their ages, they also clearly lied about their names the night they met up and had sex with each other.

Lots of sex. All night. Hot sex. Hot woman. Her mom's friend. Oh fuck.

Becky glanced between the two of them when she noticed they weren't saying anything.

"Do you two already know each other?"

"No." Ember said quickly.

“No.” Josephine echoed, her green eyes wide with shock.

Oh fuck.

4

JOSEPHINE

Josephine had found herself daydreaming when she left Emma that morning in the hotel room in The Grand. She'd told Emma that she needed to get to work, but that wasn't entirely true. She'd run away. Waking up next to such a beautiful young woman, the memory of their previous night together, it all felt too good to be true. She couldn't bear it anymore. So, she ran. It was one thing she was historically prone to doing. She found a good thing hard to accept.

And Emma's tall, strong, naked athlete body with her lazy morning eyes was a memory she wouldn't easily forget. She could have stayed for more. She had wanted to stay for more. But she had lied to Emma and left her there.

She didn't need to show up to work just yet, but Josephine wanted to make a good impression as she was still new to the job. So, she showed up and tried to familiarize herself with the routine. She was a new doctor here, although she was the boss, but she liked to know how everything worked and every hospital had their own way of doing things.

It was a good day. Becky had been right about Phoenix Ridge, mostly run by women and even the staff at the hospital were kind and approachable on the whole. They

were incredibly patient with her, showing her the ropes, so to speak. That being said, she was eager to be back home when she finished that evening. She had barely slept the night before and Emma's naked, supple body kept popping into her mind.

Her new apartment was amazing. It was insane how much cheaper everything was compared to New York. So she had gone all out on a super luxurious, ready furnished apartment with a roof terrace and incredible views. It was massively spacious with a homey feel that came mainly from the wood finish. Nothing like the sterile, cramped apartments that came a dime a dozen in New York.

She made dinner, showered, and relaxed on the couch for a few hours, catching up on some shows before she went to sleep.

The next morning, she woke up to a text from Becky; her daughter had been in a car accident and was at the hospital. It was one of the most horrifying things she could've woken up to.

Josephine burst into the hospital having dressed in a rush to get there as soon as possible. Scared for her friend. Becky had spoken about her daughter a lot and Josephine looked forward to meeting her. Between moving in and getting things going with her new job, the time never presented itself. This would be a terrible way to meet her. Josephine knew how close Becky and Ember were. She had a nurse meet her at the doors of the hospital to go through Ember's file. Becky needed to be sure they were doing everything they could for her.

To be honest it sounded like Ember Thompson had been lucky.

"Becky?" She caught the fire chief on the way to her daughter's room and pulled her into a brief embrace. The nurse was still walking next to her.

Josephine took the clip board from the exhausted nurse. She walked next to Becky

while she gave the chief of the fire department an earful. Becky knew she should have called, especially for something so serious.

“—you didn’t even give me a call!”

Becky had the decency to look contrite. She apologized and pointed at a door.

“That’s where they put her,” Becky said, lowering her voice significantly.

Josephine decided to keep her grievances down for the moment. They didn’t want to accidentally wake Becky’s daughter after all. The patient needed all the rest she could get. The accident wasn’t as bad as it looked, according to the report. Most of her injury came from a concussion she got, most likely from her head hitting something when her car somersaulted. Her seatbelt prevented the worst of it.

Becky went inside the room while she hung back to go over Ember’s file once more, making sure she got everything right. Also, making sure they got everything right. She’d seen negligence lead to some unforgettable consequences. She was going to order some tests redone, just to be sure, but Ember Thompson looked to be in full good health. Now, time to go say hello to her good friend’s daughter.

Josephine raised her head and smiled, trying to make a good first impression. Then she saw Ember Thompson sit up in the bed. Lazy, sexy, beautiful brown eyes. Long strong legs under a hospital gown. Big strong hands with fingers that could create magic, and a wild mane of reddish brown hair that looked like it needed a brush.

Oh my god. Emma. Ember. The best sex of my entire life.

It felt like the entire world became a giant frozen block of ice around her. Ember Thompson stared back at her.

Becky's daughter. Oh, Jesus. I had sex with Becky's daughter.

"Oh, great, you're still awake," Becky said. She had clearly been anticipating this moment for some time now.

"This is my friend, Josephine Mars. Josephine, this is Ember, my daughter."

They'd messed up. The shock had completely taken them both off-guard that Becky immediately picked up on the fact that something was wrong.

"...you two already know each other?" Becky asked, glancing between the two of them.

"No." Ember growled. She was staring at Josephine as though she had seen a ghost. This was clearly just as awkward for her as it was for Josephine.

"No," Josephine echoed quickly.

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Both Josephine and Ember denied at the same time. It made her a little annoyed that her date had used a fake name as well as lying about her age, but then again, so had she. Josephine was in no position to cast any stones.

She recovered first.

“Hello, Ember, your mother has told me so much about you. It’s nice to finally meet you,” she smiled and walked up to her with her best bedside manner on full display.

“Uh, hi. Mom mentioned you too,” Ember replied awkwardly. Her beautiful brown eyes looked as uncomfortable as was possible. Clearly, she was still reeling from the shock.

Josephine found her gaze dragging to Ember’s lovely full lips. She couldn’t stop thinking about what that mouth had done to her.

And those hands. Big strong hands.

Jesus. Josephine. Pull yourself together.

It made sense now, Josephine thought. She’d been wondering what job Emma—no, Ember—did that made her body so toned. Turns out, she was a firefighter, just like her mother.

And she had Becky’s brown eyes and reddish hair. Like a taller, stronger, more masculine Becky. Should she have recognized her as Becky’s daughter?

Now, how the hell was she going to tell her friend that she had slept with her daughter? There was no way Becky could ever know. She was fiercely protective of Ember, and something told Josephine her friend wouldn't take too kindly to her daughter seeing a woman who was more than 20 years older than her. She wanted to sigh. Phoenix Ridge had been so perfect, up until just now.

She asked Ember a few questions, nothing particularly serious. All pertaining to her general health and how she was feeling. She seemed to be doing okay, but she was still going to wait until the test results came back. Ember's eyes tracked her every movement, they flickered over her breasts and seemed particularly keen on her face. It was as though the young woman couldn't believe what she was seeing. Josephine couldn't believe it either. Ember looked sad. Clearly, they needed to talk but now wasn't the time. Not while her mother was right there.

"Well, looks like you're doing great."

Josephine placed her palm on the back of Ember's hand. It was supposed to be a kind gesture, but the feeling of their skin touching again made her develop instant goosebumps. She unconsciously clenched her thighs, remembering the feeling of Ember's strong fingers, the same ones under her hand, as they teased her pussy before entering her.

Stop it, Josephine! She's Becky's daughter for god's sake! She's entirely out of bounds. Don't even think about it.

Their night of passion was still very fresh in her mind, and with the way Ember was staring at her, it was fresh in hers too.

Josephine pulled away quickly, attempting to mask her slip up with a smile.

"I'll come check up on you from time to time."

“Thank you, Doctor.” Ember offered her own fake smile; her emotive brown eyes held a great deal of questions. Josephine wasn’t sure she had the answers to any of them.

She turned to Becky. “She’s doing great. You can take a break if you need and go home. The hospital staff will keep an eye on her for you.”

Becky nodded. She had dark circles under her eyes. Josephine could tell she was tired and she did need to get some sleep, but it was clear she wasn’t ready to leave her daughter’s side. Josephine said her goodbyes and left hastily before things got even more awkward.

Ember Thompson. Josephine glanced at the name on the clipboard. Twenty-eight years old. She’s so young, she thought guiltily. And so beautiful.

Before, it had been difficult to keep Ember out of her mind. Now, with her in the same hospital, albeit as a patient, she was the only thing Josephine could think about. She went through the day mechanically, answering questions, asking some, but largely she barely paid attention. Most of the things they told her, she already knew about them. She noted when Becky finally left to go get some much-needed sleep at her house. Ember was alone. The coast was clear.

No, Josephine, you shouldn’t, she told herself. But multiple times throughout the day she found her feet carrying her towards Ember’s room. She would turn away, only to find herself back there a few minutes later.

Finally, she decided to end the farce. She knocked on the door.

“Come in.”

Josephine tried to steel her nerves. A few deep breaths did nothing to calm her down.

Just go inside, she won't eat you.

But I want her to eat me.

Josephine blushed suddenly at the double entendre of that thought. She forced herself to twist the knob and let herself in.

Ember's eyes immediately fixated on her. Josephine felt so self-conscious under the young woman's unwavering gaze that swept over her body.

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“I thought you would come earlier,” Ember said.

“I was busy, sorry,” Josephine lied.

“Oh.” Ember nodded and looked down at her hands. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you my real name.”

“It’s fine,” Josephine said quickly. “I apologize for not telling you mine either.”

They lapsed into silence. So many words they wanted to say, the tension was thick enough to cut through with a butter knife.

“Was it real?” Ember asked, looking up at her. Josephine was mesmerized by her eyes once again. There was something about them, the way she looked at people. It made her heart flutter with an indescribable emotion. It made her feel...real... seen.

“Yes, for me it was,” Josephine answered honestly.

Ember nodded. “That night was amazing. I’d never felt anything like that before. I can’t stop thinking about...thinking about you.”

The earnestness in her gaze tugged at Josephine’s heart. Ember was so open and so evolved for someone so young. She walked up and sat on the edge of Ember’s bed.

“I can’t stop thinking about you either.”

Silence. This time, words weren’t going to be enough for the two to express

themselves. Josephine could feel it as much as Ember did. Her lips found Ember's of their own accord. Ember responded with enthusiasm, kissing her with the same level of desperation and desire. All of the emotions they had been feeling in the last two days were conveyed with that one, intense kiss.

Josephine felt Ember reach her hand up inside her blouse to grasp hungrily at her breasts. She moaned from the sensation of her warm touch. She wanted Ember's hands on her body. She wanted them so badly. She placed her hand on top of Ember's, encouraging her to squeeze harder. The young woman obliged her, eliciting another moan from Josephine as she felt her nipples harden and her panties getting wet.

She leaned in further into the kiss, and they made out passionately. All the while, Josephine thought about how wrong this was, how risky it would be if she was caught making out with a patient barely a week into her working at the Phoenix Ridge hospital. But she couldn't pull away from the kiss. It was addictive.

Ember moaned, her hand searched past Josephine's knee, seeking up her skirt running higher up her inner thigh between her legs. Josephine felt her back arching into the touch, hitching her skirt higher to allow Ember access.

Ember's fingers teased over and under and around her silk panties.

"You are so wet for me," she growled into Josephine's ear. "I like it."

Josephine smiled back. "You always seem to know exactly the right thing to do and say."

Ember kissed her, more forcefully this time. Her passion was clearly growing, and Josephine had to admit that hers was too. They were quickly being consumed by the same desires they felt that night. The feeling was back, and with full force. Ember

had awakened something within her that night, a part of her that she had forgotten but it was back with a vengeance.

She could already feel herself approaching that precipice as Ember's magical fingers slid in and around her soaking panties, teasing her like crazy with the occasional swipes of her clitoris. She'd barely been touched, but the familiar shaking was beginning to set in.

Then they heard a knock on the door. It was like someone had spilled cold water on the two of them. Josephine gasped and pulled away sharply, rising to her feet and adjusting her skirt, retucking her blouse. Ember rearranged her hospital gown.

Josephine made sure her face looked alright before she went to answer the door. It was an unfamiliar woman. She was a bit on the short side but thick and strong-looking and wearing the regulation navy blue pants and T shirt of the Phoenix Ridge Fire Department.

"Hello," the woman greeted. "I'm Rory, Ember's friend and colleague."

Josephine's smile faltered a bit but she recovered quickly before Ember's friend noticed.

"Hi Rory. I'm Doctor Josephine Mars. It's nice to meet you."

Josephine stepped away to let her in. "Come right in, Ember is awake."

The young woman's face lit up the moment she walked in and saw Ember sitting up in bed.

"There's our favorite superhero!"

Josephine winced at the boisterous woman's enthusiasm. She crossed the room quickly to give Ember a warm hug. Ember gave Josephine an apologetic look over Rory's shoulder. Josephine smiled back reassuringly.

She left the two of the friends, her mind still reeling from the intensity of the desires that lingered between them. She was soaking wet still and her panties needed sorting out.

They'd almost gotten themselves caught! Josephine was terrified about what would have happened if Rory had walked in without knocking first. Or even worse... Becky.

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“That was careless,” she said to herself but deep down inside, she knew she would do it again. She simply couldn’t get enough of Ember. She didn’t care if they had both used a fake name that night they met. Josephine was certain it would have changed nothing.

“Doctor Mars?”

Josephine jolted to attention. “Oh, hello?”

There was nurse talking right next to her. She had no idea how long he’d been standing there. She’d been so distracted by her thoughts she zoned out completely.

“Doctor Gale is asking to talk to you.”

“Where is he?”

“At his office.”

“I’ll be there.”

The nurse nodded and left her alone. Francis Gale was her boss, mostly in name. She did have leagues of experience over him, and he acknowledged that, but he was largely in charge of running the hospital and keeping them staffed and stocked.

“Gale,” she greeted, entering his office.

The man was older than her. Most of his hair had gone grey and the wrinkles around

his eyes spoke of someone who smiled a lot throughout his life. He gave her one of such smiles when she walked in.

“Doctor Mars, I hear you’re settling in quite nicely.”

Josephine nodded. “I am.”

“Good, good.” He bobbed his head. “I was thinking, since you and Chief Thompson are close, you might as well take up her daughter’s care. Would be a nice way to start. We don’t want to overwhelm you right away.”

“Oh.” That was not good.

“Just look after her is all I’m asking. Chief Thompson is special to our city, and we want the absolute best for her family. And you’re obviously the best.”

Josephine had already done that but since Gale was asking, she elected to simply accept it. There was no need to correct him on that front. But, if she was the one handling Ember’s case, that meant they were going to have to see each other quite often. She shivered. It was going to be difficult to keep her hands off Ember now. However, in spite of her thoughts, she couldn’t find it within herself to refuse.

“Sure, I’ll look after her.”

“Perfect!” Gale waved it off. “I mostly just wanted to check on you. Ember is doing pretty okay. She should be ready for discharge in a few days.”

By the time Josephine returned to Ember’s room, her friend was gone. It was already past visiting hours anyway. She went with her clipboard and took a seat in one of the chairs in the room.

“Hey Ember, how are we feeling?” Josephine asked, trying to gently probe her patient.

Ember was laying on her back. She watched Josephine through half-lidded sexy eyes.

“Would you believe me if I said I feel great?”

Josephine shook her head. “You were in accident, and you suffered some head trauma. I’d be worried if you said that.”

“But I do feel great. I didn’t think I’d see you again so soon. To be honest, I didn’t think I’d see you again, period. Meeting you here again feels like fate or something.”

“More like karma,” Josephine countered, putting her clipboard down. “Karma for sleeping with someone way younger than myself. You’re my friend’s daughter, she’s going to be livid if she found out what we did.”

“She doesn’t need to find out.” Ember grinned mischievously and her brown eyes flashed enticingly.

Josephine laughed and picked up her clipboard. “Let’s try this again. How are you feeling?”

This time, she managed to get a decent assessment of Ember’s condition before she got sidetracked again. Ember was an extremely flirtatious young woman. She was so bold and forward, a stark contrast to Josephine. Josephine was scared. This entire affair looked like something that would blow up in their faces, and a part of her was already saying she should return to New York to get away from it all. She’d never had much luck with relationships. Each time she felt things were going well, it would all slip away through her grasp. They would either lose interest, or cheat, or move away, something always happened.

And, aside from Ember being Becky's daughter, dating a 20-something was bound to be trouble.

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“Rory brought me a little bit of news.”

“What is it?” Josephine asked. It was amazing how easily they had gotten to the point where they spoke like two old lovers. It proved that everything she’d felt that night on their date hadn’t been a fluke. Conversation was ridiculously easy between them.

“The driver who hit me, I was worried, but she turned out okay. Her car had spun out and slammed into two other people, but she was largely okay. Apparently, I was the one who suffered the most damage.”

“And thankfully you’re doing okay.”

Ember nodded.

“But your car...Joan...” Luckily Josephine remembered the car’s name.

“Totaled,” Ember said simply and sadly. The loss was apparent in her voice.

“She was a beautiful car,” Josephine sympathized. She found herself walking toward Ember’s bed, overcome by the need to console her. She hugged her and for a while, they remained motionless, reveling in each other’s embrace.

Ember moved to lay on her back, pulling Josephine down with her. She ended up laying on her side, so as not to put her weight on the younger woman. She found it incredibly hard to say stop, the small part of her mind that remained rational helped her make that one last concession. Ember kissed her neck, sending a jolt of pleasure shooting through her body.

They laid down next to each other in bed, their legs entangled, their lips pressed against each other. All of Josephine's resolve crumbled in an instant. Her hands were exploring Ember's body with wild abandon.

I want her so badly.

"I think you better lock the door," Ember whispered to her. "I want to fuck you."

Josephine managed to pull herself away from the haze she was in. She got up and quickly went to lock the door to the room. This way, a nurse wouldn't randomly walk in on them. Josephine had nowhere else she needed to be right now. Becky hopefully wouldn't be back for a few hours. They had time.

Josephine headed back towards the bed.

Ember's eyes were hungry on her body.

"Josephine," Ember growled. "Roll your skirt up."

Josephine went to obey and rolled her skirt up higher and higher until her panties were exposed.

Ember sat on the edge of the bed, still in her hospital gown, but she could make anything look sexy.

"Roll your panties down. I want to look at you."

Josephine still had her doctor's coat on. This was wild. But she didn't care.

Her hands moved to her hips and she rolled her panties down. She gasped as the cool of the air hit the wetness of her vulva.

She stepped carefully out of her panties still wearing her heels.

The panties were soaking.

Ember reached out her hand for them and Josephine handed them over. Ember put them to her nose and inhaled deeply.

As she lowered her hand she smiled.

“I missed you,” she said simply as she took hold of Josephine’s doctor’s coat and pulled her in close. With her other hand, she moved quickly between Josephine’s legs and Josephine moaned with want at the touch. She was desperate.

“Please...” she gasped.

“Oh, baby, don’t worry. I’m going to fuck you,” Ember growled, and her fingers entered Josephine roughly. Josephine felt her eyes widen. Her body adjusted to the penetration and suddenly she was overcome with the pleasure of the feeling.

Ember pulled her closer with her fingers that were inside of Josephine. She literally pulled Josephine’s pussy right to her face, she opened her full lips and took Josephine’s clit into her mouth as her fingers began to fuck her.

As those lovely, long, strong fingers went to work thrusting inside of her Josephine felt her eyes roll back in her head and her moans become involuntary.

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It felt like seconds later when her orgasm overcame her and rushed through every inch of her body. She felt her pussy clamping tight around Ember's fingers. She thought she might collapse until Ember took her in her strong arms and pulled her forwards onto the bed.

"Oh my god," Josephine gasped, her voice hoarse. "That was incredible."

Ember pulled her in close and whispered in her ear. "You are incredible."

Josephine thought her heart might beat out of her chest.

"Now, maybe you could just slide a hand between my legs quickly... I'm so turned on, this won't take long," Ember murmured, taking Josephine's hand in her own and pushing it to her own wetness.

Josephine was more than happy to oblige her.

5

EMBER

Ember had woken up feeling like shit. Everything hurt, initially. Then she felt like her whole world was falling apart when her mother had walked in and introduced her recent lover as that friend of hers she'd been wanting Ember to meet. That was right. Ember had been sleeping with her mother's friend.

Fuck.

But there was no denying that they wanted each other. She felt it reflected in Josephine's eyes the moment their hands touched. Ember knew right away that although Josephine was clearly concerned about sleeping with her friend's daughter, it wasn't going to stop. She wanted more. So did Ember. She was determined to continue to pursue her. The issue about both of them using fake names was thrown aside. Ember found that she didn't care about the reasons why. All she wanted was to be with Josephine again, to feel her touch.

The next time the hot doctor came to her room, Ember could feel the tension in the air. She could feel the butterflies in her stomach. Something she hadn't felt since her last crush as a teenager. When they finally kissed, Ember could have sworn there were sparks going off in the background. Well, that could have been the painkillers they gave her.

Sadly, their moment was interrupted by a knock on the door. Ember had to suppress her irritation when Rory walked in. Not like it was her fault she was hooking up with the doctor at the hospital.

Rory glanced back at the door after Josephine left.

"Is it just me or is that doctor smoking hot?!"

Ember immediately felt a flash of jealousy. Suddenly, the thought of losing the doctor to her pretty friend crossed her mind. Rory was beautiful. She'd noticed Josephine giving her a once over when she went to open the door for her colleague. Rory had that effect on everybody.

"I know," Ember admitted, grinning widely.

Rory's eye narrowed in suspicion. "Wait, did you...? Oh my God! You slept with her, didn't you?!"

“Remember that date I had the other night?”

“That was her?!”

“Yeah.”

“Sweet! Good work, Thompson! I’d totally hit if you weren’t interested.”

“I’m totally interested so keep your grubby paws off her.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Rory waved off her warning and took a seat.

“There’s a problem though,” Ember said, eyes downcast.

“What is it?” Rory asked worriedly.

“So, that friend my mum kept talking about wanting me to meet?”

“Yea—oh, shit. She’s your mom’s friend?”

“Yup. And Mom is not going to like it.”

“She’s definitely not,” Rory agreed. “But it doesn’t look like that’s going to stop you, though, does it?”

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“Nope,” Ember replied without hesitation. “We just need to find a way to keep my mom from finding out.”

“You sure that’s a good idea?”

“It’s the best one I got.”

“Fair enough.” Rory collapsed into her seat. “That’s kinda hot though.”

Ember merely chuckled.

“So, how are you feeling? I mean, with the accident and everything.”

Ember shrugged. “Pretty okay, all things considered.”

“Really?” Rory pressed.

“Yeah. I’m a firefighter, remember? We deal with emergencies like these all the time.”

“Yeah, but it’s not the same as being involved in one. I’ve been in a car crash before. It messes with your mind almost as much as it messes up your body.”

“I swear I’m fine. No nightmares, no PTSD, nothing. I feel okay.”

Rory seemed to believe her.

“How about the other people involved? The driver of the car that hit me, how are they?”

“It was some sixteen-year-old girl, racing her dad’s muscle car. The car was totaled, she’s traumatized. I don’t think she’ll ever be able to drive again. She’s fine though, besides the mental trauma.”

Ember looked away in thought. She felt bad for the young girl. She understood what it was like being that young and making bad decisions. Hell, she was almost thirty and she was still making bad decisions. It was probably for the best however.

“And Joan?” Ember asked hopefully hoping for a better answer on her beloved car.

Rory winced. “Yeah, she’s gone. There’s no fixing her. Your mom’s trying to work with the insurance company, but you know how they are. It’s a modified car so they’re likely not going to pay the full cost of replacing it.”

Ember sighed deeply. “Fuck.”

Rory came and sat next to her, taking her hand gently. “Hey, it’s alright. I’m sorry Joan was lost but you’re okay, that’s what matters the most.”

Ember laughed. “That’s the same thing my mom said.”

Rory hung around for a little while until she had to leave. The nurses tending to her brought her meals and made sure she was comfortable. If it weren’t for the bruises and the headache that came back every once in a while, she felt like she was on vacation. Then, Josephine came back. Ember knew she wasn’t going to let the hot doctor leave with making love to her this time.

When Josephine finally touched her where she wanted her most, it felt like she was

going to explode.

When her orgasm came crashing into her, her mind ground to a halt. Her lungs forgot how to work. All of her muscles went rigid as though to brace her for the force of the orgasm as it cleaved through her body. The feeling was electric, lighting her nerves up with pleasure beyond anything she'd ever felt before.

Afterwards, as Josephine held her close and leaned in and kissed her hair she whispered, "Stay with me, Ember. Don't stop talking to me, don't leave me. I want you to stay with me."

Ember looked at her, surprised by the honesty of her words but also realizing she also didn't want to leave Josephine.

"I won't leave. I'm yours for as long as you would have me."

Becky walked into her hospital room later on.

Ember gave her mother a tired smile. Josephine had left to go home a few minutes before. Of course, not before they shared one last passionate kiss. Ember was tired, but it was the good kind. She was feeling so much better.

"You look happy," her mother commented.

"Well, I decided to listen to you and be grateful for the fact that I'm still alive."

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Becky looked at her suspiciously. “You never listen to me. What’s changed?”

“I almost died.”

“Fair point, I suppose.” Becky nodded. “Have you had dinner?”

“Yeah, Josephine got me some takeout.”

“Josephine? The two of you got chummy while I was away, I see,” Becky joked.

“Mom.” Ember rolled her eyes in exasperation. She looked away to hide the blush that tinted her cheeks. Her mind flashed back to moments earlier. She could vividly recall the taste of Josephine and how hot she looked with her skirt rolled up and her panties off. And how good it felt when she?—

“Are you okay?” her mother asked worriedly. “You’re red all over. Should I call the nurse?”

“No, Mom, I feel fine.” Ember sighed. Becky had gone full “mother-mode” ever since the accident. It wasn’t a bad thing, but she could be overbearing each time she was like that.

Ember spent another day in the hospital even though she felt fine after that full first day since she woke up in the hospital. The headaches had stopped. No blurry vision. She could move around with no trouble at all. There were just bruises and a few aches and pains. Her mother brushed off her complaints, simply saying the doctors wanted to be certain she didn’t have a concussion before they let her leave. Normally,

she would have made a bigger fuss about it, but she'd been subdued—mainly because of Dr. Josephine Mars.

Her doctor was diligent. She made sure Ember was in good health and attended to her needs accordingly. They had plenty of time alone together at the hospital after Josephine was done with her rounds. It was a wonder nobody had caught on to them yet.

Sadly, all good things must come to an end. It was time to leave. While Ember would miss having easy access to her lover, she was also eager to return to work. She'd missed the fire station and each time her colleagues came to visit, it reminded her that she had a duty to return to.

Josephine wasn't around to say goodbye. That was alright, they already made plans to meet at her place later tonight. This time she was accompanied by her mother and Rory.

Rory looked ready to pounce on her with a million questions. Ember dreaded the moment they would be alone together. The young woman would force her to spill everything about her time with Josephine. Ember wasn't quite certain she was ready for that yet. Thankfully, Rory took her own car while Ember rode in her mother's SUV.

"It's a little sad that we didn't get to say goodbye to Josephine before we left," Becky mused on the drive to her apartment.

"Yeah," Ember replied absently, feeling slightly guilty about the secret affair. Her mother still thought they were strangers to each other. The irony of that was Ember knew Josephine far more intimately than her mother did.

Her mom dropped her off at the apartment and pitched in to help her clean up the

place before they settled in for lunch. It was a great afternoon where they got to spend time with each and just hang out. Eventually, she had to leave after Ember had reassured her multiple times that she would be fine her own.

Ember's phone beeped later that evening. A text.

Ready?

Her heart thumped slightly with the anticipation. Yes, she texted back. Ember had invited Josephine to her place. The doctor agreed, which was a pleasant surprise. Ember knew Josephine was very reserved and somewhat averse to taking risk. Their time together at the hospital had shown her that much. But it acted as something of a two-sided coin. Taking risks seemed to turn Josephine on.

On my way. Be there soon, came her response.

True to her words, Josephine showed up at her apartment, dressed in casual clothes. She brought food and it smelled good. Ember smiled when she set eyes on her lover. Josephine returned it with a dimpled smile of her own. Josephine's lovely caramel hair was tied neatly in a low ponytail. Her dark green eyes sparkled, and she even looked good in the jeans and T-shirt she was wearing. Her breasts looked good under the thin fabric.

"Hey," she said.

"Hi," Ember replied. She stepped back to allow her inside. She took the bag from her and dropped it on the kitchen counter. The two sat on the couch, mostly in silence.

"What?" Josephine asked, when she noticed Ember was staring.

Ember shrugged, "I just wanted to take in your face. You look beautiful."

Josephine blushed. “You’re stunning and I’m old.”

Ember leaned in, placing a chaste kiss on her nose. “No, you’re perfect.”

Having her at the apartment was different. Up until then, they’d never really gotten the chance to be comfortable with each other. It was significantly more intimate and more relaxing. They had the rest of the evening to themselves. There was no rush, no fear, no other eyes were there to stare.

“Would you like to watch a movie?” Ember offered.

“Sure,” Josephine agreed. “Which one would you recommend?”

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“Oh no! My taste in movies is terrible. What are you into?”

“Action movies,” Josephine replied.

“Well, we should be able to find something enjoyable.”

The rest of the evening was spent watching a classic romance movie from the 80s. Somewhere along the way they’d abandoned the search for a decent action movie and settled for something familiar.

“Josephine?” Ember turned to her lover as they cuddled on the couch.

“Yeah?” Josephine looked a bit sleepy.

“I’m glad you came over.”

The hot doctor smiled. “Me too.”

For the first time in a long time, everything felt alright with the world again for Ember. The hole that had lingered in her life had been filled. She had found her place in the world, and it was by Josephine’s side.

“I love you.”

The words came unbidden. She couldn’t have kept herself from uttering them if she had sewn her mouth shut. This was not the time to worry if she had spoken those words too soon. Not with everything that had happened. The accident had shown her

how easily she could lose everything. If she hadn't survived it, that morning at the hotel would have been the last time she set eyes on Josephine. It would have been the end for them. The moment felt right.

"I'm not expecting you to say it back," Ember added, her voice gentle. "It just felt right for me to say it right now and so I did."

Josephine didn't say anything in response, but Ember felt Josephine's arms tighten around her. Ember wasn't sure what she had been expecting, but as long as Josephine didn't leave or shy away, it was enough for her.

6

JOSEPHINE

I love you.

Those were words she hadn't been expecting to hear from Ember Thompson. It had caught her off-guard, not necessarily in a bad way. Josephine missed the feeling of loving someone, of being loved by someone. After Eva, she'd thought it was going to be the last time. The breakup had broken her in more ways than she was willing to admit.

She should have said something back, but the shock and the trauma kept her jaws locked. It froze her solid where she should have responded and told Ember how badly she was falling in love with her too. She wanted to say something, anything. But, in the end, the words never came. She was paralyzed by fear. Josephine didn't know if she should let herself believe this was real with Ember.

A part of her was terrified that what she had with Ember would slip away, leaving her broken beyond repair. The pain of losing something she cherished was fresh in her

heart. It never left. For everything they felt when they were alone together, would it ebb away in the harsh light of the real world? What if Becky found out? She was falling madly in love with this amazing young woman. It felt like madness. Where could their relationship go? Her relationship with Eva hadn't felt as strong as this. If she allowed herself to fall for Ember and she lost her too, Josephine worried she would not survive it.

It's doomed to fail, she thought dreadingly. No way Becky would be okay with me dating her daughter.

Everyone knew how protective Chief Becky Thompson was over Ember. Plus, the betrayal would almost guarantee that their friendship would be over. Perhaps even her time in Phoenix Ridge, as well. If people realized what she had done, they would hate her, no doubt.

But she couldn't bring herself to leave Ember. She held on to her lover tighter, hoping she would understand the kind of dilemma she was in and the pain that still ravaged her soul, leaving behind scars that had yet to heal fully.

Ember understood. She held Josephine back tighter. She could feel her empathy radiating through her touch. Even without words, the two lovers had no trouble communicating. Josephine had only known her for a short time, but it felt like their souls had been linked together for eternity.

Her exhaustion eventually overcame her. She fell asleep, pressed up against Ember on her couch. They'd forgotten about the movie completely and just held each other. The night passed by quickly...

"Ember? Are you still asleep, sweetie?"

Josephine jumped. That was Becky's voice. Ember was a little slower to rouse. It

took a little bit of nudging before her eyes opened up completely.

“Ember?!” Becky called out again.

Ember’s eyes finally gained focus as the situation registered in her mind.

“I’ll get rid of her,” Ember whispered. “Give me a minute.”

“Where’s your bathroom?” Josephine asked.

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Ember pointed in the direction of her bedroom. Josephine moved as quietly as she could manage, grabbing her overnight bag off the floor. Her heart pounded hard in her chest. Thankfully, the door had been locked or Becky would have walked in on them.

After she went into the bathroom, she shut the door and sat on the toilet with the lid down. She heard Ember answer the door. The words were slightly muffled so Josephine couldn't make out what was said. Their exchange probably only took a minute but it felt like an eternity before Ember knocked on the door.

"My mom's gone, she just wanted to check in on me before going to work."

Josephine hesitated.

"Josephine?" Ember sounded worried.

A brief pause. Josephine didn't know what to say.

"Okay." Josephine heard her walk away.

It took a few minutes before she calmed her racing heart. That had been close. Too close. Her legs were still shaking when she stood but she forced herself to go outside.

Ember was in the kitchen making breakfast when she walked in. At her worried look, Josephine merely shook her head.

"You know you don't have to worry about my mom, right?" Ember said. "Even if she

found out, it wouldn't be the end for us.”

Josephine understood that. She was an adult, so was Ember. Technically, nothing could keep them apart if they chose to stay with each other. Her mother would be angry, yes. She would probably throw a tantrum, certainly. But ultimately, Josephine couldn't bear to hurt her dear friend like that.

“I'll go clean up,” Josephine said, finally. She was content to avoid the problem for as long as she could.

“Okay.” Ember went back to cooking.

Josephine went back to the bathroom. Her overnight bag was still there. She grabbed her things, mostly a fresh change of clothes and some toiletries. She brushed her teeth, showered, and came back out to join Ember for breakfast. Ember went to take a shower and came back with wet hair, completely naked. Josephine couldn't stop looking at her stunning athletic body still wet from the shower.

“Do you have to go to work today?”

Josephine nodded, knowing where this was going and finding that she wasn't completely opposed to the idea. Ember pushed her stool next to her and wrapped an arm around her waist.

“Stay with me.” Her big brown eyes were seductive as hell.

Josephine couldn't refuse, not with the way Ember's fingers traced a line along her hips. She opened her mouth to speak but the words were lost to a gasp when Ember leaned in and bit gently on her neck.

Ember's firm hand reached around to grab her other hip, pulling Josephine back until

her rear was pressed backwards into Embers hips as though they were spooning. Ember's hand reached around to fondle Josephine's breast, stimulating her nipples through her shirt. She was turned on again... Jesus. Ember's touch just did things to her.

"Let's move this to the bedroom?" Ember offered.

"Yes," Josephine managed a whisper.

Josephine took Ember's hand and allowed herself to be led to the bedroom.

"Take off your clothes," Ember commanded, and Josephine easily obeyed, shrugging out of them until she was as naked as Ember.

Ember took hold of her, pulling her in tight and kissing her deeply. Josephine felt herself melting in Ember's strong arms. She had never felt this way with anyone.

Ember turned her around so she was facing the bed and Ember was behind her, Ember's breasts pressing into her shoulder blades. "Bend over, baby," Ember whispered in her ear and Josephine thought she might come there and then. She reached unsteadily forwards until her breasts and forearms rested on the bed and her ass was well and truly in the air putting her pussy on display.

She felt Ember's strong grip on her hips.

Never let me go...

"Mmm..." Ember made sounds of appreciation as her hands ran over Josephine's hips and the curve of her ass.

She felt Embers fingers trailing down the cleft of her ass, teasing her anus, sliding

though her wet labia and circling her clit. She moaned loudly. She felt so exposed. She had never been in this position with any lover before. It seemed with Ember, there were a lot of firsts for her.

“You are so nice and wet for me,” Ember murmured as she continued to play and tease her ass and pussy.

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Josephine felt a need to be fucked overcoming her. The toying and teasing of Ember's fingertips were driving her crazy.

"Ember... Please..." she begged.

"What is it you want, baby?" Ember growled, her voice husky and sexy as all hell.

"I need to feel you inside me...please... hard..." Josephine gasped. She wanted it hard today for some reason; it seemed to be a theme when she was with Ember, the more primal the better.

She shuddered deep within herself as Ember's finger ran gently around the rim of her asshole. Every nerve ending seemed to light up, then her fingers slid lower before roughly pushing inside her as Ember's other hand held her hip tightly.

Josephine called out loudly, "Oh god, Ember, yes!"

Ember's fingers, now deep inside her, felt more exquisite than anything else she had experienced. She felt her body opening up and she pushed her hips back onto them.

"Do you want more, baby?" Ember growled.

"Please, Ember. Please fuck me." She craved the familiar thrusting of Ember's fingers against her G spot so desperately.

Ember's fingers remained inside her, but they were playing and teasing rather than fucking.

“Not yet, baby,” Ember responded. “There is something else I want from you today.”

Confusion flashed through Josephine’s mind. What could she mean? Whatever it was, she knew she wanted to give it to her.

“Whatever you want,” Josephine murmured. “Anything.”

Ember chuckled.

“Mmm,” Ember said again, and Josephine felt Ember pull out of her and then enter her again with an additional finger. She felt her body adjusting to the extra finger.

“I want to feel my whole hand inside of you,” Ember said. “I want you to stretch for me and take everything I’ve got.”

Josephine felt shocked for barely a second. Ember’s dirty words were seducing her easily. She felt scandalously excited by the idea of Ember stretching her open for her whole hand.

“Please... I want it.”

Ember stroked her hair with her free hand as another finger worked its way inside of her stretching her slowly and surely. “I know you do, baby,” Ember purred, her big strong fingers moving with confidence and pressing firmly on the insides of Josephine’s vagina as though warming her up for what was to come.

Josephine moaned into the comforter on the bed. She felt utterly taken by Ember as Ember’s fingers kept moving to open her further. She no longer knew how many fingers or what was happening. Everything felt hazy and she felt high on the waves of pleasure that were coming from the movements of Ember’s fingers.

“That’s it, you are doing so well,” Ember praised her, and Josephine felt herself preening under Ember’s praise. “I’m going to push into you now with the widest part of my knuckles, and if it hurts at all, just keep breathing through it. It will feel good once I’m inside you, I promise you that.”

Josephine nodded her consent. She trusted Ember implicitly. She took deep breaths as she felt the pressure of Ember’s whole hand pushing inside her. Slowly yet firmly it entered her, and Josephine felt what might have been pain but it was so dulled by the pleasure she was feeling as Ember’s hand pushed into her. There was a moment of release as the widest part that must have been her knuckles passed through. Josephine felt euphoric. Euphoric and full.

“Is that it?” Josephine asked between pants.

“Sure is. You want to feel?” Ember guided Josephine’s hand to reach back and round past her ass. All she could feel was Ember’s wrist. Her whole hand was encased inside of Josephine and it felt incredible.

“Oh my god!” Josephine said.

“How does it feel?” Ember asked.

“Incredible,” Josephine said, high on a wave of pleasure. She closed her eyes and relaxed into the feeling. She felt Ember begin to rock her fist deep inside her and she lost herself to the feeling of it. She heard her own moans getting louder and deeper and when she felt Ember’s left hand begin to pleasure her clitoris she began to orgasm. She climaxed once, twice, three times... she lost count. Ember’s whole hand remained in her each time as the waves of orgasm flooded her body. Each time she peaked, she dropped a little before rising again and climaxing again and again. She had had no idea her body was capable of such a thing and yet here it was happening.

She had no idea how long it continued for, the most mind-blowing thing she had ever been through sexually. When Ember's hand finally slid out of her completely, she felt empty with the loss of it. As though she had wanted to keep Ember's hand deep inside her forever.

She was collapsed forward on the bed, she felt Ember's weight on top of her pressing down on her. Ember's lips kissing her neck so tenderly. Ember's tongue against her ear was so gentle.

"You are so fucking beautiful," Ember murmured into her ear as she held her tight.

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Josephine woke up, still wrapped in Ember's strong arms, to her phone ringing.

"Hey Dad," she answered blearily. She and Ember were still entangled.

"Josephine? Still asleep? It's almost two in the afternoon," her father said.

"Uh huh," she hummed. "Just taking a nap."

"Yeah, okay." She could almost envision the old man nodded his head.

"Well, I went to your workplace, and guess what they told me?"

Josephine's eyes widened in realization. Her father was supposed to be halfway across the country. When did he get to New York. She hadn't told him she'd quit working in New York and that she had moved.

"I can explain."

"I'm hoping you would," her father said. He didn't sound particularly angry. That was the thing with Benjamin Mars—he hardly ever got angry, but Josephine feared disappointing him above everything else.

"Where are you then? 'Cause I dropped by your apartment and they said you moved out as well."

She winced. "I'm in...Phoenix Ridge?"

“Phoenix Ridge? Where the hell is that?”

Josephine laughed at her father’s antics. He was taking it well if he could make jokes.

“Alright,” her father sighed. “I’ll see if we can get the jet cleared to land at Phoenix Ridge airport. We should be there soon.”

“Oh no, Dad, you don’t have to?—”

“Don’t tell me I don’t have to see my own daughter. I want to see my daughter. I’ve missed you, my little princess.”

Josephine blushed, glancing at Ember to make sure she was asleep. Much to her dread, she found the young woman wide awake, and with the way her eyes crinkled in mirth, it was obvious she could overhear their conversation.

“Dad, I’m forty-nine years old.”

“I don’t care,” the man quipped. “Can you pick me up at the airport?”

“I don’t have a car,” she said.

“Well get one.” He hung up.

Josephine sighed, turning to Ember.

“My dad just called. I think he’s on his way to Phoenix Ridge.”

“To see his little princess?” Ember teased.

“Oh, can it, you mama’s girl.”

Ember laughed. It was a full belly laughter, one without restraint or fear of judgement. One of genuine humor. Josephine was taken by how beautiful and carefree she was.

“You’re giving me that look again,” Ember said.

“What look?”

“The type that makes me feel like I am more amazing than I actually am.”

“You are amazing, though. You’re a hero.”

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Josephine kissed her. It lasted a few seconds before she forced herself to pull away. Ember whined in disappointment, stretching her lithe body like a cat after Josephine got out of bed. She was sorely tempted to climb back in, but she had things to do.

“See you later?” Ember asked.

“Maybe? Depends on how long my dad will let me get away.”

“I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too.”

Josephine started to leave but then stopped.

“Do you know where I can buy a car?”

Ember raised an eyebrow at her question. Slowly, a grin stretched her lips.

“What’s your budget?”

“Who the hell convinced you to buy a muscle car?” Benjamin said, gaping at her new car.

Josephine cringed. “Do you hate it?”

“Hate it?! I love it!” Her dad walked a circle around the car. “Never pictured you of all people driving a mustang.”

Her dad gave her a look. Josephine didn't quite know what it meant. On their drive into the city, her father noted the terrain.

"It reminds me of the Sonoran Desert, but less dry, and there's more plant life." Everyone in medicine knew her father as one of the most famous surgeons in the world. Sure, he was an excellent surgeon, but he knew far more than that. Josephine could remember multiple vacations she'd been on with her father. He would point out various trivia as they journeyed. He was interested in everything.

"It's beautiful," Josephine said.

"And very vulnerable to wildfires," her father added.

Briefly, her mind flitted to Ember. If something of that sort happened, she'd be on the front lines. Dangerous. Josephine pushed it out of her mind. She was certain if wildfires were that common around here it would have already happened before she came. It was the season for it after all.

"So, are you going to show me around this new city of yours? I'm still trying to figure out why you decided to pack up and move without telling anyone about it."

They'd gotten Benjamin settled in his hotel room. Josephine had been spared his questions so far but as soon as they sat down to eat at the restaurant, he spoke up.

"It's a great city," Josephine said hesitantly.

"Why? I haven't seen anything particularly special about it. Well, fine the streets are cleaner than New York, I admit. But that can't be the reason why you've changed so much in such a short time."

"I've changed?" Josephine blinked in surprise. "How do you mean?"

Her father gave her a conspiratorial look. “I’ve seen you smile more in the last two hours than you did for a whole week in New York. You’re happier, more relaxed. It feels like after all these years you’ve finally taken my advice and begun to live.”

Josephine receded into her thoughts. Some introspection revealed that, indeed, she’d been smiling more since the first day she arrived at Phoenix Ridge.

“It’s the people here,” Josephine confessed. “I never really thought about it, but back in New York, I hardly ever had any friends. Sure, there were co-workers and a few acquaintances but after...after my breakup, I lost my ability to connect with people. Coming to Phoenix Ridge helped me regain that.”

“You found love again,” her father said. It wasn’t a question.

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“I...it’s not the reason why I came. We sort of met and things sparked off and she’s been so amazing to me.”

Her father nodded. Josephine noted a slight look of disappointment in his eyes. He had that same look when she’d come out to him as a lesbian. Of course, he’d been completely supportive, but she knew he wished she’d settled down and had a more traditional family. He never quite got rid of that hope.

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“As long as you’re happy,” he said, giving her a warm smile.

Josephine nodded. “Thank you.”

It had been so long since they’d actually enjoyed this much quality time together. They spent the rest of the evening touring Phoenix Ridge. The more they explored, the more Josephine understood why the city was a tourist attraction. Despite what her dad said, Phoenix Ridge was an extremely beautiful city. She could see it in his eyes. He loved it too. They eventually ended their exploration at the beach.

They basked in the golden glow of the sunset standing side by side. The warmth, coupled with the cool breeze blowing on their skin created a uniquely serene atmosphere. This was another thing they didn’t have in New York. The view was almost magical.

“You’re right. It is beautiful.”

Josephine smiled. Coming to Phoenix Ridge was the best decision she had ever made.

“It is.”

“So, you’re going to stay here permanently?”

“I’m considering it,” Josephine replied.

“Are they paying you enough at that hospital to warrant this choice? You know you could earn far more if you work with me.”

Josephine sighed. “I know, Dad. And I’m grateful for the opportunity, but this is where my heart is, at least right now.”

“I understand. Just keep that in mind.” Her father wasn’t going to push her to make the choice. “Think I’ll stick around a while longer.”

Josephine smiled. “It’ll be nice to have you around. You could also use the break.”

“Phoenix Ridge is a tad hotter than I’m used to, but I believe I can adapt.”

When night came, they returned to her father’s hotel. She helped him unpack his luggage before they said their goodbyes. Josephine knew he was going to show up at the hospital, possibly the next morning, with the pretext of familiarizing himself with her workplace. He was mostly going to check to make sure the environment was conducive for her to work in. In many ways, Josephine still felt like a child.

They said their goodbye and she returned to her apartment. She showered, got dressed in her PJs, and got into bed. The next day was going to be a bit busy as she was resuming her duties at the hospital. But she looked forward to it, most especially meeting up with Ember again. The thought of her lover put a smile on her face. It remained as sleep overcame her.

7

EMBER

Things sort of settled into a routine. Ember and Josephine played some sort of game where they met regularly and hung out while managing to keep their affair a secret from her mother. Ember hadn’t gotten to meet with Josephine’s father either even though she said her dad knew about their relationship.

She wasn't allowed to resume work yet, thanks to her mother. She utilized that time to workout and look into getting another car to replace Joan. There was only one problem. She didn't have the money. Well, there's nothing for it now. I have to buy a project car and build it myself. It would take a bit more time, but she should be able to finish it in six months or so. Maybe less time if the insurance company actually gave her part of the money she needed.

"Ember! I heard you were in an accident! Are you okay!"

Ember smiled at Mandy. The girl always so full of energy, it was infectious. Her mother was present too, and surprisingly, so was old man Farcy. They all crowded into her living room, bringing way too much food and gifts.

"Guys, this is too much!" Ember was completely flustered. She was completely fine, but people kept showing her such kindness. Even times when she went to the local store, they'd give her groceries for free. The family of the cat she'd saved had also come to pay her a visit.

"We have to come check up on our hero," Kathy said, smiling at her daughter.

"Thanks."

"Well, you saved my life. I'm ashamed I didn't make time to come see you at the hospital," Farcy said. The old man was normally quite grumpy. To see him so humble was quite the shock for Ember.

"Not you too," Ember said. "I just put out the fire."

"And saved me thousands of dollars in repairs. I'm grateful," he replied.

He seemed adamant about not letting it be, so Ember decided to change the topic.

“So how are things on the drag strip?”

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The man grunted simply but Mandy was quick to fill her in on the details.

“Jenny’s taken your spot at the top of the domestic class. She’s been gloating about it endlessly. Everyone knows she’s only there because your car was wrecked, maybe she does too. Anyway, Max’s Siren beat The Grinch! You should’ve seen it! Epic race!”

Ember nodded. None of that was surprising news. Well, Jenny being at the top of domestic class was a bit surprising since her car was not even close to being the fastest or the most well-built. She missed the tracks. It would be a while before she could return there seeing as she didn’t have a car anymore.

“You thinking about getting a new car?” the old man asked.

“Yeah? But I haven’t found anything decen?—”

“I’ll sell you Swift Hog. Or what’s left of her.”

Mandy’s eyes widened in shock. Kathy merely nodded, like she knew things were going to turn out this way.

“What?” Ember was in shock. She loved the Buick GNX. She’d always felt like the old man hadn’t treated the car with the love it deserved but she was never vocal about it.

“I’m saying I’ll sell you the car. I mean, her engine’s gone, so you’ll have to rebuild that, as well as do some body work to fix the damage from the fire but the rest of the

car is in good condition.”

“How much?”

“We’ll talk about that later when you’re ready to come see the car,” he shrugged.

Ember nodded. She was happy to have something else to focus on. With the car, she could begin her project. All the plans were formulating in her mind, a turbocharger would fit nicely under the hood.

“You’re drooling,” Kathy said.

Ember wiped her chin before she realized Kathy was teasing. They spent some time before they left her.

Josephine showed up later that night after she’d had dinner with her father. Ember was excited to see her, and they had sex against the wall in the hallway. It was raw and full of passion. Ember loved it when Josephine was dressed up like the successful woman of power she was. The heels and pencil skirt combo was always such a winner with Ember. She had stripped Josephine to her underwear and fucked her against the wall as soon as she arrived. After she came loud and hard squirting all over Ember’s hand and the floor, Ember pushed her to her knees on the floor. She dropped her own pants and underwear to the floor, took a handful of Josephine’s lovely silky caramel hair in her hand and pulled Josephine’s face to her pussy.

“Lick me,” she commanded, and Josephine eagerly obeyed. Every time they had sex it just seemed better and better. They were so in sync in all their desires, Ember couldn’t imagine anything being better. She orgasmed hard in Josephine’s mouth before pulling her to her feet and kissing her deeply tasting herself in Josephine’s mouth.

“I missed you,” she whispered.

“I missed you too,” Josephine replied and smiled. Her smile was so beautiful. Ember felt high on oxytocin.

“I found that movie we were talking about. Yeah, the Angelina Jolie one. I’ll get it on, you want to order some Chinese food?” Ember passed her the takeout menu.

There was a nice Chinese restaurant just down the street from Ember’s. She always enjoyed the food from there. They had ordered from there together before.

Josephine nodded and picked up her handbag to locate her phone. “You want the same order as last time?”

Ember nodded. She liked that Josephine could remember her order. She liked that there was this ease between them. She pulled on her Calvin Kleins and sat on the couch in her underwear and her shirt to sort out the movie.

Josephine was still in her lacy lingerie. The rest of their clothes were still on the floor in the hallway. The lingerie was a lovely shade of yellow one might call lemon. Ember’s gaze couldn’t help but be drawn by Josephine’s body in the lace. Her hair was a bit mussed up, but she still looked remarkably put together all things considered.

Fuck, she is stunning.

Josephine made the order and then came to join Ember on the couch, and they relaxed into the beginning of the movie with Josephine enveloped in Ember’s arms. Everything felt so right.

There was a knock at the door.

“Well, that was quick,” Josephine commented. Ember got up to answer the door to the delivery guy. She opened the door, expecting to be handed her Chinese food, only to find her mother staring at her.

“Mom?!”

It was too late to cover Josephine; she was sitting on the couch in her lemon lace lingerie and her mother saw her right away. One thing struck her then. Her mother was not that surprised to see Josephine. It was as though she expected her to be there.

“What are you doin?—”

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“You’re sleeping with my daughter?!” Becky yelled through the door. She stormed in, pushing past Ember.

Josephine looked horrified and scared as her mother confronted her.

“You’re almost twenty years older than her!”

“I-I...” Josephine stuttered, searching for something to wear, grabbing a Tee and track pants of Ember’s and pulling them on.

Ember tried to step in, but her mother raised a hand to stop.

“I can’t believe you of all people would betray me like this! My daughter!”

“Mom, stop!” Ember yelled.

“You should know better, Ember! She’s old enough to be your mother!!” Becky turned to her.

“She’s too old for you!”

“That is my choice to make!” Ember heatedly responded.

“Well, you made a terrible one!”

“NO! STOP!” Josephine screamed, interrupting the two.

The mother and child turned to look at her. Ember's heart sank as she watched the tears running down her lover's face. They'd been so afraid of something like this happening that seeing it finally come to pass was just awful.

"Okay, stop! I'm leaving! Just! Stop! Yelling!"

Josephine grabbed her overnight bag and handbag and fled through the door, tears trailing her as she went. Ember was furious. Part of her blamed herself for this—she'd been the one to answer the door.

"Ember," Becky began, turning to her.

"Leave."

Silence. A beat passed with neither of them saying anything. Finally, her mother walked out, and Ember was left alone. Alone and heartbroken. She lost to the strength keep herself on her feet. Slumped against the wall, slowly crumbling to the floor. All of her sudden, her apartment felt empty and dark. The shadows became the grim reaper's condemning talons, reaching for her. Accusing baleful eyes lurked in the darkness. They glared at her. She could feel their judgement. She was a failure. Something good was finally happening in her life, but it had been ruined, just like that. It had all slipped through her fingers. Josephine was never going to come back now. They were done.

True to her predictions, Josephine didn't answer her calls. She didn't reply to her texts. It was like she'd disappeared from the world. When Ember dropped by her apartment on Sunday night, no one answered the door. She went home, disappointed.

Monday evening came, Ember found herself in front of her mirror, hollow eyes staring back at her as she dressed for work for the nightshift. She felt strangely numb. Her day had gone by with barely anything of note happening. Everything used to be

so vibrant and colorful when Josephine came into her life. Now, she was looking at the world through a film that rendered everything in black and white.

Dimly, she recalled getting an uber to take her to work. It deposited her outside. The skies were already growing darker. She was there to relieve the people on dayshift, which was perfectly okay by her. Nighttime was quieter. Fewer people on the street, everywhere actually. Ember didn't have the energy to interact or socialize. She got her duffel bag and made her way inside.

“SURPRISE!” Ember jumped in fright at the loud noise that assailed her the moment she walked into the fire station.

She looked around, alert, but only saw the smiling faces of her co-workers. They were all holding balloons and ribbons. A large banner overhead read WELCOME BACK EMBER!

Rory rushed forward and pulled her into a hug. Ember tried to relax, but her heart was still pounding. More people came to express their joy at her return. She responded somewhat mechanically, trying to fake a smile but failing woefully at it. They crowded her to the open office area where there was a cake waiting. It largely read the same thing the banner did.

Everything seemed to happen in a blur. She allowed herself to be carried everywhere. Occasionally, she caught her mother watching from the open door of her office, but she didn't speak with her. They hadn't spoken to each other since that night she came over and had that fight with Josephine. Ember was resolved to never speak with her again beyond work. Becky had broken her heart.

They had some sort of mini-party at the station. She still had an hour before she could need to start her shift. As soon as she could, Ember made up some excuse and left the fire station. It was getting suffocating in there. She loved her co-workers, but all of

them together like that was putting too much strain on her already weakened mind. She went for a walk instead, going to the park nearby.

Ember took a seat on the bench. Staring out at nothing in particular, letting her mind wander. Naturally, her thoughts drifted to Josephine. Again. She'd done nothing but think about her for the past few days. The longing never ceased. The hole that was left by her absence remained a gaping wound that refused to heal.

"Hey." Ember turned to the familiar voice.

It was Josephine.

Ember stared blankly at her. Wondering if her mind was playing tricks on her.

“Are you real?”

Josephine smiled and reached over, taking her hand. Her dark green eyes were thoughtful. The touch was real, she definitely felt it. The warmth that travelled between and the goosebumps that rose across her forearm confirmed that this was definitely real.

“Yes, I’m real,” Josephine confirmed.

Tears welled up in Ember’s eyes. “How?”

“Well, I heard about the party from one of your coll?—”

“No,” Ember cut her off. “How did you live through these past few days? I could barely think! Sometimes I felt like I couldn’t breathe! Not seeing you has messed me up so bad! How are you okay?!”

Josephine looked at her sadly. “Love, I was not okay. Trust me. I waited outside for hours, hoping I would simply catch a glimpse of you. Avoiding you was the hardest thing I had ever done in my life!”

“Then why did you do it? What was the point of it?”

Josephine looked at the ground. Pulling her hand away from Ember’s.

“Because your mother is right. I love you, but I can’t ignore the fact that I am much older than you. You have your whole life ahead of you while I’m closer to the end of

mine.”

“You love me?” Ember asked, hanging on to that more than anything else Josephine had said.

The doctor looked her deep in the eye. A range of emotions played across her face, but the sincerity in the words that followed was undoubtable.

“Yes, Ember. I love you. I actually think I have loved you since the very first night we spent together.”

Ember felt something snap within her. Like a broken dam, the tears flowed freely. She’d thought she already cried her eyes out enough but that was not to be. There was far more left. She buried her face in her palms. Hearing those words meant the world to her. Since that night Josephine left, she’d questioned herself over and over again on whether what they shared was real or not. She was thankful that it was.

“So why won’t you stay with me?” Ember asked, hating how she sounded like she was pleading, but she knew it was exactly how she felt. All these years she had spent building this façade as someone unflappable. She could run into a burning building without hesitation but a life without Josephine was something she dreaded above all else.

“It’s for the best?” Josephine replied.

“For who?!” Ember demanded. “Because I don’t see how this is doing either one of us any good!”

“For you, for your mother, and maybe for me too. I can’t bear the thought that it was me who drove a wedge between you two. Family is important.”

Ember wanted to rage, she wanted to scream in frustration. Nothing Josephine was saying made sense. Why did her mother's approval matter so much? Why did it matter that she was older? They loved each other, that was what mattered the most!

"I know what you're thinking," Josephine said in that gentle voice. "Sometimes, love is not enough, Ember. It's hard to admit, I know, but it's not. I've lived through it before."

Josephine got up. "I didn't want to leave things as they were, not without speaking to you. I want you to know each moment we spent together will forever remain the best times of my life."

Ember couldn't bear to look at Josephine as she walked away. Something broke within her. What little light that was left within her was snuffed out. She stood from the bench, feeling like a husk of herself. She walked into the fire station. It was emptier than it had been earlier. They'd all gone home. It suited her just fine. She went about checking the equipment, going through the motions.

A tap on her shoulder made her turn around.

"Are you okay?" Kiera asked. She'd made an attempt to tame her thick, wild red hair and pull it up into a ponytail to keep it out of her face. It didn't do much good as strands were already sticking out.

"Yes, why do you ask?"

"Well, I called you three times and got no response." Keira looked bewildered. "I was standing right next to you."

"Sorry, guess I was a bit distracted."

“Okay.”

Kiera didn't sound like she believed Ember, but that was okay as long as she didn't prod any further. Soon the alarm rung, signaling an emergency somewhere in the city. It came as something of a blessing for Ember. She wanted to be on the move. She wanted to be doing something that would distract her from the pain she couldn't seem to get rid of.

She got behind the wheel of the fire truck. Normally, Elle would drive, but when she caught her eye, there was an understanding that passed between them.

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This time, their team leader was Captain Jenna Carter. At thirty-eight, she already had fifteen years of experience on the job. Naturally, Ember deferred to her.

“What are we looking at this time, Captain?” Ember asked.

“Fire at an old construction site. It’s been abandoned for a while, but it’s been known to house junkies and some homeless folk.”

Ember missed being behind the wheel of a vehicle. She missed Joan. Her mind cleared somewhat as she drove to the site of the emergency. Fire had started right in the center of town, in the business district. The building was supposed to be a mall, but construction had been halted halfway.

Jenna radioed in, telling them they were going to need another team of firefighters to handle it. Ember could see why. The building was huge, their one fire engine wouldn’t be able to cover everything.

Ember brought the truck to a stop where they could easily access a fire hydrant. They’d already ran this drill multiple times. Jenna surveyed the building; it looked largely empty. The structure looked stable, but one could never tell with fires. The mall wasn’t complicated, chances of the fire eating through something important leading to a collapse was high.

“Is everybody out?!” Jenna asked the witnesses watching the mall go up in flames.

The ratty looking man shrugged his shoulders. He didn’t look very sober in Ember’s eyes. They focused on getting hoses down and started smothering the fire with high-

pressure water. Immediately, the smoke thickened, obscuring most of the building. They kept the pressure on. Zara was the strongest on the team so it was her job to direct the hose. Ember observed the building, underneath the roar of the flames she could hear a creaking noise. It was toward the east end of the crescent-shaped building. Most of the flames had been put out, leaving a blackened, misshapen husk.

“Hey, Zara,” Ember called out. “Let’s back away a little bit.”

Zara snapped to attention, understanding the warning for what it was. She moved ten feet back. It might have seemed she wasn’t too close at first glance, but debris from a collapsing building could travel surprisingly far.

The creaking noise grew loud enough that the others heard it as well.

“It’s coming down!” Jenna yelled. “Back away!”

Sure enough, the top two floors on that side caved in on itself, producing a thunderous boom as it crashed. A large plume of smoke filled the air.

“Aaahh!”

Ember’s head snapped to the left.

“Did you hear that?!”

Jenna glanced at her. The look she gave Ember confirmed that she had heard it too. There was reluctance in her gaze. She didn’t admit it out loud. Ember knew what she was worried about. It wasn’t going to stop her. The urge to go into the building overcame her good sense. She rushed to the truck to grab her breathing apparatus and mask.

“Ember, the structure is unstable! Part of it just came down, for Pete’s sake!” Jenna cautioned.

“You heard it too, just like I did. There’s somebody in there!”

She pulled the mask on and rushed up to the building. The fire welcomed her. Almost like the warm embrace of a loved one. Most firefighters developed a healthy respect for flames. Some even feared it. For Ember, fire was many things, it was accepting, in a strange way. Fire would consume anything it could without discrimination. There was something to be said about that level of acceptance. Yes, that was the thing about fire. It would take you as you were, and all your worries and flaws would mean nothing in the face of its limitless hunger.

She rushed up the stairs, taking them two at a time, being more careless than usual. What use was her life if she couldn’t get to the people who needed her on time. Would she fail at this task too? No. She would not, even if it killed her.

The scream had come from the direction of the crash. Ember believed there’d been someone there when it came down. They could still be alive if they weren’t crushed. Now the problem was finding them on time. Most people thought fire was the most dangerous thing in a burning building. It was actually the smoke they needed to worry about first. It would get to them before the flames did.

Her eyes scanned the third floor. Checking for any form that vaguely resembled human. She had to go through the individual stores, which made progress even slower. As far as she could tell, no one else had entered the building behind her, that meant Jenna had done the right thing and kept everyone else who wasn’t suicidal out. There was no need to risk more lives than necessary for this rescue.

“Hello?! Is anybody there?!” she called out, hoping to get a response. She didn’t, but that didn’t stop her. She kept up her search until she was just on the edge of the

section that had collapsed. If the victim was here, this was where she would find them. It was possible the collapse had knocked them out.

Or they could be buried under the rubble.

Ember went further down, lifting up and pushing away the rubble. The smoke engulfed her, blackening out her vision. She heard a cough. Coming from somewhere nearby.

“Ember!” the radio on her shoulder crackled. “That’s enough! Get out of there!”

“No!” Ember moved through the wrecked building, dodging low-hanging concrete from what was left of the floor above. “I heard someone!”

“Everybody’s already out,” came Jenna’s voice over the radio. “There’s nobody left in there! Get out!”

She was certain she heard someone cough. Somebody was still alive. She couldn’t leave without them. Ember couldn’t fail, not again. She’d failed too many times already. She’d failed Josephine, Joan had gotten wrecked, she and her mother were not talking. This was all she had left. She would not fail.

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Ember continued to push the rubble around. She took a step forward, a little too far to the edge of what was left of the collapsed floor. It gave underneath her weight. There was an initial jolt of terror as the floor crumbled underneath her feet and gravity took hold of her. As she fell, her fear gave way to peace. At least she'd done all she could. It wouldn't count as failure if she died trying, would it? Nobody would judge her then, would they? Would it matter? She would be gone by then. It wouldn't. Perhaps now the eyes would stop glaring at her accusingly. No judgement in death after all.

"Ember!" Someone wrenched the mask off her face.

She was staring up at the open skies. She was outside the building, no recollection of how she got there. Jenna appeared above her, her dark hair framing her worried face underneath her helmet. The captain was covered in dirt and part of her gear was still smoking.

"Are you okay?"

Ember moved her lips. They were working. She felt fine.

"Yes?" But she didn't understand how, or why. The building had gone down, hadn't it? She tried to get up, feeling strength return to her body as she moved. Jenna helped her up. She glanced around, noting other firefighters arounds. The fire had been put out, only a few areas was still smoking so everyone was a bit more relaxed, though Kiera and Zara gave her worried looks.

"What about the person trapped inside?" Ember enquired.

Jenna frowned. “We’ve gone through most of the rubble. We haven’t found anybody so far.”

“That’s...,” Ember didn’t know what to say to that. She’d heard someone cry out, hadn’t she? She definitely heard someone stuck up there when she was in the building. She heard them cough.

“I don’t think there was ever anyone trapped up there, Ember,” Jenna told her.

The ride back to the fire station at the early hours of the morning was eerily quiet. Even Kiera, who was normally boisterous, was somewhat subdued. Jenna drove the fire truck while Ember was made to sit in the back. She didn’t know if that was meant as punishment or for her to recover. The medic had performed a check-up and confirmed that she was fine.

Apparently, only a small portion of the floor had collapsed, likely due to Ember’s weight. Any more than that it would likely have killed her. They’d used the firetruck’s ladder to lift Jenna up. She found Ember buried under mostly dust, her helmet and protective gear had prevented any serious injuries. They brought her down without any incident.

Nobody mentioned the fact that she had risked her life for nothing. They searched the whole rubble. Nothing was found. There was nobody trapped inside the building.

Ember knew she was going to get an earful for her mother when she came in to work. This time, she actually deserved it. Another failure.

Nothing had been harder for Josephine than walking away from Ember in the park.

I love her

Nothing had been more terrifying than watching Becky, her friend, storm into the house and stare at her with such vitriol.

It had been the one thing she'd feared the most in her relationship with Ember. Watching it unfold had been horrifying and heartbreaking. As Ember and her mother devolved into shouting matches, Josephine couldn't take it anymore. She had to leave.

In the days that followed, she avoided Ember. All the times she had showed up at the apartment, Josephine had known it was Ember, but she didn't answer the door. It was for the best, or so she told herself. She didn't want to be the reason why the mother and daughter cut ties with each other. Her friendship with Becky was basically gone. That bridge had been burned the night she unknowingly slept with Ember.

"What happened?" Benjamin asked, sitting across from her at the table. They were having dinner at a place called Swan's Heart. It was a beautiful restaurant, but seemingly built for tourists of Phoenix Ridge. It didn't have any of the intimacy that The Golden had, but it was a beautiful place, nonetheless.

Her father studied her, his grey eyebrows furrowed in concern.

"What do you mean?" Josephine played dumb.

"You've been moping around for the last few days. Come on, I'm old but I'm not quite senile yet."

Josephine sighed.

“Things not working out with your girlfriend?”

Josephine looked at him. She searched his expression. Realizing he was genuinely concerned, she relaxed and decided to reveal her situation to him.

“I’m dating my friend’s daughter.”

He ruminated on her words before looking at her. “Okay, I think I see where this is going. How old your friend’s daughter?”

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“Twenty-eight.”

“She’s an adult. That’s not too young. I don’t see what the problem is,” her father said.

“Well, I do. Plus, she is my friend. Or was, until she caught me with her daughter.”

Her father nodded sagely. Thinking about what she said. No doubt he was turning the issue around in his mind, attempting to look at it from various perspectives.

“Well,” he began, in that tone he often used in his lectures. Or when he needed to discuss an issue he had given a lot of thought to.

“It’s not entirely black and white. As a parent, I understand where she’s coming from, but her daughter is old enough to make her own decisions. I can see the anger, having two people you care about alienating you completely, while developing a relationship without your knowledge can feel like a betrayal.”

“I know, I did something terrible.” Josephine buried her face in her palms.

“No, you did not.”

She glanced at her face, surprised. “How? You just said it!”

“No, all I spoke about was the complexity of the situation and that I understand your friend’s reaction. That doesn’t mean you did something terrible. You fell in love, sweetheart. There’s nothing terrible about that.”

Josephine was silent. She gave it some thought. She didn't truly reach any decision, her father wasn't trying to push her in any direction; he never did that, not on purpose. Josephine decided to let the matter lie for the time being.

"I noticed you haven't made any travel plans," she said instead, changing the subject.

Her father gave her look, letting her know he knew what she was attempting but he allowed it anyway.

"You're right, I haven't."

"You're really planning on staying here permanently?"

He shrugged. "I haven't quite decided yet. We're still exploring the city, remember? You're supposed to show me what you believe makes this place so special."

"Well, have you interacted with the people?" Josephine asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes, and I admit they are pleasant and certainly more openminded than most people I've known around the country."

"Well, the charm will eventually get to you," Josephine said with confidence. It was infectious. The city was simply too beautiful.

When she went in to work on Friday, she learned from one of her colleagues that they were throwing a welcome back to work party for Ember. Josephine knew she couldn't show up there, not with how things had turned out last with Becky. But she decided it was best to end things officially with Ember. She couldn't leave it as it was, and she couldn't do it over the phone either, not with everything they had shared.

She drove near the fire station and parked outside, hoping she could catch Ember outside somehow. Even if she was with friends, as long as Becky wasn't there. She couldn't risk another confrontation. Part of her expected to have been run out of town following their discovery, but it appeared Becky had chosen to keep their relationship secret. Why? She didn't know but she appreciated that her affairs weren't out in the open.

Josephine waited for about forty minutes before she decided it was actually a dumb idea. She got in the car and was ready to leave but froze when she spotted Ember walking out of the fire station. She was transfixed by her beauty once more. Her wild hair tied up in a messy bun. She didn't have her normal glow and her eyes were downcast, but there was no denying that Ember was stunning. Even the way she walked, the way her hips moved with such confidence, it was impossible not to stare.

She got out and followed Ember. Josephine felt a little bit like a stalker doing that. Not for the first time that evening, she reminded herself how creepy she was being. She persevered. All these things were just excuses she was making to not do what she needed to.

Ember made her way to the park and sat on the bench. After a while, Josephine made her way over and took a seat. It broke her heart when Ember looked at her without registering that she was actually there. Their time apart had done just as much damage on her as it did on Josephine. She reached out and took Ember's hand, trying to show her she was there.

The full extent of Ember's heartbreak tugged at her, but Josephine was convinced that this needed to happen. They needed closure so that they could both move on with their lives.

The goal was to move on. Josephine was supposed to come to Phoenix Ridge, rediscover herself, and grow as a person. For a while, her life had meaning. She was

happy and content. And then she lost it. It felt like the light had gone out of her life. Phoenix Ridge lost most of it's magic.

She drifted through her days at work listless like a zombie. Her performance didn't decline, she could focus well enough to keep her patients in good health, and in moments like those she was able to flee from some of the emotional problems she was facing. But, aside from that, she was constantly agonizing over her time with Ember. Missing her touch, her voice, her scent, the love they made together.

“Heard Chief Thompson's daughter charged into a burning building recklessly against protocol again.”

That immediately caught her attention. She was in the middle of lunch when she heard some of the nurses gossiping. Normally, she barely paid attention to their chatter, but she couldn't help but eavesdrop when she noticed they were talking about Ember.

The other nurse, a thick young woman with a mole on her top lip, Mikaila was her name, replied, “I swear she has a death wish.”

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“And a great deal of luck too,” her partner replied. She was slightly smaller than the other one. Josephine couldn’t remember her name, but she and Mikaila could pass for twins.

“I think she’s a little crazy because of her mom. The chief was pretty awesome in her younger days, being the first female chief of any US fire department. She is a real formidable woman.”

“And Ember has been living in her mom’s shadow.”

“Definitely some self-destructive tendencies there.”

Josephine had heard enough. She finished her lunch and rose. She planned to walk out without saying anything but decided that she was indeed going to say something to the two nurses.

“Perhaps you should gossip less about someone working hard to save lives and appreciate their efforts more?”

They gaped at her in surprise. Josephine was surprised herself. But the urge to speak up in defense of Ember was impossible to ignore. This was not normal for her, she wasn’t confrontative by any means, but Ember was a hero. She risked her life to save others. She deserved accolades, not criticisms.

She left the two women in shocked silence. Their interactions were going to be awkward from now on, Josephine realized. For someone who just got here, that was not a good thing, making enemies like that. But Josephine found she cared less about

that. There was a familiar itch she felt deep within her. The itch that always drove her to run away from her problems. It was not as intense as it could be but that would change over time. She knew this fact.

Josephine sighed.

What was she going to do about Ember though? There might have been some merit to what the nurses were saying. They might have been wrong in assuming Ember was putting herself in danger just to surpass her mother. What if she was doing it because they broke up? She'd seen that look in her eyes. Ember looked lost. Josephine wanted to think of a way to help her without necessarily getting back together. Though the thought of getting back with Ember sent a thrill of excitement and satisfaction rushing through her.

Becky

Things were rough between the two but if there was anybody that could possibly reach Ember. She was the one.

“Doctor Mars!” someone called out her name, breaking her from her musings.

“Yes?” The sense of urgency was familiar. There was a medical emergency.

“We need a general surgeon in the OR! Doctor Morley is fifteen minutes out?”

“Take me to the patient,” Josephine went full doctor mode. She'd been taking things easy, but she knew something like this was going to happen eventually and was mentally prepared for it. She was in her element now.

“Patient is a female in her mid-thirties. Badly in need of an appendectomy.” The nurse gave her a rapid-fire rundown of the situation.

“How bad is it?” she asked the nurse.

The woman winced. “She’s about to pop.”

If Josephine was the swearing type, she would’ve let out a few expletives right then. She hated to rush surgeries like these, but there was nothing for it.

“Is everything prepared?” Josephine asked. She gowned up and scrubbed in and then walked into the OR, sighting the patient right away. Josephine gave the woman a reassuring smile. She looked panicked. There was no helping it, they had to inform her of what they were about to do and that would naturally put her on edge. Removing an appendix was supposed to be relatively simple but there were always risks involved.

“Don’t worry, Ms Flynn. It’s an extremely straightforward surgery.”

The woman gazed at her, bewildered. Something about her reminded Josephine of Ember. Then again, that could just be her mind playing tricks on her. Either way, she was determined to ease the woman’s discomfort.

“Then why is everyone going crazy?”

Josephine laughed. It wasn’t entirely genuine, but she was putting on a show that she was in control and that would, by extension, put the patient at ease as well.

“They’re not going crazy. They know what they’re doing.”

At the corner of her vision, she could see the nurses exchange glances. Thankfully, the patient didn’t notice them.

“It’s a relatively simply surgery,” Josephine explained. “Small incision, separate the

muscles, find the appendix, tie it up and cut it out. You'll be back on your feet in no time at all."

"Thank you, Doctor," the woman said gratefully.

"Call me Josephine," she offered.

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Soon, the woman was sedated and put under. Some of the nurses were still new faces but they knew their jobs. The whole surgery took about an hour. She was halfway through before Doctor Morley arrived and Doctor Morley let her finish.

“Very impressive work” Doctor Morley gushed at Josephine as she left the operating room. “That was the quickest, most efficient appendectomy I have ever witnessed.”

Josephine merely smiled. A real one this time. She loved Phoenix Ridge; the looks she got after the surgery was as success was something she’d missed working in New York. It was a shame that she would have to leave soon.

“I did a surgery today. Appendectomy,” Josephine informed her father as they had dinner.

“Oh? How did go?” He wasn’t particularly excited. This was normal for her. She’d done thousands of surgeries before, and an Appy was about the most common one. But in her role as Head of Hospital, she was all admin and no action. It had been sometime since she had last had a scalpel in her hands.

“Went well.”

He glanced up at her. “And?”

Josephine looked down at her meal. “It felt amazing. It felt like I was making an impact on lives again. I missed that feeling.”

Her father nodded. He didn’t fully understand what she was talking about. For him, a

surgery was surgery. Not that Doctor Benjamin Mars didn't care about his patients. He cared about their wellbeing greatly. But he didn't connect with them the way she did. For him, the extent of his work was keeping them alive. To his credit, he had done his best to understand her perspective these last few years. That was why he prompted her to speak on how she felt about it.

"You have that look in your eyes again."

"What look?" Josephine enquired.

"The same look you had before you told me you were moving out of the house when you were little."

"I wasn't little, Dad. I already had my first master's degree."

"You're changing the subject." He was going to let it go.

"I'm thinking about leaving Phoenix Ridge."

"You just got here, been here barely a couple of months now," her father pointed out.

"I know!" Josephine replied, slightly exasperated. "But...ugh! Everything!"

"Sweetheart," Benjamin put his fork down and stared her in the eyes. "You're a beautiful woman. You've achieved far more than I have ever dreamed for you. But, above all else, what I want for you the most is for you to be happy, and it pains me to see you run away from your own happiness time and time again."

His words struck a chord in her. She wanted to argue, to dispute him. She was a successful doctor. She didn't run away from that. She'd made a name for herself and left her father's shadow. She didn't run away from that. Josephine didn't see herself

as that coward her father was making her out to be.

Then why are you running away? a small voice asked in her mind.

Because it's for the best!

For who?

The last question rang in her mind. An image popped into her mind. Ember, sitting on that park bench, staring out into nothingness. Had their breakup really done her any good? Would leaving be better for her?

Josephine sighed. The answer might have seemed easy and straightforward to everyone else. Not to her. Not when she cared about her friend. Becky might hate her guts now, but she had always been a good friend. In the hard times with Eva, it was Becky's friendship that kept her afloat. It allowed her to escape from the misery of coming to terms with the fact that her relationship was completely dead. Everyone in her life knew about it. They gave her pitying looks, which she hated. Becky didn't know, and in many ways, helped her return to her normal self again.

She resolved to try and reach out to her friend. They deserved closure too.

"What are you going to do now?" Benjamin asked as she got up.

"I'm going to give Becky a call. See if she wants to talk."

He nodded. "Good luck."

Josephine was going to need it if her last encounter with Becky was anything to go by.

Josephine dialed her number on her way to the apartment. After the first two rings, she was certain she wasn't going to get any response.

“Hello?”

Josephine jumped. She was expecting the call to go to voicemail. A beat passed without her saying anything.

“Josephine, I know you can hear me, you’re the one who called.” Becky sounded more exhausted than angry. “I’d like us to talk.”

“Uh, right, we should—we should talk,” Josephine stammered. She was a bit nervous. This was not how she’d expected this discussion to go. “Tonight?”

“Yes? I hope that’s not too inconvenient. We could meet somewhere around the pier, close to the beach.”

A small part of her wondered if she was going to be murdered and thrown in the ocean. She quickly squashed that line of thought.

“Sure, I’ll meet there...what time?”

“Is eight-thirty okay by you?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“See you then.”

Becky hung up. Curt, but far more polite than she had been the last time they spoke to each other.

“Well,” Josephine said to herself. “Have to prepare myself for that encounter.”

She was five minutes early to the pier. There was a bit of a crowd; she had no idea how she was supposed to find Becky, but apparently the chief didn’t have such troubles.

“Over here.”

Josephine flinched and whirled, finding Becky behind her. Her friend was dressed in casual clothes, a rare sight. Becky wore a black t-shirt over brown cargo pants and sandals. Her hair was a bit lighter in color than Ember’s and not so messy. It was tied in a neat ponytail. And she looked extremely stressed.

“Hi,” Josephine said nervously.

“Let’s sit.” Becky led her to a bench, somewhere less crowded.

Josephine had no idea how to break the initial silence between the two of them. Thankfully, Becky did, and surprisingly enough, she started with an apology.

“First, I’d like to apologize for my actions last time.” She looked down at her hands. Her fingers were interlaced, moving over each other.

“I overreacted.”

Josephine nodded. “In a way, I kind of understood.”

They lapsed into silence once more. This time it wasn’t as awkward as the previous one.

“How’s Ember doing?” Josephine ventured cautiously.

“Not good,” Becky replied bluntly. “She ran into a burning building again, claiming she heard someone in there but there was no one in the building. The floor collapsed right underneath her, she almost died. Only reason she is still alive is pure luck, nothing else.”

It was one thing to hear that Ember was suicidal from gossips, it was another to hear it coming from her mother.

“She’s always had no fear, but it has gotten a lot worse ever since the...”

Ever since we stopped seeing each other.

“Well, basically I think she is being self destructive. She has even less thought for her own safety than she ever did.”

“I think you should reach out to her,” Josephine suggested.

“Already tried.” Becky sighed again, looking as though she’d aged years in an instant. “She wouldn’t talk to me. Or anyone for that matter.”

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Becky suddenly turned to her. “I’m starting to realize that maybe I was wrong about you two da?—”

“No, you were right. I’ve thought about it too. The differences in age and experiences are too big,” Josephine said. “And you helped me realize that. I’m sorry that dating your daughter had essentially ruined what could have been a great friendship for us.”

Becky looked sad, but Josephine strengthened her resolve. It was for the best, or so she kept telling herself. Deep down, Josephine was terrified. She could not live through the trauma of losing Ember again. The connection they’d shared in a very short period of time had been greater than anything she had ever felt before. She didn’t have it within herself to heal from further trauma. It was cowardly, but cowardice was an easier pill to swallow than pain.

“I’m sorry,” Becky apologized again. “I wish I could go back and change everything. I didn’t know my actions would hurt you both like this.”

“I know.”

Becky turned to her once more. “Are you sure you can’t help?”

“I think anything I do right now will only cause more damage. Ember will be okay without me. Maybe even better. She’ll find somebody her own age, they’ll fall in love, and I’ll be nothing but a distant memory.”

Becky turned to stare at the ocean. “I thought that, but it really isn’t going that way.”

They sat in companionable silence until it got dark. On her way home, Josephine felt some of the weight lift off her shoulders. At least she'd patched things up with her friend somewhat. They might never be as close as they used to be but there was some closure.

She'd decided that she was going to leave Phoenix Ridge.

Seeing Ember in pain and hearing about her actions was breaking her heart.

9

EMBER

“What the hell was that stunt you pulled last night?!”

Ember had been called into Deputy Chief Sophia Ramirez's office the moment she resumed back at work. Sophia Ramirez was around Josephine's age but with a fiery Latina temper. Unlike with her own mother, Sophia did not hesitate to chew her out.

“I was doing my jo?—”

“Oh, spare me that. You're not a rookie, Thompson.” Sophia jabbed a finger at her to emphasize her point. “If you're still making rookie mistakes at this stage, then maybe firefighting isn't the best profession for you. The job is already dangerous enough as it is.”

Ember felt a jolt of panic rising within her, along with the need to defend herself. “I thought there was somebody in the building, Ma'am.”

“And you should have waited, assessed the situation before charging in like some raging bull. That is not what firefighters do!”

Her tirade went on for a good deal longer before she was dismissed. She'd seen the deputy chief get pissed a number of times, but Ember didn't recall ever seeing her that angry before.

Even the looks she got from the other firefighters were odd. Most were cautious, even when she sat to eat with them. Nobody broached the subject, something she was thankful for, but that only drove home the fact that everyone was consciously avoiding the topic. Eventually, her mom came down hard with an order to see a psychologist for counseling and not return to work until she was deemed fit to serve again.

That was it. She was back home again. Ember had no one to blame this time. It was her own reckless behavior that got her to that point.

Failure. Failure. Failure.

The voice chanted in her mind each time she was alone with her thoughts.

"Your symptoms indicate that you might be suffering from depression, Ember," the psychologist said.

Ember had been entirely focused on his large-rimmed glasses and the way he pushed them up his nose each time she said something he found to be interesting. Her mind ground to a halt when she processed what he'd said.

"Me? Depressed? I don't see how I could possibly be... I mean, I'm not locking myself away at home, hiding away from the world."

He studied her for a moment then nodded his head as though her words had confirmed something he already knew.

“Depression manifests in different ways in different people. Your attempts to end your own life are alarming, to say the least, considering your choice of profession. It is good you were ordered to take this test. You are a danger to yourself and the people who work with you, Ember.”

“I save lives! I wasn’t trying to end my life!” she snapped at him. The sudden wrath had surprised her. Ember prided herself in being coolheaded but something about his words rubbed her wrong.

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The psychologist showed no outward reaction. He did not chastise her for her outburst or overly dwell on it when she showed no desire to discuss the matter.

He's right, isn't he? Ember thought. Jenna had been forced to enter the burning building to come rescue her. Leilani had done the same that day they rescued the cat. Ultimately, her actions ended up endangering others.

Guess I failed firefighting too

"I can see you spiraling," the doctor observed.

Ember shrugged, "What would you have me do?"

"For starters?" Some real emotion crept into his voice for the first time since she'd begun the appointment. "Stop putting yourself at risk, that remains the nexus of the problem we're having, Ember."

Ember didn't have any response to that. It was easier said than done.

"Treat yourself like somebody you care about, like somebody you want to see succeed. Put yourself in the shoes of those who care about you enough to risk their lives to run into a burning building to save you."

On the ride back home, she turned his words over in her head. If she was her mother, what would she want for herself? What would Haley and Rory want for her? If she was Ember's good friend who wanted to see her succeed, what would she want her to do? What she truly wanted was Josephine to come back. But that wasn't going to be

possible. She'd said her goodbyes.

"Get to work on a new car," she said out loud. It was meant to be something of a joke, but the idea didn't leave her mind. She found herself being deposited by the Uber at Farcy's property. He lived out of town. His next-door neighbor was at least a mile and a half away. Ember couldn't tell if the man was solitary or just lonely out here.

He was waiting for her outside, dressed in jean overalls with a cigarette stuck between his lips. His ford F150 was sitting in the front of the house.

"Figured you'd show up one of these days. Come on, she's out in the barn."

Ember followed after him. They walked around his house. The property looked well-maintained, clearly the old man put some effort into keeping it clean, but she couldn't help but muse about the feeling that the house didn't feel like somebody lived in it. She wanted to ask about his family, his wife had passed away, but they had three children, all of whom had moved out at this point.

The American Buick was sitting in the garage, thankfully, still on its wheels. It didn't look like the man had touched it since the day it caught fire.

"Was thinking you'd bring a mechanic with ya to check it out or something," he said as she walked around the car.

"Nah, I'm good," she replied.

Like he said, most of the engine was unsalvageable, the engine block was completely warped and misaligned from the fire. She would need to rebuild the engine bay, she didn't trust it's integrity, not after the fire.

“Yeah, you’ve always been a little gearhead,” he commented. “I remember the first day your mom brought you to the drag strip. Had eyes as wide as saucers staring at all the muscle cars around ya.”

He glanced at her. “It’s a shame to see some of that light dimmed since you lost your Joan.”

Again, Ember didn’t know what to say. She and the old man barely spoke even though they met on the drag strip often. It was odd to know the man had such memories of her. How many other people like Farcy were out there?

“How much do you want for it?” Ember thought the car was in relatively good condition. She’d start saving some money for it.

“How much you got?”

Ember did some quick mental calculation. She had some money saved up. But it was not going to be anywhere near enough to pay for the car.

“Only about four thousand. If you give me a little more time, I can?—”

“Take it. Car is worth eight thousand, but you can pay me the remaining half when you’re ready.”

“I—thank you,” Ember said gratefully. Eight thousand dollars was more than fair for the car. It was a classic car, with a lot of history.

“I can send you the money right now,” Ember offered.

The transaction was quick, she accessed her bank account on her phone and sent him the money. Farcy brought a trailer hitch from under a shed and they rolled the car

over it. He then hooked it up to his Ford truck and they drove it down to the Ember's place and rolled the car into her garage.

After all the hard work, Ember and Farcy stepped back to stare at the garage. Seeing a car sitting in there was nice again. All of her tools were still there, some parts left from Joan's build.

"Well," Farcy patted her shoulder. "Good luck with it."

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He left her alone. Ember stood there for a good five minutes. Her fingers itched, she wanted to pick up the phone and call Josephine. She wanted to tell her the good news. The need was so overpowering, she couldn't breathe. Ember went and sat in the car for a while. Then she curled up on the seat. The tears flowed freely.

“How the hell did you get the car running in less than a week?!” Farcy asked, gapeing at the Buick. She'd told him over the phone, she didn't expect him to show up to actually see the car.

“Went by the junkyard to check on Joan. The car is gone but most of her engine was still in good condition since the collisions came from the side and the rear. Salvaged what I could.”

The car was nowhere near ready for the drag strip. The new engine was a temporary solution to keep it running well enough to drive it to the grocery store and back.

“Well, you would've made a damn fine mechanic if you weren't a firefighter.”

Ember nodded. She'd learned quite a lot about cars while building Joan. Not that she'd worked on it alone, but the professionals didn't hesitate to show her the ropes and answer any questions she had. She had learned a lot online. Through videos. Through books. It was a passion for her. All of that skill came in handy now that she was working on her second car.

She settled into something of a routine, largely shutting herself away from the world as she worked on her car and attended her appointments with the psychologist.

The day had started like the rest. Ember spent most of her day at home, she was in the garage, working on the car. She wasn't doing anything particularly important. She was mostly zoned out until her phone ringing woke her from her reverie. She jolted and reached for her device. It was Captain Carter.

"Hey," Ember answered, her voice was hoarse and scratchy from crying.

"Ember!" Jenna yelled. The urgency in her voice had Ember on alert immediately.

"We need you!"

"What?!"

"Where the hell are you?!" Jenna screamed into the phone.

In the background, Ember could hear the unmistakable chaos of a fireground. People were screaming, some in panic, others were giving orders. She could almost smell the smoke.

She was out of her car in a blink. Ember stepped out of her garage and was confronted by what she would have described as a nightmarish sight. In the distance, it looked like the edge of the world was on fire. Thick clouds of smoke blanketed the sky, underneath it was the orange glow of fire, burning underneath it. Phoenix Ridge was on fire and she'd slept through half of it.

"This can't be real," Ember said out loud, into the phone.

"It's real! Get your butt to the fire station and gear up, we need every hand on deck and you're one of the best firefighters we got!"

Her hood slammed shut and she hopped into the Buick. Swift Hog wheezed a couple of times, churning out a plume of black smoke.

“Come on, Hog,” Ember encouraged.

She gave it a couple of pumps before the engine rattled to life. She threw it in gear and tore out of her driveway. The city was in panic. Understandably so, everyone could see the smoke plumes from the fire. Ember was yet to make out the extent of the forest fire, it looked like the whole outskirts of Phoenix Ridge was on fire. Most likely, the fire wouldn’t reach the city, but if the flames went into the suburbs, the destruction to lives and property would be unthinkable.

The fire station was a mess when she arrived, everybody had been called in to work. The parking lot was filled to the brim. Nobody batted an eye when Ember rushed into the locker room to grab her gear. She was dressed and on the next fire truck heading out.

Haley was in the back. Leilani was with her. Elle was behind the wheel. Ember could see her lips moving, she was likely praying. As she stared ahead into the danger they were riding into, she understood her urge to pray.

The radio crackled. Becky’s unmistakable voice came through the speakers.

“Engine four?”

“Chief?” Elle replied.

There was a pause before Ember’s mother spoke again.

“Ember?” she called.

“Here, Chief,” she answered. There was tension in the fire truck as they anticipated what her mother was going to say next.

“Glad to have you back,” her mother said. “Stay safe, all of you.”

Ember could almost hear Elle heave a sigh of relief as she turned the intersection. It was a red light, sirens were blaring, everyone stopped to let them pass. They could all see the smoke.

“Engine four, I want you on the front lines, you will join engine two in securing the suburbs and making sure the evacuations continue without a hitch.”

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“Aye aye, Chief,” Ember replied.

Elle was already altering their course.

“It’s nice having you back,” Haley said, rubbing Ember’s shoulder. The genuineness in her voice made Ember tear up slightly. She’d missed this, the camaraderie, the sisterhood, and the feeling of actually doing something for the greater good and saving lives.

“Thank you,” she looked at each of them. “I’m grateful to all of you for looking out for me.”

Elle smiled though her eyes remained glued to road.

“We’re happy to look out for you, Ember. Wish you would help us out by looking out for you too.”

She nodded. This was what Leilani meant when she said Ember would understand. She did. Ember pictured one of her colleagues charging into a building like she had been doing.

“I’m sorry I’ve been so blind.”

Leilani scooted close to her and took her hand. There was a knowing look in her eyes.

“You’re not alone, Ember. Remember that we agreed to take these risks with you.”

Ember squeezed Leilani's hand back. The accusing voice in her head was quiet this time around. No glaring eyes in the shadows either. She was at peace, despite the chaos.

While Ember's mother was directing the battle against the flames, she was going to do her part in the fight. The fire had already taken a few homes before they arrived on the scene. The forest was aflame behind them as the roads were packed with fleeing residents. They had to pick their way through the throng of cars littering the roads.

Engine two was already on scene. Kiera, Zara, and Captain Jenna were doing their best to keep the fire from spreading further. The captain took charge the moment they arrived.

"Position the truck down at the end of Road Thirty-Four. Ember, you and Haley work your way up from there, make sure all the houses are evacuated while we try to keep these homes from burning to the ground."

They barely had any time to respond before Elle barreled her way down to their position. Ember hopped out of the truck, the heat and smoke hit her immediately. It was familiar territory. Her mind was at ease as she took in everything.

She glanced west, the fire didn't show any indication of spreading that way for now, but the wind could change that at any moment. Farcy's home was in that direction. He should have gotten out by now. Ember prayed for his safety as she went blitzing through the houses, checking to make sure there was nobody still in them. The homes were so tightly packed together, she was forced to be more thorough to make sure she didn't miss anything. If the fire got to this area, it would be devastating.

She joined Jenna at the junction.

"Houses are clear."

“Good,” Jenna acknowledged. She seemed to study the fire burning in the distance for a moment. Ember could see her mental gears turning and knew the conclusion she was going to reach.

“Backfiring?” Ember said, knowing that that was what the captain was thinking.

“Yeah, we need to burn away all the vegetation in the area so the fire doesn’t have any fuel. At least, not in this direction. Grab a cannister from the truck, we’ll have engine two filled up and ready to escort you. You’re going in with Zara, Kiera, and Haley.”

Ember was moving as fast as she could. Backfiring was one easy way to keep wildfires from spreading. Fire needed fuel to burn and by depriving it of that, it would have no choice but to go out. They had to do it quickly, however, if the fire arrived before they were done, all of their work would have been for naught.

They had to make their way deep beyond the edge of the woods. The fire truck was parked some distance away, to make sure it would reach them in time to contain the fire. If they didn’t do this right, they could potentially cause the fire to go out of control.

They were at it for about half an hour before the radio attached to Ember’s shoulder hissed and Jenna’s voice came through.

“Ladies, wind just bought us a little more time. It’s blowing west, the fire’s gone over the hill, headed west. Hopefully, they’ll have better luck on that end.”

Ember stopped.

“Old man Farcy lives up in that area. Has anyone made sure he made it out?”

Jenna's response came through the radio.

"I'm not sure. I'll contact the team handling west, up by the creek, see if they spotted him leaving."

Ember could feel the wind now. It was increasing in strength. That meant the fire was going to spread quicker due to the increased supply of oxygen. She was beginning to worry. Perhaps the wind changing directions was not such a blessing...

10

JOSEPHINE

“You’re leaving?!” Doctor Gale sputtered. “Why?! You just got here! Did somebody at the hospital offend you?!”

“No.” Josephine tried to placate the man before he fired an innocent health worker. “It’s not the hospital, I promise.”

“We’ve been careful not to overwhelm you with work. You didn’t take that to mean we were underestimating you, did you?”

“Again, no.” She shook her head. This was an obstacle she hadn’t foreseen when she decided to leave Phoenix Ridge.

“It’s not the hospital. My time here has been some of the best times of my life.”

“So why are you leaving?”

The old man sounded almost whiny when he asked that question.

“It’s complicated. I need to leave for personal reasons.”

Her father hadn’t objected or even tried to dissuade her when she’d given him the news. He merely asked where she wanted to go. Josephine had no idea; her things were still in a storage unit in New York, so she resolved to start from there. Her

father offered to take her on his jet.

All that was left was to quit her new employment at the Phoenix Ridge Hospital. She didn't realize that was going to be one of the hardest parts of her decision. Hospital admin was insistent on keeping her at the hospital, far more than they had been in New York.

She couldn't stay, though. The itch had grown unbearable in the last few days. It was constant, ever present. It urged her to move or something terrible was going to happen soon. That foreboding feeling never left her. It receded somewhat when she finally decided that it was time to leave Phoenix Ridge, but it was replaced by grief. A hollow feeling tugged at her on the drive to the airport.

"Are you okay?" her father enquired.

The entire interaction with Doctor Gale had left a bitter taste in her mouth. It wasn't like when she was saying goodbye to her former colleagues in New York. That had been exciting. This was just...sad.

"I'm okay," Josephine lied.

"Really? Is that why you look like a young pup being separated from its mother?"

Josephine turned to look outside. She didn't feel like continuing the conversation. She noticed black smoke in the distance.

"What is that?" Already dreading the answer.

Her father glanced up briefly before turning back to his tablet.

"A wildfire, looks like."

He didn't look particularly worried.

"But isn't that a little too close to town?" The fire looked like it was burning within the city limits.

"Looks closer than it actually is. Don't worry, it shouldn't interrupt our flight."

Josephine wasn't worried about their flight. Ember is going to be out there. Josephine was incredibly worried, and given the young firefighter's tendencies, a knot was already beginning to form in her stomach.

"Should we be leaving?"

"I'm sure their firefighters are capable of taking care of it."

But who would be looking out for the firefighters?

With disasters like these, there were bound to be injuries. Even if the fire didn't get to them, accidents were prone to happen when people panicked in the face of such a terrifying phenomenon. She thought about Ember again, imagining her sprinting into the inferno, a blank look on her face even as the fire consumed her.

She managed to restrain herself. They eventually got on the jet and were soon in the air. From above, Josephine got an aerial view of the disaster. Her breath hitched. The fire was massive, spanning from the shoreline where the dried grass provided ample fuel, all the way over the rolling hills and down into the river that eventually fed into the ocean. To her, it looked like a giant spreading rot, reaching its infernal fingers toward the city. She could see some homes on the outskirts had already succumbed to the flames. No doubt, there would be injuries. The firefighters were on the front lines, they needed support.

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“I have to go back,” Josephine whispered.

Her father glanced at her. “What?”

“I can’t leave. I have to go back,” she repeated, louder this time, going into a frenzy. What the hell was she thinking leaving at a time like this?! Phoenix Ridge had been kind to her, why would she abandon the city at the first sign of danger? Why would she leave Ember to face all that by herself?

“We have to turn around.”

Thankfully, her father didn’t get annoyed with her. He merely nodded and rose to go speak with the pilot in the cockpit. When he came back to take his seat, she felt the plane begin to circle back to the airport.

“So, you decided to stay?” her father asked.

“I don’t know yet,” Josephine confessed. “But I want to help right now.”

Their plane landed and she was out the door in a blink. She found a car to take her back into the city. Her mustang was supposed to be shipped back to her in New York later. The hospital was busier than normal when she walked in. Doctor Gale found her immediately. His blue eyes lit up with glee he saw her entering.

“Welcome back.” He smiled triumphantly. “I knew you wouldn’t leave us at a time like this.”

“I’m not back permanently.” She didn’t want to get his hopes up. “How can I help?”

“Right now, we’re put together teams to go along with our EMTs to provide aid to the?—”

“Put me on the next one,” she said without hesitation.

Doctor Gale hesitated. “It’s closer to the fire. There’s a lot going on. It is going to be risky.”

“I know. This city has done much for me. This is my way of giving back.”

“I don’t know about that. You’ve been a blessing since the day you walked through those doors.”

He didn’t need further convincing. Josephine changed into her trauma medic jumpsuit and was on the next ambulance headed in the direction of the fire.

“Wildfire this close the city is almost unheard of,” the driver of the ambulance said. She was a tall woman with both of her forearms heavily tattooed. She smelled great, Josephine mused.

“How do you think the firefighters are faring?” Josephine asked.

The driver shrugged. “Looks like they’ve been doing good so far. No casualties that we’ve heard off. Just some homes that were lost. While that is heartbreaking, houses can be rebuilt.”

Josephine agreed with the sentiment. Her profession had taught her to value human life above all else. Almost everything else could be reacquired, but not life. It was fragile, but that quality made it beautiful.

Getting through traffic presented a major obstacle. Becky was on the scene in her fire chief coat and helmet—the only white helmet while all the others wore yellow—with a big clipboard, directing the various teams when they arrived. She took one look at them and immediately had them stationed nearby.

“The other EMTs have everything under control for now. Stay here, if anyone is brought in, you’ll handle it.”

Josephine would have liked to stand by her friend, but she obviously had her hands full. She grabbed one of the firefighters passing by.

“Where’s Ember Thompson?” she asked.

The firefighter had to pause to get her bearing before she answered Josephine.

“Ember was suspended; I don’t know if they called her back in.”

That brought her a sense of relief. Perhaps Ember was not embroiled in all this chaos. As soon as the thought came, she immediately pushed it aside. Ember would never sit on her ass while something this big was happening. Josephine finally summoned the courage to approach Becky.

“Is Ember here?”

Becky glanced at her and indicated with her hand. “Ember is over in that area. They’re working on backfiring to keep the fires from reaching the homes in the suburban areas. It shouldn’t be too risky if all goes to plan.”

Josephine felt a swell of relief. Maybe Ember wouldn’t get into any trouble today for once.

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Josephine had resigned herself to watching while everything unfolded, but soon a firefighter rushed up to them, carrying someone bundled up in a blanket.

“Medic!”

Josephine was already beside her. There was a little boy wrapped up. His eyes looked unfocused and drowsy. Side-effects of smoke inhalation.

“Place him there!” Josephine directed. She turned to the other medic. “We need to put him on oxygen right away!”

Josephine made sure the boy’s airways were not obstructed, peeling back the blankets to observe his torso. His breathing was weak. She put a stethoscope to his chest and listened. There was a high-pitched whistling sound in his lungs each time he took a breath. The smoke had probably exacerbated the boy’s allergies, leading to bronchospasms.

They needed to relieve his airways as quickly as possible.

“Do you have albuterol on hand?”

The medic nodded and added the medicine to the nebulizer before he placed the oxygen mask on the patient. Josephine checked once again to make sure the boy was breathing properly before letting the others on the team take care of him. Her mind wandered back to Ember.

I hope she’s okay

More injured people came. The fire raged. The fight went on and Josephine did the best she could to help out. But there was no sign of Ember. She was starting to get worried. She heard some commotion outside the ambulance, prompting her to step out and see what was happening.

She found some firefighters crowded around Becky who was frowning at the radio in her hands with a hint of fear in her voice. Josephine knew something was horribly wrong. The chief had been stoic in her operations until now. Only something happening to Ember could put a chink in her armor.

Josephine pushed her way through the people gathered round.

“What happened?”

Becky looked at her. The desperation in her friend’s eyes told her too much.

“Ember’s radio just cut off while she was in the middle of requesting backup,” Becky told her. “It’s probably nothing.”

Josephine’s mouth worked but no words came. Her mind had gone completely blank with fear for her lover. She started hyperventilating. The world spun around her, she started to lose her footing, but strong hands grabbed her under the arm, steadying her.

“Stay with me, Josephine,” Becky’s voice cut through the haze. “I need you. Ember needs you.”

Her voice centered Josephine. Her vision reasserted itself. She took slow, deep breaths. She nodded gratefully at her friend.

“What do we do?”

“You sit tight,” Becky replied. “I’ll coordinate the search.”

She turned to her radio, talking rapidly. “Engine two, can you read me?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” came a response.

“Where was Firefighter Thompson headed before her radio cut out?”

“She wanted to make sure old man Farcy had moved out. She went up over the hill in the direction of his property.”

“On foot?” Becky asked, sounding like she already knew the answer to that.

“On foot,” the voice confirmed.

Becky sighed deeply. “Get me in touch with the helicopter. Engine four, head westward.”

“We’re already making our way there. We have a problem. The backroad leading to the Farcy home is currently inaccessible. There’s flaming trees blocking the way. It’ll be nearly impossible to go through.”

Josephine saw Becky’s fingers tighten over the radio.

“Copy that. Hold on, don’t force your way in.”

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Josephine could never fathom the amount of self-control she had to halt the rescue of her own daughter due to safety reasons. She wanted to wrench the radio out of her hand and order the firefighters to go in on foot to rescue Ember. The logical part of her mind won out eventually. Rushing in with no clue wouldn't save anybody.

Josephine looked into the distance. The fire was growing. Watching the smoke rise high up into the sky inspired a certain level of hopelessness within her. How were they supposed to win against a force of nature? It seemed like a battle they were bound to lose eventually. Would Ember be one of the casualties it claimed?

"Please be okay." she whispered. "I love you."

The winds were starting to pick up speed. Josephine looked up, beyond the thick smoke, clouds were gathering in the sky.

11

EMBER

There was no word on old man Farcy. Ember had to move fast before it was too late. She turned to look around, they'd been largely successful with backfiring. Most of the ground around her was burned black by the fire. The strong smell of wet, burned leaves assailed her nose. They'd successfully put out the fire in this area of controlled burn and the trucks were refilling their water tanks before they moved off to other areas that might present greater risks.

She glanced up over the hill again. Most of it was blanketed in smoke, obscuring the

skies above. Her mind couldn't stop thinking.

"I'm going to check on Farcy."

Jenna glanced at her. Perhaps she'd been expecting her to run off again, but Ember was genuinely waiting for the go ahead to move.

"We'll need to go around, over the interstate to get to that side."

"Not if I go on foot. I'll cross the hill faster if I cut through the forest."

"With all that gear?" Haley asked, incredulous.

"I can make it," Ember said confidently.

"Alright, we'll go around. That might take us a while."

"Got it." Ember broke off in a jog.

"Your mom won't like this, you know?" Haley called.

Ember nodded to herself. "Yeah, I know," she called back to Haley. They weren't supposed to go anywhere alone, but Ember wasn't going to force one of the others to go with her on this mission.

The others rushed to pack up and move. Despite her confidence, Ember's lungs were burning with the effort by the time she crested the hill. She picked her way down carefully. She glimpsed Farcy's house in the distance. Ember thought she saw his truck parked in the driveway in the distance, but it was hard to tell. Eventually, she descended into the forest, the tall trees obscured her vision. The fire had already spread this far. The trees around and above were already aflame. The wind had likely

carried embers this way. What leaves that were left on the trees were already dry, waiting to serve as kindling.

Ember pulled her mask on to keep most of the smoke out. She was still huffing, but the descent into the forest had been less exerting than the climb.

She broke out of the tree line, getting a clear view of the old man's home. His truck was still sitting in the driveway.

He never goes anywhere without it, Ember thought.

True enough, she found him attempting to wrestle an armoire out the door of the house.

"Farcy! You need to go!"

He glanced up at her in shock, blinking blearily.

"Can't let the fire have it!" he protested and went back to fighting with the furniture.

Ember didn't understand what was so important about it. It looked like an antique, probably very expensive. However, it was still furniture, nothing worth risking his life over.

"Come on," she grabbed him by the arm, trying to pull him away.

"No!" the man refused, wrenching his arm away. "I can't leave it!"

"We have to go!" Ember said urgently. "We don't have much time until the fire traps us in here!"

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The old man stopped to look at her. Ember saw his face for the first time. He looked utterly desperate. A shiver ran down her spine when she saw the gruff man with tears in his eyes.

“Please! It belonged to her! I can’t leave it!” he cried.

A cold shiver ran down Ember’s spine. It wasn’t just a piece of furniture. The armoire belonged to Farcy’s late wife. Now she understood his attachment to it. It wasn’t about the monetary value of it.

“She loved it! I can’t let the fire have it!” the old man said stubbornly he went back to wrestling the furniture. But it was too heavy to move. It was a miracle he got it this far, that had probably taken up a significant amount of time.

“Let me help.” She tried to move the man out of the way.

“No! You should go! Save yourself!” he protested.

“It’s my job! Now let me help you!” She hefted the armoire, dragging it beyond the door frame. Farcy went around and placed his hand on the bottom. Together they lifted it and brought it outside.

She placed it on the ground.

“Let’s put it in the bed of the truck.”

“No,” Ember disagreed. She had a foreboding feeling. Taking the armoire wouldn’t

end well. “Do you have a tarp? Something thick we could cover it with?”

“Yeah!” Farcy snapped to action. He went around the back to grab a massive tarp. They’d found a relative grassless patch to place the armoire. It was far away enough that if the house went up in flames, it should be safe. Ember threw the tarp over it to protect it from the elements.

“Let’s go!” She hurried him to his truck. He got behind the wheel while Ember took the passenger seat.

“Are you sure we can leave it there?” the old man asked. He was still worried.

“It’s our best bet.”

Thankfully, he didn’t argue any further. He started the truck, and they zoomed out of his driveway. Ember secured her seatbelt.

“Put your seatbelt on, old man!”

He grumbled but did as he was told. Ember studied the roads ahead. It wound around the hill, over the river, and all if it was covered in thick, flammable vegetation. They still had a few miles to go before they hit the main road and everything was aflame ahead of them.

She remained hopeful but the wind was picking up quickly. The rain might help to put out the fire, but the wind that came with it was only going to make things worse. The feeling she had before they left the house was confirmed. They would not make it, but Ember couldn’t see any other options. They couldn’t sit in the middle of the woods waiting to be saved either.

She tried to radio in for help.

“Captain, can you hear me?!”

The voice came back garbled. She tapped the device desperately until her voice came through clearly.

“Thompson?! Are you okay?”

“Uh, not really. I’ve got Farcy. We might need some help. The fire’s trapped us over the hill. We can’t get out by road. Any chance we cou?—”

Her words were interrupted by a thunderous crack.

“Look out!” she warned Farcy.

A massive tree had crumbled from being eaten by the flames. It succumbed to its own weight, unable to support its huge bulk. That, in itself wasn’t what made the tree dangerous but rather it’s position above the hill. It had fallen off its roots and gravity had taken hold of it, carrying it further down the hill, building up momentum as it went. The thunderous crack came from the tree tearing its way through the forest.

“Shit!” the man swore.

She could hear him stamping hard on the brakes to no avail. The tree struck the passenger side of the truck like a supercharged battering ram. Ember felt the impact reverberate throughout her body, a sharp cutting pain flowed from her right arm into her shoulder, spreading all over her ribcage. Her vision swam for a moment. her eyes picked up glimpses of their truck sailing through the air. Dimly, she registered the fact that they were falling in the direction of the river below.

The sudden change in direction was all the truck needed to flip onto its side, consequently slamming the bed of the truck into the tree they’d been trying to avoid

in the first place. That sent them into another spin. Dirt from the forest and inside the truck itself rained all around them.

They hit the river with a loud crash, displacing massive volumes of water. They'd landed upside down, but the raging current easily flipped them over, filling the interiors of the truck in the process. The cold water was exactly what Ember needed to jolt her mind awake, escaping the fugue the intense pain had put her in.

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“We need to get out!” she told Farcy. If they stayed in their seats they would drown when the truck sunk completely. She got no response in return. She glanced in his direction. His head bobbed around, with the movement of the car. He’s unconscious, Ember told herself. Another, more pessimistic voice said, most likely dead from the impact. She ignored the latter.

She needed to get him out. Most of the cab of the truck was already flooded. She tried to move quickly, a sharp pain on the entire right side of her torso discouraged her. She hissed, trying to power through the agony. She was certain something was broken.

“Have to keep moving,” Ember told herself. She reached, unhooked her seat with her left hand, and pushed her way across to Farcy. The old man was unmoving. She didn’t want to check if he was breathing. It took a couple of tries to get his seatbelt off. By then, half the cab was already filled with water.

She tried to shake him awake but got no response. Have to get him out. That’s not going to be easy. Even with both her arms fully functional, it would have been a difficult task.

Ember bunched her feet under, bracing herself against the passenger side door. She heaved Farcy up, holding him against her body while she allowed the water to do most of the lifting. Then, she shoved both of them out the driver’s side window, nearly crying out as the rapid movement caused fiery agony to light across her arm and body. The current took him instantly, eager to carry him to its depths. Ember held him as tightly as she could and kicked her feet to keep their heads above the water. If she let go, he would drown.

The water got into her eyes, blinding her. Each breath felt like she was inhaling ample amounts of water with the air. She coughed and sputtered. Her legs were beginning to burn with the effort of keeping them afloat. She needed to get them to the bank, but she didn't have the strength to fight the river.

The irony of it struck Ember. She was going to drown while fighting wildfire. She would have laughed but that would have gotten her nothing but a mouthful of water.

Hold on to Farcy. Stay on your back. Kick your feet. Stay afloat. Live.

The last word continued to ring in her thoughts, even when she reached the point where she wasn't certain if she was conscious or not.

Live.

A few months ago, this would have been enough. A glorious death while saving another life. That would have been the peak of it all. There would have been statues built in her honor, she would have finally left her mother's shadow. She would give her life gloriously in service to the people she cared about.

Now that's no longer enough for me.

She could see Josephine's face. Her beautiful, dimpled smile. Her warm, amber-flecked eyes. Her lovely, honeyed silk hair. Ember didn't want to give that up forever. If she died, it would be the end. She would never kiss her again. The memory she would make with Josephine would be of her walking away after ending their relationship.

Live.

She wanted more out of life now. Ember wanted her lover with her. She wanted a

family of her own. She wanted to live a long, happy life with Josephine. She wanted them to watch their children grow and flourish together.

She was blacking out intermittently. Sometimes she would forget to kick her feet and both their heads would sink below the water. That was usually enough to jolt her back action. She was exhausted. There was no hope in sight. Nobody around to offer them aid, but she held on stubbornly. Help would come. Her sisters would find her. She was confident that they would.

The water swallowed them both.

Kick your feet.

She tried to move but her legs were not listening. The muscles were locked in place. No matter how hard she tried, they refused to respond.

Is this it? she wondered as darkness crept around the edges of her eyes. The surface of the water looked so far away now. She could not reach it no matter how hard she tried.

Please. Help.

A powerful force wrenched her forward. She gasped, sweet air filling her lungs.

“Ember!”

She recognized that voice. It was Josephine. Was she hearing things in her last moments? She felt so cold.

“Ember!”

Her eyes snapped open. Josephine's face hovered above her. She gaped in shock.

"Let go!" Josephine said. "Let go of him!"

Ember looked down and realized she was still holding on to Farcy. She forced her arm to relax and they pulled him away from her. She frowned in worry.

"He's fine," Josephine assured her, flashing one of her dimpled smiles. "He's alive. You did good."

Other firefighters crowded around her. Her sisters had come for her. She felt herself being moved on to a stretcher. The pain was enough to rip most of the haze away. She remained focused on Josephine.

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“Are you real?” she asked.

Josephine looked at her with so much love. Then she leaned in. The feeling of their lips touching was electric. Warmth flooded into her body.

“I’m here,” Josephine said when she pulled away. “I’ll take care of you.”

Josephine climbed into the back of the ambulance with her. Ember had never seen her so serious before as she snapped out orders and instructions. Ember marveled at her beauty. She’d been rescued by an angel.

The doctor performed a quick check on her body. Noting the damage.

“Bruised ribs—maybe broken. Arm is broken. Shoulder might be dislocated. How are you still moving?” she asked incredulously.

Ember tried for a smile, but the oxygen mask hid most of her face. She simply resolved to stare at Josephine’s face, memorizing every single one of her features. Ember pulled the mask off.

Josephine scowled. “You need to keep that on, you nearly drowned.”

“Kiss me,” Ember said.

Josephine blinked in surprise. “Your oxygen mask?—”

“Kiss me anyway,” Ember forced out. Talking hurt but she craved to feel Josephine’s

lips again.

The doctor looked conflicted for a moment, but she eventually gave in. Their lips met. Ember felt like she was amongst the stars. She would have preferred it to last much longer, but the doctor pulled away, revealing Becky standing next to her.

Ember gasped in shock. How long had she been standing there? She'd most likely seen them kissing.

Her eyes searched her mother's face but there was no disapproval to be found. She knelt beside her, running her hand gently through Ember's hair.

"My baby," she cooed. "I'm so glad you're okay."

Ember hadn't seen her mother in a long time. The tears of relief that rolled down her mother's cheeks tugged at her. She reached her good hand over and placed it on her mother's cheek.

"I love you, Mom," Ember said.

"I love you too, sweetheart. I'm sorry for letting you down. I'm sorry I tried to keep you away from the person you love. I'm...so sorry, for everything."

"You're perfect, Mom," Ember said, trying for a smile but a jolt of pain shot through her body, turning her smile into a grimace.

"We need to get you back on oxygen," Josephine stepped in authoritatively. Becky rose to her feet. She nodded gratefully at Josephine and Ember watched her leave the ambulance. She turned back to Josephine, feeling happy, in spite of everything that had happened.

“I’m glad you came back for me,” Ember said.

Josephine looked slightly guilty, but it was replaced with a content smile.

“I’m glad I came back too. I’m never leaving you again.”

That put a smile on Ember’s face. Not even the excruciating pain she was feeling could wipe the joy off her features.

“Can you not be bad ass for a moment?” Kiera joked.

All of her colleagues were gathered around her hospital bed. They’d come to pay her a visit, as well as the other victims of the fire. No life was lost, surprisingly. Old man Farcy was recovering well. The flames had spared his armoire, but his house had been lost in the wildfire.

“I’m glad you’re all okay,” Ember said with a smile. “Sorry I made you guys worried.”

Zara shrugged. Elle’s eyes were shining.

“It was a miracle. We were very lucky the helicopter crew spotted the truck. They watched as that falling tree pushed you guys into the river, from there it was a race to head downriver where we could safely extract the both of you. Thankfully, you kept him alive until then.”

All that had probably taken just a few minutes, but at the time it felt like hours. She didn’t even notice there was a helicopter hovering above them the entire time.

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They left flowers and chocolate on their way out. Ember was left with her mother. They hadn't really been alone with each other since the last fight they had at her apartment.

"Hey, baby," Becky said.

"Hi, Mom," Ember replied.

Things were not nearly as awkward as she thought it would be. Probably had something to do with the fact that she almost died. Again.

"You want to talk about Josephine." It was a statement. Her mother wasn't asking.

Ember nodded.

"You love her?"

She nodded once more.

"Then I'm happy that you're happy."

Ember was surprised by her response. She hadn't expected it. Her mom's initial outrage at finding out they were seeing each other had been so palpable she would've sworn this day would never come.

"I think I want to marry her," Ember confessed, surprising both her mother and herself.

Becky cocked her head to one side, giving it some thought. Ember knew she was going to marry Josephine no matter what, but she wanted her mother's approval. It would mean a lot to her.

"You have my blessing," Becky said finally. "I guess you really couldn't have chosen someone better to be with. Josephine is incredible. She worked so hard to make sure you were okay."

Ember nodded, glancing down at her right arm, which was in a cast. Josephine had gone above and beyond to ensure her recovery would go without a single hitch.

"When do you plan on asking her?" her mother enquired.

"As soon as I'm back on my feet again."

When her mother left, Ember was alone in her room and she just daydreamed about the proposal.

She wanted it to be perfect. Not for her sake, but for Josephine. Maybe they'd go to a great restaurant, have a candlelight dinner under the stars. Ember was going to buy a beautiful ring...

"Do you want to get married?"

Ember's mind ground to a halt. Josephine had come for one of her routine checkups. She hadn't been expecting the question. She'd made all of those plans in her head, thinking Josephine wanted everything to be special and picturesque.

"I'm so sorry." Josephine looked away sharply. "God, that was terr?—"

"Yes!" Ember said quickly before Josephine could take back her words. "I'd

absolutely love to marry you!”

Josephine smiled the brightest smile she'd ever seen. There was a bit of hunger underneath her gaze, but her eyes briefly went to Ember's cast.

“I can't wait for you to get better,” she said.

“Yeah.” Ember grinned. “We do have a lot to catch up on.”

It took weeks before Josephine agreed to have sex with her again. She'd wanted to wait longer but Ember watched her resolve crumble over time. She was back at home, in her apartment. Josephine had come over to spend the night. Ember had planned for this. After her bath, she came out of the bathroom naked and wet.

She felt Josephine's eyes latch on to her as she deliberately walked past her where she was sitting on the couch. She walked into the kitchen. She busied herself at the sink while she waited.

Ember didn't have to wait long until she felt Josephine's arm wrapping around her waist.

“How's your arm?”

Ember turned around and pulled Josephine close. “You know my arm is okay.”

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Their lips met. First it was gentle, and they savored it. Then, it grew more and more intense. Ember's hands made their way under Josephine's clothes and she moaned. Ember smiled to herself. She had missed those little moans.

"Let me do all the work, okay?" Josephine requested as she lowered Ember to the couch.

Ember smiled up lazily at her. "Sure." She reclined back as Josephine sank to her knees on the floor and dipped her face between Ember's legs.

Her tongue felt as exquisite as it ever had, and it wasn't long before Ember found her orgasm flooding through her like a warm hug.

Josephine stripped off and straddled Ember and Ember used the fingers of her good hand to give Josephine the pleasure she was craving. Josephine tipped her head back in ecstasy as she came hard for Ember's fingers, and Ember smiled to herself.

Josephine came back down to earth and looked into her eyes. "I love you," she said, warmly.

"I love you, too," Ember responded.

"Let's never be apart again," Josephine said. "I want to be with you forever."

"Me too, my darling. Me too."

EPILOGUE

Ember took a last glance at Swift Hog and the other cars she was working on and smiled. They had taken a lovely house just out of town with some big outbuildings she could use as a garage and lovely views to the forest. She smiled as she walked up to her front door, knowing what was coming next.

She opened the door.

“Mommy!” came a high-pitched squeal.

A tiny form thudded into her, nearly taking her off her feet.

“Hey, Natalie!” She picked up the little girl with one arm, balancing her daughter on her waist.

“I missed you! You said you would come pick me up! Only Mom showed up,” the girl said with a pout.

“Yeah, there was a car-fixing emergency, sorry I couldn’t come pick you up. I’ll be there next time.”

Her beautiful daughter’s expression changed instantly to a big smile. She was a lively preschooler. Dramatic and so expressive.

“Promise?”

“If there are no emergencies with cars, I promise I’ll be there.”

Ember had left her job as a firefighter. She couldn’t say it was forever, but for now and certainly while Natalie was small, she didn’t want to be risking her life all the time. She was working as a specialist mechanic, her own little business, and she loved every second of it.

A delicious aroma wafted from the kitchen. Ember followed her nose, she found Josephine in the kitchen, fretting over the stove.

Natalie had returned to coloring in a coloring book at a little table.

Josephine was wearing well-tailored pants and a lovely, fitted blouse. Her beautiful caramel hair was loose around her shoulders. Ember felt butterflies still when she saw her. She was filthy and sweaty from work, but Josephine never seemed to mind.

“Hey,” Ember leaned against the doorway.

Josephine looked up and smiled, wiping the sweat off her brows. “Welcome home, honey.”

She pulled Josephine tightly to her and kissed her deeply. Ember pulled back and stared at her wife in the eyes. Her lovely dark green eyes flecked with amber. She looked more beautiful than ever.

Four years. It had been four wonderful years since they got married. That time had gone by in a blink. She was happier than she had every been.

“Is dinner ready yet?” Natalie asked, pulling at her pretty red hair.

Josephine laughed. “Almost, sweetheart.”

There was a knock at the door.

“Oh, that will be Becky or my dad. They are joining us for dinner, I didn’t think you would mind?”

“No, of course.” Ember wandered towards the door and Natalie toddled after her, her eyes lit up in excitement.

“Is it Granny? And Grandpa?”

“Maybe...” Ember said, smiling at her beautiful daughter. “Shall we open the door and see. Natalie was bubbling with excitement as she helped Ember open the door.

Both Becky and Benjamin were there smiling widely.

Becky held a bottle of wine and Benjamin held a bottle of whiskey. It was a good job because neither Ember or Josephine really drank alcohol these days. Since Natalie’s birth, they both just wanted to stay sober for her, to enjoy their time with her, to make sure they were always able to drive if there was an emergency. So if Becky and Benjamin wanted to drink- which inevitably they did, they had to bring their own.

Becky passed the wine to Ember and scooped up little Natalie in her arms kissing her face as she wriggled and giggled. Natalie looked a lot like Ember and Becky.

At first, when Ember and Josephine had discussed the possibility of having children, Ember hadn’t been so sure about being pregnant herself.

Josephine was older and because of her age, the chances of her getting pregnant were unlikely.

So they had decided on Ember getting pregnant and carrying their child. Ember was super fit and healthy and despite her initial reservations, when she luckily became pregnant on their first attempt at the clinic, she felt such an overwhelmingly powerful connection immediately to the tiny baby growing inside of her.

She had felt awkward physically as her belly grew- it was a strange feeling for someone who had spent her life working out. She stayed as active as she could until the baby was born and her body handled everything well.

Ember had labored in a birthing pool in their home with Josephine and Becky both with her. Josephine's love had carried her through the difficult hours of the night and when the sun rose and Natalie was born and Ember took her from the water and held her in her arms she had never known love like it. There were tears in her eyes as the tiny baby nuzzled at her breast. Josephine held her from behind, kissing her neck, "You did it, baby. You are so incredible. This is our beautiful daughter." She leaned forward and kissed Natalie's tiny head which was covered in white vernix.

Ember could see Becky crying with happiness. She reached over the edge of the pool and took Ember's hand, squeezing it.

"This reminds me of when you were born. My amazing daughter and my amazing granddaughter and my amazing daughter in law. I am the luckiest woman in the world."

Being Natalie's mom had been the greatest privilege of Ember's life. It had meant reassessing her work priorities and starting a little garage of her own, but that suited her so well being able to work from home and choose her own hours.

As good of a firefighter as Ember had been, she knew her self destructive tendencies

were not good. Whether she would go back into that one day, she didn't know right now. What she did know was that she was happy every day now and that was a huge thing.

Yes. Ember was happier than ever, and she would do everything she could to live for this. For them. Her family. Her loves.

Josephine was happy, too. She had settled into her role running the hospital. It played to all of her strengths. She was efficient, organized, a strong leader. She did an occasional surgery, but she didn't miss the constant life or death stresses of being a full time surgeon.

She loved being Natalie's Mom, an honor she never thought she would have. She had contemplated having children earlier in her life, but between her career and her ex's, she had known she wouldn't have been able to spend the time with them that she had wanted.

But now, she had negotiated her hours at the hospital so that she worked less hours and she could work some of her days from home and that suited them all well.

She could never have imagined the beautiful little life she had now with her own little family. Loving Ember had been a love she had never imagined possible. Filled with a passion she had never known and a tenderness that she knew Ember kept reserved only for her and Natalie.

Natalie was the most beautiful little girl with big dark eyes just like Ember's. The three of them spent all the time they could together. Becky visited often and Josephine valued their friendship greatly. Women in positions of power had to stick together, Josephine always thought that and having Becky Thompson the Fire Chief on her side was a powerful friend to have. She was an incredible grandmother to Natalie, too.

Benjamin had bought a home in Phoenix Ridge, too. It wasn't his only home, but he certainly spent more time than Josephine expected there with all of them. Her connection with her father had only grown through having him spend time with her new family.

They were all sitting round the dining table in the yard as Josephine walked through carrying out the big pasta dish she had been preparing. They were all laughing and chatting away and Natalie sat on Ember's lap, her own smile lighting up the world.

Ember's big dark eyes met Josephine's and she smiled that lovely lazy sultry smile that Josephine had fallen in love with.

She felt filled with warmth and love. This was her family. This was her happy ever after.

"I love you," she mouthed to Ember and Ember mouthed it back. Beautiful Ember. Beautiful Natalie. Her very own beautiful little world.

"Right everyone. Dinner is ready!" she smiled and began serving.

THE END