



# Passions Ignite

**Author:** *Emily Hayes*

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

**Description:** She hates her... also, she can't resist her... and aside from that, will they even make it out of here alive?

Wildfires threaten Phoenix Ridge and Lieutenant Zoey Knight -a seasoned firefighter- is at the heart of the fight against the fires.

When she is forced to work with Chief Helicopter Pilot Lux Valentine to fight the fires, they clash immediately.

They hate each other instantly... but also... well, they can't resist each other.

Lux and Zoey's explosive chemistry ignites during a high-stakes rescue mission, where they become trapped together.

Getting trapped with her enemy who she is totally crushing on isn't ideal at the best of times, but when Zoey finds their safety hanging in the balance will they even make it out of there alive? And if they do, what will happen between them both when they are back in the real world?

**Total Pages (Source):** 77

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LUX

The soft morning light filtering through the blinds stirred Lux Valentine from her sleep. Her eyelids flickered open, slowly taking in the familiar sight in front of her: a powder-blue wall with abstract white designs streaking on it—her bedroom.

Lux stretched and blinked furiously again. The sheets felt warm against her bare skin, and she could feel them tease against her nipples.

A soft sigh caused her to turn. It was Phoebe, twisting and turning but still sound asleep. Lux turned her head slightly, taking in the peaceful sight of Phoebe—the gentle rise and fall of her breasts, the soft curve of her lips.

Phoebe always craved fiery, sensual lovemaking, and Lux wasn't a stranger to fire. She was chief pilot at the Phoenix Ridge Fire Department.

With a sigh, Lux slipped out of bed, the cool hardwood floor satisfying under her bare feet. The room was a jumble of discarded clothes and half-empty wine glasses.

Her eyes caught sight of the digital clock on the wall: 10:23 am. Being a helicopter pilot meant she had less free time on her hands. Phoenix Ridge was a forest fire hazard in summer, so firefighting from above was essential. Something none of her previous girlfriends ever understood.

Lux shrugged as she walked over to the wardrobe. What she shared with Phoebe was

a fling, but it didn't mean they couldn't have a great time during it.

Her mind drifted aimlessly as she thought about her relationships in the last year. They've all been similar. No matter how much she tried to make it into a serious relationship, it never worked. They never saw how important working as a firefighter was to her. Lux felt like they never really saw her—the real her; they just liked the idea of her.

She had long decided to ignore relationships completely. What mattered to her was her job at the fire station, nothing more.

Lux slipped into her uniform.

As she pulled on her boots, the loneliness she kept tucked away floated to the surface. In the quiet moments, she wondered when—if—she'd ever find love. She managed to shrug off the thought and focus on getting dressed.

A sleepy voice called out from the bed, "Lux?"

Phoebe blinked, her eyes still heavy with sleep.

"Hey," Lux replied, a small smile tugging at the corner of her lips. "Someone looks like they had a great time."

"It's always a great time with you," Phoebe said. "I never want it to end."

Lux paused, then continued getting dressed. She walked over to the mirror in the corner and fixed her tie. She could still feel Phoebe's eyes following her intently.

"Leaving already?"

“Got to be at the station, Phoebe,” Lux said. “You know how it is.”

“Yeah, yeah. You show up, we make love, then you disappear.”

“Make love?” Lux snorted. “We fuck, Phoebe. I don’t make love.” She turned around. Phoebe propped herself on one elbow, pushing her hair out of her face.

“Forgive me, Lux.” Phoebe rolled her eyes. “I forget every time.”

“We’ve talked about this a million times before.” Lux turned back to the mirror. “I can’t deal with a relationship right now.”

“And why’s that?”

Lux sighed. She had gone over this so many times with Phoebe. She just didn’t have feelings like that for her. Yet, every single time, Phoebe always got clingy afterward.

“Phoebe, darling,” Lux said, “I can’t commit to anything serious right now. Maybe sometime in the future, but right now, I can’t.”

“Can’t make it official, you mean?” Phoebe asked.

Lux paused, her hand freezing mid-air. “Official?” she echoed, her smile fading. “Did you hear anything I just said?”

Phoebe nodded, her gaze unwavering. “You know, like...a real couple.”

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Lux let out a laugh. “Come on, Phoebe. You know how I am. I’m not the relationship type. The only fires I don’t fight are the ones that come with relationships.”

“Maybe it’s because there are no fires to fight.”

Lux chuckled. “That’s a nice one. See, you get it.”

“I don’t. I mean, why not?” Phoebe pressed. “What’s so wrong with wanting something more?”

Lux sighed, running a hand through her hair. “It’s not you, Phoebe. It’s me. I-I can’t do relationships. I’ve tried, but they never work out. They either distract me from my job or suffer because of it. Either way, it never works.”

“Why not?” Phoebe said, her voice now tinged with anger. “Is it because you’re afraid of getting hurt? Or is it because you don’t care about anyone but yourself?”

Lux winced, the accusation hitting a nerve. “That’s not fair, Phoebe. You know I care about you.”

“Do you?” Phoebe retorted. “Or do you just care about what I can give you?”

The room fell silent. Lux turned back to the mirror and tugged her tie one last time. Talking about this with Phoebe wasn’t worth it. She felt a pang in her chest.

“I’ve always felt sorry for you, Lux,” Phoebe said. “You hide behind your humor and carefree attitude, but deep down, you’re scared. Scared of letting anyone in, scared of

getting hurt.”

Lux’s jaw tightened, her fists clenching at her sides. “You don’t know anything about me.”

“I know enough,” Phoebe said. “I know you’ll end up alone if you keep pushing everyone away. I know you’ll never find happiness if you don’t learn to open up and let someone in.”

“You’re only saying that to hurt me.” Lux chuckled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “That’s not fair, Phoebe.”

“No, you’re not being fair.”

“You knew how things were with me before now. Why make it an issue now?”

“Because I’m not built for all this, Lux.” Phoebe walked out from the bed, her breasts bare. “I know I agreed not to get attached and all that. It’s just supposed to be sex and nothing more. But you’re you, Lux. How could I not fall in?—”

“Just don’t,” Lux interrupted. “Trust me, you can’t love me.”

“And if I do already?”

“You won’t be the first to say it,” Lux said. “But trust me, you’ll get over it.”

“Is it that evil to let yourself love someone? Are you so certain you want to live the rest of your life alone?”

“I’ve got Mira, honey,” Lux said, watching Phoebe’s face squirm.

“Mira? Are you?—?”

“Mira is my favorite helicopter at the station,” Lux clarified. “You don’t even know that, and yet you think you love me?”

“You love your job more than you love me.”

“Finally, you’re starting to see it.”

“You’re not getting any younger, Lux. You need to find someone to spend your forever with.”

“Thanks, Mom. I never knew being thirty-four meant my life should end.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Of course, you didn’t,” Lux retorted. “Shut the door when you go. You know where to leave the key.”

She turned and walked out of the room, not slowing down until she reached her white truck in the driveway. Her smile wore off the second the door thudded shut behind her.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:48 pm*

Was Phoebe right? Would I die alone?

Phoebe's words echoed in her head as she started the truck's engine. Phoebe didn't understand it. No one ever did.

As much as she wanted to find love, she knew she'd never see it. Not while she's still tucked this deep in her job. She'd talk to her father about it, but then again, he wouldn't know. He had devoted most of his life to his job after Mom had died all those years ago.

Perhaps there's nothing wrong with me after all. It's just the deal with the job. You either give it your all or it takes yours.

Sam would understand, but he was working in the city. Besides, she wouldn't want to call him over anything as petty as a spat with someone she was not even in love with.

Love. Lux chuckled again.

"Oh, well." She eased her truck out of the driveway and headed for the station.

The sight from outside the window soon drowned the thoughts from Lux's mind. She drove just fast enough to get past the sights of houses lining either side of the road.

She smiled at the ragged forests sprawling in the distance. The rugged hills were always a beautiful sight, except, of course, when the fires began.

They scorched much of the greenery, but the town always won the fight against the



fires every season. Even these very green expanses she drove past had thick smoke drifting from them about this time last year. Now, it's lush again.

Lux wondered if that was why the town was called Phoenix Ridge. It always rose from the ashes. A thin smile crossed her face. Hopefully, her love life would one day rise from the ashes too.

Soon, even the distant forests faded from her mind as she drove into the fire station parking lot, a sprawling complex of red brick and steel that hummed with activity.

Lux took a deep breath. The smell of burnt coffee and engine oil hung in the air.

Inside, the atmosphere was charged with a nervous energy. Everyone knew what season it was, and as much as they anticipated it, no one could say they loved it.

She parked her truck and looked around. The crew, a mix of seasoned veterans and eager rookies, was preparing for the day's drills.

"Another day, Lux," she said as she descended from the truck.

"Morning, Chief," a voice called out.

Lux turned to see Jay, one of her most experienced pilots, grinning at her from across the room. Her tangy-orange hair sat messy on her head.

"Jay," she replied, returning her smile. "How's the morning treating you?"

"Can't complain." She took a swig from her coffee mug.

"I can't say the same for your hair," Lux replied. "Get a hat or something."

“It’s that bad?”

“Like a hornet’s nest.”

“Just another day in paradise.” Jay patted her hair and fell in step with her.

Lux chuckled. “If you consider dodging wildfires paradise, you’re right.”

“It’ll be fire season soon,” Jay said. “Chief Thompson is already giving everyone hell down here.”

“You think Becky Thompson is hell? Wait until the fires start.”

“Trust me, I’m not eager for that,” Jay said.

As Lux made her way toward her office. She caught her breath before going to the simulation room. She couldn’t afford to have unprepared pilots with fire season so close.

“Alex thinks there might not be any fires this year,” Jay said.

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Alex, Jay's wife, was a beautiful woman with brown eyes, and Lux remembered meeting her on a few occasions at some town events.

"She thinks? She must be psychic." Lux raised her eyebrows.

"She hopes," she said. "She'd rather have me home with her, you know."

"How sad," Lux said. "She has to put up with your bland jokes for the rest of her life."

They both laughed.

"You sure have been having a great time yourself," Jay said. "I can see that look in your eyes."

Lux chuckled. "You kidding? Love's not on my agenda, Jay."

"And fires are?"

"You know it," Lux said. "Fire is where my real passion lies. Big, wild, aggressive, beautiful fire. That is my true love."

A flash of movement caught her eye.

A tall and athletic woman who Lux hadn't seen before stepped off a black truck, her dark hair pulled back in a tight ponytail. She wore the standard-issue navy blue fire department uniform, but an air of authority set her apart from the rest of the crew.

She looked around with the eyes of someone new to the environment, but her head was still held high with confidence.

Lux found herself staring, her breath catching in her throat. The woman's features were striking: high cheekbones, piercing brown eyes, and mouthful lips that hinted at a hidden sensuality. She moved with a grace that belied the strength in her muscles, her every step radiating confidence.

Lux's heart hammered in her chest, an unfamiliar flutter of attraction taking hold.

"She's new," Jay said, appearing at Lux's side. "A lieutenant, I think."

Lux snapped out of her daze. "Not bad. We could do with the addition."

"You think she's hot, don't you?"

"Don't be ridiculous," she retorted, regaining her composure. "The only thing hot around here is the fires we're going to fight."

Jay chuckled. "Oh, come on, Chief. It was written all over your face."

Lux rolled her eyes. "I was just...observing."

"Observing, huh?" Jay teased.

Lux shot her a warning glare. "Drop it, Jay."

Jay held up her hands in surrender. "Alright, alright. I'll leave you to your...observations." She sauntered off, leaving Lux to grapple with the unexpected surge of attraction.

Lux glanced in the newcomer's direction again. But as she turned, the woman suddenly stopped and looked directly at her. Their eyes met, and Lux felt a jolt of electricity shoot through her. The woman's gaze was intense and unwavering, and Lux could not look away.

Time seemed to slow down as they held each other's gazes. Lux's cheeks flushed, and warmth spread through her body.

The woman's lips curved into a polite smile. Then, just as quickly as it had begun, the moment was over. She nodded and continued, leaving Lux standing there, her heart pounding.

2

ZOEY

Zoey Knight glanced at her phone. A text message notification flashed on the screen. Dad.

Settled in already?

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Zoe sighed. Her father was “settled” somewhere on a Montana ranch, vacationing with her mom. She was in a new town, unsure if she would ever settle in.

Her thumbs hovered over the keypad, thinking of how best to reply.

She heaved and looked around.

The room was sparsely furnished. A desk was pushed against the far wall, a chair tucked neatly under it. A stack of unopened boxes leaned against the wall beside a file cabinet.

The fluorescent lights above hummed quietly, casting a stark white light over the space. The walls were painted a dull beige, and a single window offered a view of the parking lot.

Her thoughts were riveted to the woman she had seen when she arrived at the station. Their eyes danced together in unison for what felt like an eternity. How long did she stand there, staring?

Not now, Zoey, she warned herself.

It was way too early to be attracted to anyone. She wasn't even sure she was attracted just yet. It didn't work that way, right? She hadn't come down to Phoenix Ridge only to find solace in the arms of the next woman who smiled at her.

Lisa, her older sister, would tease her for always having fickle emotions and craving a life forever with anyone who smiled at her. She liked to argue that she wasn't a

hopeless romantic, but then she knew, as did Lisa, that she was.

At least, she used to be. Romance was not necessary anymore.

She ran her fingers over the smooth desk surface then glanced at the empty shelves on the wall. The office felt sterile, impersonal. A place that didn't yet feel like home.

Her phone buzzed to life. The caller ID was one she didn't expect. Jamie. She smiled. Jamie was her younger brother and favorite sibling.

"Hello, Jamie." She pressed the phone against her ear.

"Hey, Z. How's my little big sister doing?"

"Holding up, I guess," she said. "Dad just texted."

"You must be the only middle child in the country who gets this much attention."

Zoey laughed, even though she'd argue that they only cared this much because they feared she'd fall apart if left alone. At thirty-one, one would think their family would cut her some slack.

"I guess so," she said. "How's the army treating you?"

"Not bad," Jamie replied. "Snuck off just to check up on you."

"That's sweet."

"I'll be heading back out now. You're fine, right?"

Zoey rolled her eyes. She hated being asked that. It's been three months, and she still

gets asked this. “I’m fine.”

“You know it wasn’t your fault, right?”

Zoey paused. “If you believe that, you don’t have to say it.”

Jamie chuckled. “Typical Zoey. You always have to be a?—”

“Say ‘wise ass,’ and I’ll whip yours from over here.”

“I was gonna say ‘loving older sister,’ but you took the words right out of my mouth.” Jamie chuckled. “Take care, Z.”

“You, too, Jamie.”

The line clicked. She smiled, but it only survived the next few seconds.

There was a knock on the door. Zoey turned as the door creaked open and Fire Chief Becky Thompson stepped inside, holding a thick folder.



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“How’s the office treating you?” Chief Thompson asked, her voice no-nonsense but not unkind. She was an average-height woman with a head of sandy-colored hair streaked with gray and lines around her eyes, and she was renowned for running a tight ship.

“It’s fine,” Zoey said, glancing around. “Still getting used to it.”

“You’ll settle in soon enough,” Thompson said, setting the folder on her desk. “These are the files you asked for. Reports from the last few years. Thought you might want to go over them.”

Zoey nodded, eyeing the folder. “Thanks.”

“Take your time,” Chief Thompson said, straightening up. “No need to rush. Just ensure you’re ready for the drills tomorrow and the command ops meeting later. Don’t forget to take a peek at the simulation.”

“Command ops?” She raised a brow.

“It’s our fancy word here for the tactics room. That’s where we decide on strategies and the like. You’d like it there.”

“So, it’s straight to work then.”

Becky smiled. “I know what you’re capable of, Lieutenant. Can’t wait to see you in action around here.”

Zoey nodded. “Can’t wait either.”

Becky lingered for a moment, then gave a curt nod and left the room, closing the door behind her. Zoey stared at the door momentarily, then turned back to her desk.

She opened the folder, flipping through the details of Phoenix Ridge and its history of wildfires. The paper felt thin under her fingers, the text dense with numbers and details. She tried to focus, but her mind wandered back to Forest Vale, her previous station.

Chief Thompson said she knew what Zoey was capable of. She wondered if she knew that she made a poor call once and lost a child in the process. Did she also know how much it had hurt her? So much that she opted for a transfer away from Forest Vale to help her deal with it?

Even now, she wasn’t even certain she had dealt with it. How does one deal with the fact that the error they made led to the death of a child?

Zoey’s body shuddered. She walked over to her seat and sank into it.

“Get yourself together,” Zoey said to herself. She sighed again.

The door opened again, this time without a knock. A young woman walked in. She was very beautiful with thick dark hair in a long, messy plait and a kind smile.

“Lieutenant,” she said, then took a step back. “I’m sorry, I should’ve—”

“Knocked? Yes, you should have.” Zoey said. “Pilot?”

“Firefighter. The name’s Leilani Silva. Chief Thompson says I’m part of your team.”

“You’d have to remember to knock next time if you’re going to remain a part of my crew.”

“I will, Lieutenant.” Silva nodded.

“What’s the rest of the team like?” Zoey asked.

“Most of the team like you already.”

Zoey shrugged. “I didn’t come here to be liked.” She came here to make sure no one else died under her watch, but she didn’t say that. “There’s a lot to catch up with around here.” Zoey pointed to the files on her table.

Leilani walked over, standing beside the desk as she glanced at the open folder. “I can go over them with you if you’d like. I can tell you about many of them firsthand.”

“That would be helpful,” Zoey said. “You’ve been here a while?”

“Seven years,” Leilani said. “Started as a rookie, worked my way up.”

“Impressive,” Zoey said, watching her closely. “You must know this place inside out.”

“I do,” Leilani said, pointing toward the door. “I should get back to the rest of the team.”

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“I’ll meet up with you guys soon,” Zoey said.

Leilani left, closing the door softly behind her.

Zoey exhaled and looked around the room again.

She turned back to the folder, this time focusing on the reports, determined to make this place home—or at least safe. At the moment, it felt way too dull inside.

Needing fresh scenery, she headed outside into the hallway, her boots echoing on the concrete floor. The walls were lined with framed photographs of past crews, smiling faces, and scenes of controlled chaos.

A few people walked past her, everyone seeming to be in a hurry. They were trained to be this way. To be ready for any and every eventuality. She wondered how they dealt with it when something came along that they weren’t prepared for.

Zoey spotted Chief Thompson a few steps ahead, deep in conversation with someone dressed in a pilot’s uniform with short, messy hair. Becky Thompson’s own strawberry-blonde hair was neatly cut in a bob and her uniform was immaculate. Thompson turned just in time for her eyes to meet Zoey’s.

“Lieutenant Knight,” she called to her. “Join us.”

Zoey walked over to meet them.

The pilot with messy hair nodded toward her as she approached. “Welcome,

Lieutenant.”

Zoey matched her smile. Something about her looked familiar.

“Thanks, and you are?”

“Jay Summers,” she said as they shook hands.

“Pilot?” Zoey asked, glancing at her hair.

Jay seemed to catch her eye. She patted her hair as she replied, “Yeah.”

“Lux Valentine keeps these pilots in line.” Chief Thompson chuckled.

“Lux Valentine?” Zoey asked.

“She’s the chief pilot around here,” Jay said. “We both saw you step off your truck this morning.”

The memory raced through Zoey’s mind. She recalled those blue eyes that held hers, the curl of her lips that moved slightly as they held her gaze, and the beauty—and defiance—that lurked behind it.

Zoey frowned. She hated the thoughts that swarmed her head. She hated the fact that she wasn’t even settled in and some very attractive woman who looked like trouble—the chief pilot, to make it worse—was filling her head with thoughts of passion. Passion, Zoey certainly wasn’t sure she desired.

“I don’t think we’ve been introduced,” Zoey said.

“It won’t be long now. Which reminds me, I should go meet her in simulations.” She

noded toward Chief Thompson. “Chief?”

“Alright, Jay.”

Jay walked off, and Chief Thompson turned to Zoey. “Come, it’s about time you meet your team.”

Inside, firefighters milled about, some checking equipment, others conversing.

“Lieutenant Zoey Knight, I want you to meet some of the team,” Chief Thompson said, waving her toward the open room.

A tall woman with a no-nonsense expression was the first to approach. Her uniform was crisp, and her hair was pulled back into a tight bun. “This is Captain Ramirez,” the chief said. “She handles most of the ground operations. She’ll work with you.”

“Nice to meet you,” Zoey said, extending her hand.

Ramirez shook it firmly, her gaze sharp as she looked Zoey over. “Welcome to Phoenix Ridge.”

Zoey nodded, not quite meeting her eyes. The room felt too warm, the air heavy. She forced a smile, her mind drifting back to Forest Vale, to the faces of her old team, the way they had looked at her after the fire where they had lost the girl. She swallowed hard, pushing the memory down.

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“And this is Captain Hallie Hunter,” the chief continued, introducing her to a serious-looking woman with a tired smile.

“Good to have you here,” Hallie said, her handshake quick but firm.

“Thanks,” Zoey said, quieter now. She could feel the weight of the room pressing down on her, the unspoken expectations. It was the same as Forest Vale, only her previous comrades didn’t hold any silent judgment.

A familiar face walked over to meet them. It was the nice firefighter, Leilani Silva. “Hello, Lieutenant Knight.”

“Leilani, we meet again.”

They shook hands.

“I see you’ve met Silva here,” Chief Thompson said.

“Yeah, I already did.”

Leilani nodded and walked toward the hoses. The chief led Zoey through more introductions, each blending into the next until they reached the large bay where the trucks were kept. Zoey’s eyes scanned the area, taking in the equipment, the orderly rows of hoses, and the gleaming trucks. It was all so familiar yet foreign at the same time.

As they reached the end of the bay, Zoey spotted a group of pilots near the far wall.

One of them, the woman from earlier with dark hair and intense blue eyes, caught her attention. She stood apart, her arms crossed over her chest, whispering with another pilot.

“That’s Lux Valentine, chief pilot,” the chief said, following Zoey’s gaze.

Zoey almost said she recognized her from earlier, but she didn’t. The other pilot next to Lux listened attentively, nodding intermittently. It looked more like a rallying of directives than a conversation. Lux’s body was striking, and the curl of her lips switched from sensual to a snarl constantly. Her blue eyes were hard, and her dark hair was in a neat bun. Her body was beautiful, lithe, and athletic with beautiful curves.

Zoey nodded, tearing her eyes away from Lux. “Looks like she knows her stuff.”

“She does,” the chief said. “But she’s not the easiest to get along with. Stubborn, to put it mildly.”

Zoey shrugged. She could see that Lux Valentine was difficult. It was written all over her face, defiant stance, and tense shoulders. Lux looked like she seriously needed to loosen up. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Zoey glanced over her shoulder at Lux one last time. She quickly dismissed the thought. Relationships hadn’t worked out for her before. There was no reason to think this time would be any different. And as beautiful as she was, Lux Valentine looked exactly like trouble. Trouble with a capital T.

The chief studied her for a moment. “Get settled in. We’ll need you at command ops tomorrow.”

Zoey closed the door behind her, leaned against it, and closed her eyes. The room was



quiet, but her thoughts were loud. She took a deep breath and pushed away from the door, looking to clear her head.

She'd need a clear head to contribute tomorrow, which meant she'd need to stop thinking of Lux Valentine in any way other than professional.

3

LUX

Lux woke up the next day more tired than when she went to bed. She rolled over and patted the empty space next to her.

She recalled Phoebe's words but quickly discarded them. It was of no use. She'd rather have just a cup of coffee in bed with her. She certainly didn't need a partner.

She picked up her phone. Two missed calls from Dad. It's been a day since she last heard from him. Perhaps she could stop by at his place before heading back to the station for the meeting at command ops.

She returned the call, and he picked up after a few rings. "Hello, princess."

"Princess?" She chuckled. "I'm Chief Pilot Valentine now, Dad."

Her father's laugh floated into her ears from the other end of the line. "My bad then. How're you, little princess?" He stressed the word "little."

"I'm fine, Dad. Sorry I missed your calls. Are you okay?"

"Younger than I've ever been. I'm sure I'd be better if you came to see me."

“I could stop by before going to the station.”

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“That’ll be nice. Your brother is far off in the city. You don’t want me to grow old so soon, do you?”

“You’re still too young to think of aging, Dad,” Lux said. “I’ll see you soon.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

Half an hour later, she entered the coffee shop off Main Street. The place was small but cozy with mismatched wooden chairs and tables scattered throughout.

She once frequented this place when she had dated Sarah. They’d come here every weekend before she went to the station. It was beautiful, at least for the months it lasted. Soon, their time here grew shorter and shorter. At first, by an hour, then to mere minutes.

She wasn’t surprised when Sarah asked for a breakup. It all didn’t matter anymore. That was nearly half a decade ago. Now, all she craved was coffee.

She approached the counter, nodding at the barista. “The usual, Flora,” she said. “Black.”

“Sure you don’t want our special for today?”

“Only if you can convince me that the day is special.”

“Every day is special in Phoenix Ridge.” Flora chuckled. “Something special coming up.”

Lux leaned against the counter, waiting for her coffee. Her eyes wandered over the few patrons scattered around the shop. Most were familiar faces, townspeople who started their day with the same routine as her.

As she scanned, her gaze landed on someone familiar sitting at a corner table—the new lieutenant at the fire station. Dark ponytail. Big, expressive brown eyes. Full lips. A body made for sin. Very attractive. Zoey something, wasn't it?

Maybe Flora was right; today might be special after all.

Lux watched a little longer. Zoey sat alone, her hands wrapped around a mug of coffee, her eyes fixed on something outside the window. She looked out of place in the relaxed setting, her posture stiff, her eyes distant.

“A cappuccino for Phoenix Ridge's best pilot,” Flora said, smiling at Lux.

She placed it on the counter with a quiet clink, but Lux didn't move to grab it immediately. Instead, she watched Zoey, curious as she was interested in what lay behind those pretty eyes.

Lux finally picked up her cup and walked across the room slowly.

“Morning,” Lux said with her most seductive look, stopping at Zoey's table.

Zoey looked up, her eyes widening, then quickly becoming neutral. “Morning.” Her voice was calm but had a hint of something guarded in her tone. It was as though she had been lost in her head and hated the interruption. Lux didn't mind. She nodded toward the empty chair across from Zoey.

“Mind if I sit?”

Zoey hesitated for a moment then gestured to the chair. “Go ahead.”

Lux sat down, setting her coffee on the table. The chair creaked slightly under her weight. She studied Zoey, trying to get a read on her.

“How are you settling in?” Lux asked, even though she already knew the answer. It was an easy way to start the conversation.

“If I had a penny every time I’ve been asked that, I’d be a billionaire by now.”

“I doubt there are that many people in these parts,” Lux said with a little laugh. Zoey didn’t join in. Lux curled her lips in a warm smile nonetheless. “You seem to be finding your way around quite well.”

“I guess so.”

Lux motioned toward the coffee in Zoey’s hand. “Great coffee, right?”

Zoey nodded. “Best I’ve had since I’ve been here.”

“You’ve had coffee elsewhere?”

“No.”

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Lux chuckled. “You’re funny.”

“Yeah,” Zoey said, taking a sip of her coffee. “Why do I doubt that?”

Lux nodded, leaning back in her chair. “What do you think of Phoenix Ridge so far?”

Zoey glanced around the coffee shop then back at Lux. “It’s quiet. Different from Forest Vale.”

“Forest Vale, huh?” Lux said, pretending to be surprised. “I’ve heard it’s a bit rougher up there.”

“It has its moments.”

“Phoenix Ridge isn’t so bad once you get used to it. There’s a lot to like about this place. And it isn’t so quiet, I promise you that. Not once fire season starts. We will be very busy.”

Zoey looked at her, saying nothing. Her beautiful brown eyes were framed with long, thick lashes, and they were hard to read. There was stuff going on there; Lux could see that for sure. Lux could also see the curve of her full breasts under her shirt, and she liked it. She ran her eyes over them appreciatively, knowing Zoey would notice.

Zoey didn’t react. Women always reacted to Lux’s moves.

Hmmm. A tough one here. Maybe she isn’t gay?

Even the straight ones usually reacted to Lux. She had that effect on women.

Lux smiled slightly, taken aback by Zoey. “I’m guessing you haven’t had much time to explore yet.”

“Not really,” Zoey said, her expression unchanging.

Lux felt herself getting more annoyed at Zoey’s lack of reaction.

“So, how are you finding the station?” Lux asked, her tone casual.

“It’s fine,” Zoey said. “Still getting to know everyone.”

Lux took a sip of her cappuccino, studying Zoey over the rim of her cup. Zoey was very attractive, no doubt about it. Her features were sharp, and there was a quiet intensity about her that Lux found intriguing. Oh, and her resistance to Lux’s charms. That had to be a challenge.

She put her cup down. “I know it can be tough being the new person. Especially in a place like this where everyone knows each other.”

Zoey’s eyes met Lux’s, and for a moment, Lux thought she saw a crack in the armor. But it was gone as quickly as it came.

“I’ll be fine,” Zoey said, her tone polite but firm.

Lux nodded, leaning back in her chair again. She wasn’t going to push. “If you need anything, you can always ask. People here are friendly, even if they don’t seem like it initially.”

Zoey offered a small smile, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “I appreciate that.”

There was a brief silence between them. Lux could feel the awkwardness settling in, but she wasn't ready to walk away.

“What brought you to Phoenix Ridge?” Lux asked.

Zoey hesitated again, her fingers tightening slightly around her coffee mug. “Just needed a change of scenery, I guess.”

Lux nodded, sensing that was all she was going to get. “Well, I'm glad you ended up here. We can always use good people.”

Lux caught Zoey's wince at the mention of good people. Did Zoey feel like she wasn't good? A modest firefighter. That was unusual.

“Thanks,” Zoey said.

Lux went to finish her coffee, but the cup was empty already. She stood up, adjusting her jacket. “I should get going. Got a lot to do today.”

Zoey nodded, looking up at her. “Sure.”



“I’ll see you around.”

As Lux left the coffee shop, she glanced back at Zoey one last time. She had finally remembered her surname: Knight. Lieutenant Zoey Knight. She was still sitting there, her big brown eyes again focused on something outside the window. Lux felt a bit puzzled by her and her complete lack of reaction to Lux.

Zoey was attractive. Damn, she was hot. Merely staring at her brought up wild fantasies in Lux’s mind. But there was something about her that felt distant, almost unreachable. Lux found herself both frustrated and intrigued by it.

As she walked back toward her truck, she couldn’t shake the feeling that there was more to Zoey’s story than she was letting on. Maybe it was just the newness of the town, the strangeness of being in a place where everyone already knew each other.

Or maybe it was something else, something that Zoey wasn’t ready to talk about.

Whatever it was, Lux decided to let it go, at least for now. She had her own life to focus on, her own responsibilities. But as she reached the station and stepped inside, she couldn’t help but glance back down the street, wondering if she’d see Zoey Knight again before the day was done.

She held that thought as she started the truck heading straight for her father’s house.

The drive was short as she wound through quiet streets lined with trees and modest houses. She had grown up in this neighborhood, every turn familiar, every yard and front porch a part of her childhood.

Her father's house was a small, single-story home with white siding and a neatly kept lawn. The flower beds out front were filled with blooming roses, their vibrant colors standing out against the green.

She parked in the driveway and got out of the truck, taking a deep breath as she approached the front door. The screen door creaked as she pushed it open, the sound familiar and somewhat nostalgic.

It reminded her of the many nights she had stood on the other side of this door, crying for her mom to come back to her. Losing her mom when she was so young had been devastating, and Lux had carried the trauma of it her whole life.

She often thought of what might have been, what her mom might have been like. How they might have had a great relationship now that Lux was an adult. She wished so deeply that things had been different.

They—Lux and her father—soon became inseparable, so much that she wanted nothing more than to be a firefighter, just like him. She walked inside.

The house smelled like freshly baked bread and coffee, a combination that always made her feel at home. The living room was cozy, filled with well-worn furniture and awards sitting atop the shelves. Her father had been a pretty outstanding firefighter in his time.

“Dad,” Lux called out as she walked inside. “You in?”

“Kitchen!”

Lux made her way to the kitchen where her father was standing at the counter slicing a loaf of homemade bread. He was a tall man with graying hair and a friendly face; his eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled.

Lux smiled and took a deep breath as she watched him. He wore an apron over his plaid shirt and jeans, his hands moving with practiced ease.

“Hey, kiddo,” he said, looking up from his work.

“Hey, Dad.” Lux leaned against the counter. She watched him for a moment, then walked over and hugged him from behind.

“Want a slice?” He held up a piece of bread. “There’s nothing like warm, homemade bread.”

“Sure.” She took a slice and bit into it. The bread was warm and soft, the crust just the right amount of crunchy. “This is good.”

“Glad you like it,” he said, grinning. “I’m trying out a new recipe.”

“It’s a winner!”

He poured them both a cup of coffee, and they sat down at the small kitchen table. The table was old, the wood worn smooth from years of use. Lux’s father took a sip of his coffee, his eyes on her, full of the same warmth and affection that had always been there.

“So, how’s work?” he asked, his tone casual but interested.

“It’s good.” She set her cup down. “Busy as always.”

“Anything interesting happen?”

Lux thought about Zoey, about their brief conversation at the coffee shop. She wasn’t sure how much to share, not wanting to make too big a deal out of it.

“Not really,” Lux said, keeping her tone light. “Just the usual stuff.”

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Her father nodded, taking another sip. He didn't press for more, just smiled at her, content with whatever she was willing to share. That was one of the things Lux loved most about her dad—he never pushed, never demanded more than she was ready to give.

“How about you?” Lux asked. “How's everything here?”

“Oh, you know” He waved a hand absentmindedly. “Same old, same old. I went fishing yesterday and caught a couple nice ones.”

“Yeah? Did you cook them up?”

“Of course,” he said, grinning. “Saved you some for later.”

“Thanks, Dad.” She smiled back at him.

Lux's phone rang, cutting into their conversation. She recognized Chief Thompson's number.

“Work calling?” her father asked, his tone light.

“Yeah, Chief Thompson,” Lux said. She knew her father knew Becky well and respected her.

“Already?”

Lux shrugged. “You know how it is, Dad.”

“Well, don’t let me keep you if you need to get going.”

“Yeah,” Lux said. “But I’ll be back soon. Maybe this weekend?”

“I’d like that.” He stood up.

They walked to the front door together, and Lux hugged her father before stepping outside.

“Drive safe.”

“I will,” Lux said, giving him one last smile before heading to her truck.

4

ZOEY

Zoey walked into command ops, her mind still on the conversation she’d had with Lux Valentine earlier in the cafe.

She sat two seats to Lux’s right, and Zoey saw Lux’s beautiful blue eyes darting around. Every once in a while, their eyes would meet. Zoey did her best to keep her face expressionless.

What expression is there to hide anyway? Attraction? Lust?

What was the use in being attracted to someone like Lux Valentine, anyway? Women like Lux—everyone wanted them. She hadn’t missed how Lux had put the charm on her or how her gaze had travelled over her body and lingered.

A gaze meant to seduce. And it had.

But Zoey would never let on that it had. It was pointless being attracted to Lux. Zoey had seen her type a million times. Lux was exactly the type of woman you would do well to avoid.

Their eyes met again. Zoey looked away, her eyes darting in front of her.

Becky Thompson stood at the front of the room, her expression serious as she reviewed some notes while waiting for everyone to settle in.

Zoey nodded at a few of the firefighters she recognized from her first day. She momentarily missed her old team, their faces flashing through her mind unbidden. She shook off the memories, focusing on the present. This was her team now.

Becky cleared her throat, drawing everyone's attention. The conversations died down, and all eyes turned toward her.

"Alright, let's get started," the chief said, her voice calm but firm. She looked around the room, making sure everyone was focused. "Zoey, meet Marcia Foxwell, our chief engineer. Marcia, Lieutenant Zoey Knight."

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Zoey stretched her hand toward Marcia but she simply nodded curtly at her, ignoring her hand.

“She didn’t mean any insult,” Lux whispered to her. “That’s just Marcia.”

“Oh,” Zoey said.

“We’ve got a lot to cover today. First, I want to talk about the state of our station and where we stand in terms of resources.”

Becky clicked a button on the projector remote, bringing up a slide that showed a list of their current assets: trucks, equipment, helicopters, and personnel.

Zoey leaned forward slightly, taking it all in. The numbers weren’t great, but they were about what she had expected. The station was under-resourced, like most of the others she’d worked at.

“We’ve got a total of three helicopters,” Chief Thompson continued. “Two are fitted with the necessary gear for fighting fires. Water tanks, thermal imaging, the works. The third is still waiting on some repairs and upgrades, so it’s not fully operational yet.”

She turned to Marcia. “How soon can we get the third chopper operational?”

Marcia shrugged. “A week? Maybe two?”

“That’s not ideal,” Chief Thompson said.



“My team is working on getting that third chopper up to standard as soon as possible,” Marcia added.

“Get it done. In the meantime, we’ll have to make do with what we’ve got.”

She paused, giving everyone a moment to digest the information before moving on.

“In terms of personnel, we’re stretched thin, as usual. We’ve got a solid ground team, but we’re short on pilots. Lux, as chief pilot, is doing the best she can with what we have, but it’s going to be tough.”

She clicked to bring up the next slide, which showed a map of the region with several areas highlighted in red.

“These are the possible hotspots we’re most concerned about,” she said, pointing to the map. “There’s a big one to the north, near the edge of town, and another out to the west, near the forest. If the winds shift, we could be looking at a pretty serious situation.”

Zoey felt a knot of anxiety tighten in her stomach. She’d seen too many situations like this before—understaffed, under-resourced, and on the brink of disaster.

“We’ll need to prioritize our response,” Chief Thompson said. “We can’t be everywhere at once, so we need to be smart about where we deploy our resources.”

Lux leaned forward, her eyes on the map. “Chief, if I may,” she began, “I think we need to focus our efforts on tackling the fires at the hotspots. We’ve got two choppers that are fully equipped, and I can take one of them to the northern area while the other handles the west. If we concentrate our ground teams there as well, we can hit the fires hard and hopefully contain them before they spread.”

Zoey's eyes narrowed slightly as she listened to Lux's suggestion. It was a solid plan, tactically speaking, but there was something about it that didn't sit right with her.

"We can't ignore the evacuation and rescue operations," Zoey said. "There are still people in those areas, and if we focus all our efforts on the fires, we're leaving them at risk."

Lux turned to Zoey, a snarl forming. "We're firefighters, Lieutenant Knight. Our primary job is to put out the fires. If we don't, there won't be anyone left to rescue."

"I beg to differ, Chief Valentine. Our primary objective is to ensure the security of lives and property by putting out fires."

"And when the fires intensify?" Lux's face was defiant and her shoulders tense as hell. She looked ready to fight. Zoey kept calm.

"I understand," she said. "But I've seen what happens when a team is too focused on fighting the fires and not enough on getting people out. We can't afford to make that mistake."

"And how do you suggest we do that?" Lux asked. "Expend all our resources on rescue operations?"

"We don't need to expend. We prioritize evacuation and rescue operations," Zoey said. "We can assign a few teams to tackle the fires, but the majority of our efforts should be on getting people out of harm's way. Land attacks in these areas could be dangerous, especially if the winds shift."

Lux's expression didn't change, but Zoey could see the stubbornness in her eyes. "And what happens if the fires spread faster because we're too focused on evacuation? We could end up with an even bigger disaster on our hands."

Zoey felt her frustration growing, but she kept it in check. “I’m not saying we ignore the fires, Lux,” she said. “But we have to be smart about this. If we lose people because we didn’t get them out in time, that’s on us.”

Chief Thompson cleared her throat, interrupting their argument. “Alright, let’s take a step back here, you two,” she said, her tone calm but firm. “Both of you make valid points, but we need to find a balance. We can’t afford to ignore either the fires or the people in those areas.”

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She looked at Zoey then at Lux. “I want both of you to work together on this. Come up with a plan that addresses both concerns. We need to be coordinated in our response if we’re going to handle this.”

Zoey nodded. She wasn’t sure how well she and Lux would work together, but she knew they didn’t have much of a choice. Disagreeing with the fire chief immediately after disagreeing with the chief pilot would only make her seem unreasonable.

The tension between her and Lux was electric. Zoey did everything she could to dampen her thoughts, but her eyes kept flicking to Lux’s hands and strong, capable fingers. Fingers that might...

Lux glanced at Zoey. “Alright,” she said, her tone clipped. “Let’s figure this out.”

Becky continued with the rest of the meeting, outlining other details and updates, but Zoey’s mind was only half aware of her words.

When the meeting finally ended, the team slowly filed out of the room, but Zoey stayed behind. She watched as Lux gathered her things, her movements quick and her face giving nothing away.

As Lux headed toward the door, Zoey stopped her. “Lux, wait a second.”

Lux’s gaze didn’t waver, but Zoey could see the slight tension in her posture. “Can we do this later? I’ve got a crew waiting in simulations.”

Zoey nodded. “Okay.”

Lux turned and left the room, and Zoey didn't get the chance to go over the interaction.

The fire chief walked over to her, her expression thoughtful. "You handled that well."

"I'm sorry, Chief. I didn't mean to create a scene."

"A scene?" Chief Thompson waved her hand dismissively. "Nonsense. I love it when reasonable points are going around my strategy room. I also love it when someone is brave enough to challenge Lux Valentine."

"Reasonable points?"

"You and Lux would make a pretty great team."

Zoey snorted. "We would've had each other's throats if you weren't in the room."

"I did mention that she was stubborn."

Becky Thompson laughed heartily. She took a few steps toward the door, and Zoey fell in step with her.

"I'm glad I have you two on my team, you know?" Chief Thompson said. "You're two smart, capable women who know how to get things done."

"Thanks," Zoey said. "I just want to make sure we're doing the right thing."

"I know you do," Chief responded. "And that's why I have confidence in you. But remember, this isn't just about what you think is right. It's about what's best for the team and the people we're trying to protect. You and Lux are both strong leaders, and I need you to work together, not against each other."

Zoey nodded, understanding the weight of her words. She was still getting to know this team, and she knew she had to earn their trust. Pushing her agenda too hard too soon could backfire, and she didn't want to start on the wrong foot.

"I'll work with her," Zoey said, trying to sound more confident than she felt. "We'll come up with a plan that makes sense for everyone."

"Good." She gave a reassuring nod. "I know it's not easy, but I'm counting on you both."

Zoey watched as the chief left the room, feeling the pressure of responsibility on her shoulders. She took a deep breath, trying to shake off the lingering tension from the meeting. She couldn't afford to let this get to her—not now when there was so much at stake.

She headed out of the meeting room and down the hallway toward her office. Her mind raced, trying to piece together a plan that would address both the evacuation and firefighting efforts. She knew Lux's suggestion had merit, but she couldn't shake the feeling that they needed to prioritize getting people out first.

As she reached her office, she found herself pausing at the door, her hand hovering over the doorknob. The memories of her old team, of the child they'd lost, came flooding back. She pushed them down, focusing on the present. This wasn't Forest Vale, and she couldn't let the past dictate her decisions here.

At least, she hoped so.

Zoey stepped into her office, the familiar surroundings helping to ground her. She moved to the desk, sat down, and pulled a notepad toward her. She jotted down ideas, trying to find a balance between the different priorities they faced.

She spent the next hour working through different scenarios, trying to find a happy medium between fighting the fires and ensuring the safety of the people in the affected areas. Every time she thought she had a solution, a new problem would arise, and she'd have to start over.

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“Come on, Zoey. Think,” she said aloud.

She leaned back in her chair, rubbing her temples in frustration. She couldn't do this alone; she needed to talk to Lux and get her input to find a way to make this work. As much as she wanted to prove herself, she knew that this wasn't something she could tackle on her own.

Zoey let out a deep breath. They had to get on the same page, for the sake of the team and the people they had to protect.

But first, she needed to get Lux Valentine out of her head, as ironic as it all sounded.

5

LUX

Lux stood in front of the simulation room, the hum of machinery filling the space as her pilots gathered around.

The room was dimly lit, the large screens on the walls displaying various terrains and fire scenarios they would be navigating today. She ran a hand through her hair, her mind going back to Zoey and their spat in command ops.

She hated that it was still gnawing at the back of her mind, even as she tried to focus on the details in front of her.

Oh, and obviously how attractive she found Zoey. That wasn't distracting at all.



“Listen up,” Lux said. “Today, we’re running through a series of scenarios that could realistically happen, given the current fire season. I want everyone to treat this as the real thing—no cutting corners, no messing around.”

She walked over to the control panel, her fingers hovering over the buttons as she set up the first scenario. The screen flickered to life, showing a dense forest with thick smoke rising from the treetops. The simulated fire spread rapidly, with several hotspots scattered across the terrain.

“Let’s start with a basic containment strategy,” Lux said. “We’ve got a fire line here”—she pointed to a section of the screen—“and I want you to establish a perimeter around it. Remember to coordinate with the ground team and keep an eye out for any spot fires.”

The pilots moved to their stations, their fingers flying over the controls as they began the simulation. Lux watched them closely, noting their movements and decisions as they navigated the scenario. She could see the tension in their shoulders, the way they leaned forward, fully immersed in the task.

As they worked, Lux’s mind drifted back to Zoey. She couldn’t shake the image of her standing tall and defiant in the meeting, her eyes flashing with determination. Lux found herself annoyed by the way Zoey had challenged her.

She wasn’t used to being argued with when it came to tactics, and, to an extent, it excited her. She tried to push the thought away, focusing on the simulation.

“Jay, you’re coming in too hot,” Lux called out, her eyes on one of the screens. “Pull back and give yourself more room to maneuver.”

Jay nodded, adjusting her controls as she pulled the helicopter back. Lux nodded in approval, her attention shifting to another pilot. “Jeanine, you’re drifting off course.

Stay focused on the target area.”

Jeanine corrected her flight path, her movements precise as she guided the helicopter back into position. Lux continued to monitor the simulation, her eyes scanning the screens for any signs of trouble.

But even as she worked, she found herself replaying their argument over and over in her mind, analyzing every word, every look. Lux was used to conflict—she thrived on it, in a way—but this felt different. Zoey Knight was different.

It wasn’t just the argument that bothered her; it was the way Zoey had looked at her, the way her lips had curved into a slight smile when Lux had finally agreed to work with her. Lux found herself drawn to Zoey in a way that she hadn’t expected, and it was unsettling.

She shook her head, trying to clear her mind. “Focus,” she muttered under her breath, her eyes narrowed.

The first scenario ended. “Nice work, everyone. Let’s move on to the next one.”

She set up the next simulation, this one featuring a residential area on the edge of a forest. The fire was closing in on the homes, and the pilots needed to work quickly to protect the structures and evacuate any residents.

As the simulation began, Lux’s eyes flicked to the clock on the wall. Time was ticking by, and she knew they needed to get through several more scenarios before the day was done.

The pilots worked efficiently, coordinating their efforts as they tackled the fire. Lux could see their progress, the way they communicated and adapted to the changing situation.

Her mind wandered back to Zoey. As much as she didn't want to admit it, there was something about Zoey that intrigued her, something that made her want to know more. She found herself wondering what Zoey was doing right now, whether she was thinking about their argument too. Whether she was thinking about her.

“Chief V!” one of the pilots called out to Lux, pulling her out of her thoughts. “We’ve got a flare-up in sector three. Should we divert resources to handle it?”

Lux blinked, forcing herself to focus. “Yes, divert two units to sector three and make sure they coordinate with the ground team. We need to contain that fire before it spreads.”

The pilot nodded, relaying the instructions to the rest of the team. Lux watched as they executed the plan, their movements precise and efficient. She felt a sense of pride in the way they handled themselves under pressure.

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As the simulation came to an end, Lux let out a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. The room was silent for a moment, the pilots catching their breath as they took in the results of their efforts.

"Good job, everyone," Lux said. "You handled that well. We'll pick this up again tomorrow and run through one more scenario."

The pilots nodded, standing up from their stations and stretching. Lux watched them for a moment before turning back to the control panel.

The door to the simulation room flew open. Jolted, Lux turned to meet Zoey, her gaze fixed in Lux's direction. Her heart thumped unreasonably fast, no matter how much she willed it to slow down.

There was something in Zoey's eyes that Lux couldn't quite place—something intense, something that made it hard for her to breathe.

"Lieutenant," Lux said, "you just missed the simulation."

"Good," Zoey said, walking toward her. "I came here to see you, not the simulation."

Lux raised her eyebrows and then signaled her pilots to leave. They all exited the room. Lux walked out from behind the control panels, taking a few steps in Zoey's direction.

"Was there a simulation room like this in Forest Vale?" Lux asked.

“A simulation room? Yes. Was it like this? No.”

Lux chuckled. “So, no then?”

“No.”

“Actually, I guess I did come to see the simulation,” Zoey said, pointing to the control panel.

“What about it?”

“I figured I’d better understand your views if I saw your simulations firsthand.”

Lux nodded. It wasn’t an apology. It wasn’t an admission of guilt either. It was one strong woman speaking to another.

One strong, beautiful woman.

“My team just finished their rounds. It’s just us now.”

Lux could feel the tension between them, but she pushed it aside, focusing on the task at hand.

“Let’s start with a basic scenario.” Lux moved to the control panel. “We’ll go through a forest fire situation, similar to what we’ve been working on. I’ll walk you through the process.”

Zoey stood beside her, close enough that Lux could smell the subtle scent of lavender on her. It was distracting, but Lux didn’t let it show. She set up the simulation.

“First, we establish the perimeter,” Lux said, pointing to the screen. “The helicopters

will focus on containment while the ground team handles evacuation.”

Zoey frowned, her eyes narrowing slightly. “I think we should prioritize evacuation first. If we can get people out safely, then we can worry about containment.”

Lux’s jaw tightened. “If we don’t contain the fire, it’s going to spread faster than we can evacuate. We need to prevent it from getting out of control.”

Zoey shook her head. “Containment isn’t going to matter if we lose lives in the process. We should focus on getting people to safety.”

Lux’s frustration flared, but there was something else too. Something about the way Zoey’s lips moved when she spoke, the way her brown eyes, like warm hot chocolate, stayed locked on Lux’s, unwavering. Lux felt a strange pull, a distraction that made her want to look away, but she didn’t.

“The wildfire isn’t predictable,” Lux said. “We have to contain it first or we’re risking everyone.”

“And if we waste time on containment while people are trapped?” Zoey’s voice was calm, but Lux could see the intensity in her eyes. “That’s not a risk I’m willing to take.”

Lux’s eyes darted to Zoey’s lips then back to her eyes. Her mind raced, and she kept getting caught in the way Zoey was standing, the way her body seemed so close, almost brushing against hers.

“We’re talking about lives here,” Zoey continued. “I understand the need for containment, but I think our priority should be the people.”

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Lux wanted to argue, to push back, but she found herself hesitating. She couldn't get past the way Zoey's voice sounded, strong but soft, commanding but somehow gentle at the same time. It was throwing her off balance.

"Fine," Lux said after a moment. "We can run the simulation your way and see how it goes."

Zoey nodded, stepping closer to the control panel. Their arms brushed, just barely, and Lux felt a jolt she didn't expect. She turned away quickly, staring at the screen.

Zoey's fingers moved over the controls, setting up the simulation to prioritize evacuation. The scenario started, and they both watched as the screens displayed the spreading fire and the rescue operations in action. Lux could feel Zoey's presence beside her, the heat from her body almost making Lux's skin tingle.

"We're losing too much time on these evacuations. The fire's spreading faster than we can handle."

Zoey didn't look up, her attention trained on the screen. "We're saving lives. That's what matters. Be patient."

Lux clenched her fists, her frustration mixing with something else she couldn't quite name. "But we're not containing the fire. It's going to get out of control if we don't act fast."

"We'll get it under control," Zoey said. "Once we know people are safe."

Lux was about to argue more, but she caught sight of Zoey's profile, the curve of her jaw, and the way her hair fell just slightly into her eyes. She looked so composed, so sure of herself, and Lux found herself caught in the moment, forgetting what she was going to say.

Zoey glanced at her, and Lux quickly looked away, pretending to focus on the simulation. But her mind was still on Zoey, on the way she looked, the way she sounded, the way she made Lux feel something she didn't want to acknowledge.

The simulation ended, and Zoey turned to Lux, a small smile on her lips. "See? We managed to handle both. People are safe, and the fire's contained."

Lux nodded, trying to hide the turmoil inside her. In some ways, Zoey had a point, but she wasn't going to admit that. "I still think containment should be the priority."

Zoey's smile widened a fraction. "We'll find a way to balance both. We're on the same team, after all."

There was something in her eyes, something intense, something that made it hard for Lux to breathe.

"Maybe you're right," Lux conceded. "About finding a balance. It's just...this job is dangerous."

"That's why we have to be smart about it."

Lux nodded, her eyes flicking down to Zoey's lips and back up. She didn't mean to; it just happened, like some magnetic pull she couldn't resist. Zoey took another step forward, and suddenly, they were standing too close, their breaths mingling in the space between them.



“Zoey,” Lux began, but she didn’t know what she was going to say. The words died in her throat as Zoey’s eyes dropped to her lips, and Lux felt a rush of heat through her body.

Kiss her, Lux.

It was as though everything around them faded, leaving just the two of them in that small room, the air thick with the unspoken. Zoey moved closer, and Lux felt her heart skip, her breath catching as their faces were now inches apart.

“Chief Valentine,” Zoey whispered.

Lux’s mind was a whirl, part of her screaming to stop, the other part wanting nothing more than to close the distance. She could feel Zoey’s breath on her skin, warm and steady.

But she wanted more than just a kiss. Her thighs shuddered with a sudden burst of desire, wanting—no, needing—this stubborn lieutenant in front of her. She leaned in yet again, their lips almost touching, the anticipation coiling tight in her chest.

The blaring sound of the alarm shattered the moment.

Lux jerked back, her heart pounding, the spell broken. She glanced at the red alarm lights blinking in a corner then hurried toward the door.

“Shit, there’s a fire.”

Shit.

ZOEY

Zoey stepped out of the simulation room, the sound of the alarm still ringing in her ears. The fire station was a flurry of activity.

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Everyone was in motion, grabbing their equipment and heading to the trucks. Zoey moved quickly, pulling on her gear with practiced ease. Her hands were steady and her mind sharp, but the memory of Lux's closeness lingered in the back of her mind.

"Gear up!" she called out through the chaos. "We need to move now."

The ride to the fire was tense, the sirens blaring as they sped through the streets. Zoey was in the passenger seat while Marshall drove, her eyes scanning the horizon as they approached the smoke rising in the distance. She could feel the heat even before they arrived, and the air was thick with the scent of burning wood.

As they pulled up to the scene, Zoey jumped out of the truck, her boots hitting the ground with a thud. The fire was worse than she had expected. The flames towered above the trees, and the heat was intense. Her team was right behind her, ready for action.

"Everyone, listen up!" Zoey said, her voice loud over the roar of the flames. "We need to establish a perimeter and start containment. Keep an eye out for any civilians. We don't know if anyone's still out there."

Her team nodded, spreading out as they moved toward the fire. Zoey grabbed her radio, checking in with the other units. "This is Lieutenant Zoey Knight. Phoenix Ridge 13 on site and beginning containment efforts."

The response came through quickly, and the other teams coordinated their efforts. Zoey moved with her team, directing them as they laid down firebreaks and set up hoses. The flames were relentless and the heat oppressive, but Zoey was in her

element.

The fire was spreading fast, the wind pushing it through the forest at an alarming rate. Zoey could see the urgency in her team's eyes, but she kept them steady, guiding them through each step. They were making progress, but it was slow as the fire consumed everything in its path.

Zoey wiped the sweat from her brow, her eyes scanning the area for any signs of trouble. Her radio crackled to life, and Ramirez's voice came from the other end.

"We've got a spot fire near the northern perimeter. It's moving fast. Requesting backup."

Zoey turned to her team, assessing their progress. They were holding the line, but just barely. She had to make a call.

"Ramirez, take the trucks and head to the northern perimeter," Zoey said. "Contain that spot fire before it gets out of control."

Zoey stayed with her team, pushing them to keep the fire from spreading any farther. The smoke was thick, the heat almost unbearable, but Zoey didn't let up.

About half an hour later, they had managed to slow the spread, but the fire wasn't out yet. Zoey could feel exhaustion setting in, but she didn't stop.

The radio crackled again, and Zoey grabbed it. Ramirez's voice came over the line. "Lieutenant, we've got civilians trapped near the eastern edge. They're cut off by the fire."

Zoey's heart skipped and her mind raced as she considered the options. The fire was still spreading, and pulling resources away could mean losing containment.

“Where’s the nearest unit?” Zoey asked. Containment be damned. She’d rather that than lose anyone else.

“The nearest unit is ten minutes out, but the fire’s closing in fast. They won’t make it in time.”

“What about air support?”

“We should have them over the zone any time now. I only fear it’ll be too late.”

Zoey’s heart raced. If the helicopters weren’t up just yet, then there was no saving those civilians.

Not again.

“Hold the line here. Keep pushing containment,” Zoey breathed into the receiver.

“Lieutenant?”

“I said hold the line,” Zoey repeated. “I’m going in.”

She grabbed her gear and headed toward the eastern edge, her team moving to cover her as she went. The smoke was thicker here, the flames closer, but Zoey didn’t hesitate. She moved quickly, her eyes scanning the area for any signs of the trapped civilians. Leilani Silva joined in.

As they approached, she could see the group huddled together as the fire surrounded them. They were panic-stricken, their faces covered in soot, fear evident in their eyes. Zoey moved closer, momentarily stunned by a sudden wave of déjà vu.

“We’re with the fire department! You’re all going to be safe, okay?”

She could see the relief in their faces, but the fire was closing in fast. Zoey had to act quickly. She and Silva led them toward a break in the flames, the heat intense as they moved through the narrow path she had cleared.

The flames were close, too close, but Zoey kept them moving, urging them forward. Her heart pounded and adrenaline surged as they made their way out of the fire's grasp. When they finally broke free, the civilians stumbled into the open, gasping for air.

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Zoey took a moment to catch her breath, her eyes scanning the area to make sure everyone was safe. The fire was still raging behind them, but they had made it out.

“Get them to the medics,” Zoey ordered.

The medics moved in and took the civilians to safety. Zoey watched them go, her mind already shifting back to the fire and the work still to be done. She grabbed her radio to check in with her team.

“Containment is holding, but we’re not out of the woods yet,” Ramirez reported.

Zoey nodded, even though she couldn’t see her. “Keep at it. We need to keep this fire from spreading any farther.”

She turned back toward the flames and pushed everything else aside—the exhaustion, the fear of losing someone, and maybe, she hoped, the moment when she nearly kissed Lux Valentine.

It didn’t work.

The fire still roared, but she couldn’t let her team lose focus. She paused for a moment and looked around. There were still a few members of the squad staying back in areas where the fires were less likely to affect trapped campers and hikers.

Zoey frowned. No doubt, they subscribed to Lux’s strategy.

“Haley, I need that hose over here now!”

Haley, a young firefighter with a strong build, rushed over. Her face was streaked with soot and sweat dripped from her brow, but she moved with purpose, dragging the heavy hose behind her.

Zoey grabbed it from her and aimed the stream at a particularly stubborn section of the fire, steam rising as water hit the flames.

“Ramirez, how’s it looking on your end?” Zoey asked over radio.

“We’re losing control over here, Knight. We’re keeping it from jumping the road, but it’s pushing hard,” Ramirez said.

Zoey could hear the strain in her voice. She knew Ramirez and her crew were exhausted, but they couldn’t let up. “Keep at it. I’m sending Captain Hunter and her team to reinforce you. Hold the line.”

“Copy that.”

Zoey turned to Hallie Hunter, who had just arrived on scene with her team, and nodded.

“On it,” Captain Hunter said. She motioned to her crew, and they headed off toward Ramirez’s location.

Zoey watched them go, her mind racing as she considered their options. The fire was still spreading, and they were stretched thin. They needed more resources, but she knew the other teams were just as overwhelmed.

Her radio crackled again, and she heard Lux’s voice come through. “Knight, it’s Valentine. I’m coordinating air support. We are seeing the fire pushing uphill. It’s going to be harder to contain if it gets over the ridge.”



Zoey's heart skipped at the sound of Lux's voice, but she pushed the feeling aside. There was no time for that now. "I know. We're doing everything we can down here. What's the status of air support?"

"Still ten minutes out. I'm trying to get them to prioritize your location, but they've got other spots to cover too."

Zoey gritted her teeth, frustration bubbling inside her. Ten minutes could mean the difference between holding the line and losing control of the fire. But she couldn't afford to lose her cool. Not now. "Okay, we'll keep pushing. Just get them here as soon as you can."

"Will do."

Zoey lowered the radio, taking a moment to gather her thoughts. The fire was relentless, and they were running out of options. She looked around at her team, seeing the exhaustion on their faces and determination in their eyes. They were giving everything they had, but she knew they needed more.

Zoey's mind raced as she considered their next move. They needed to hold the fire back, but they also needed to prepare for the worst-case scenario. She spotted Lux's air team on the horizon, their helicopters slicing through the smoke as they approached.

"They're here," she said, more to herself than anyone else.

The helicopters swooped in low, dropping water on the flames, and the fire was momentarily subdued by the deluge. But Zoey knew it wouldn't last. The fire was too strong, too determined to be easily defeated.

She grabbed her radio again, calling out to her team. "Everyone, pull back to the

perimeter! We need to regroup and prepare for another push.”

Her team responded quickly, moving back to the established fire line. Zoey joined them, her mind still racing as she considered their options. The fire was still spreading, and they were running out of time.

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Lux's voice crackled over the radio again. "Zoey, I'm coming down to help coordinate. We need to get this under control."

Zoey's heart skipped again at the thought of Lux being here so close—both thrilling and terrifying. She wanted to see her, to feel the comfort of her presence, but she knew there was no time for that now. They had a job to do.

"How about I handle things from down here and you stay up there as my eyes?"

"Maybe you should take a look from up here. It's not looking good," Lux said. "Hold on, I think there might be some campers still trapped in the hot zone."

Zoey inhaled sharply and held her breath. "Where?"

"I said maybe. I'm not certain. I'll circle back as soon as I know."

"Copy that. We'll be ready."

"Hang tight, Lieutenant. I'm coming to get you."

Zoey recoiled. Despite the raging fire ahead, she felt chills run down her skin.

7

LUX

Lux thought the new lieutenant's voice sounded close to panicking over the radio..

For an experienced officer, that was a red flag. But right now, nothing mattered more than getting to her.

The helicopter rotors thundered above, drowning out the chaos below. Smoke and flames swallowed the forest, turning the sky into a murky blend of grays and oranges.

Lux's hands were steady on the controls, her vision razor-sharp. This wasn't just another fire; it was a beast raging with a ferocity that could devour everything in its path.

"Base, this is Valentine. We're approaching the drop zone." There was no room for anything else when she was in the air.

"Copy that, Lux. The ground team is ready for aerial support," the response crackled back.

Lux could see them now, tiny figures moving against the backdrop of burning trees. And there, directing the chaos like an orchestral conductor, was Zoey. Even from up here, Lux could spot her. The way she moved, the way she commanded her team—it was like she was born for this.

"Stay steady," Lux told her co-pilot, Jay, as they prepared for the drop.

She nodded, her face set in concentration. "We've got a lot of wind shear. It's going to be a rough one."

Lux gritted her teeth. "We've handled worse. Let's give them a clean drop."

The fire was unpredictable, and flames licked at the edges of the trees, driven by the wind that was the pilots' worst enemy right now. They made the first pass. The water released hit the fire's edge with a satisfying hiss. But it wasn't enough. The fire was

moving too fast, spreading up the hills and threatening to surround Zoey and her team.

Lux circled, keeping an eye on the ground. Zoey was a blur of motion, directing her team with sharp, precise gestures. She was in her element down there, and Lux couldn't help but feel a tightness in her chest as she watched her.

"Lux, we need to go up for another pass," Jay said.

"I see it. Hold on." She was already banking the helicopter for another approach.

"We're low on water," Jay reminded her.

Lux nodded, the tension in her shoulders growing. "We'll make it count."

They swung around again, the helicopter vibrating as they fought against the wind. Lux lined up the shot, and they dropped the last of their load right where it was needed. It bought Zoey's team some time, but it was clear that this fire wasn't going to be easily tamed.

"Valentine, this is Knight. Do you copy?" Zoey's voice sent a jolt through Lux, one that she wasn't sure she liked.

"Copy, Zoey. What's your status?" Lux replied.

"Same as the last time. We're holding, but barely. The fire is moving uphill faster than expected. We need you to survey from above and coordinate with the ground teams."

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Lux glanced at Jay. “You take the controls. I’ll guide you from the back.”

She nodded, taking over as Lux unbuckled and moved to the back of the helicopter. She grabbed the binoculars, scanning the ground below as they approached the fire line.

“Zoey, I’m going to do a flyover and give you a better assessment,” Lux said.

“Understood.”

They passed over the fire, and Lux saw the full extent of the damage. It was worse than she thought. The flames were climbing the hillside, and there was a thick line of smoke making it hard to see the edges of the fire.

“Looks like the fire is spreading faster on the west side,” Lux reported. “You need to shift your team to cover that area or it’s going to cut off your exit.”

“We’re on it,” Zoey said, and Lux could hear the determination in her voice.

Lux relayed the information to Jay, and they banked left to get a better view. The fire was relentless, but so was Zoey. Lux could see her moving, directing her team with precision. It was like she was part of the fire itself, bending it to her will.

Only, she couldn’t turn it off.

“They’re doing a swell job down there,” Jay said.

“This looks like a swell job to you?” Lux asked, staring at the flames climbing uphill.

“If they weren’t so damn good, we’d be choked for cover up here.”

Lux knew she was right, but Jay hadn’t grown up with a veteran firefighter for a father. It’s everything or nothing. Until the last flame is put out, don’t commend yourself.

As they swung around for another pass, Lux couldn’t shake the feeling that they weren’t doing enough. That she wasn’t doing enough. She should be down there on the ground, not up here in the sky, detached from the heat of danger.

It was either that or she was completely losing her head over the new lieutenant.

“Zoey, I’m coming down,” Lux said before she could second-guess herself.

The moment the rotors slowed down, she spotted Zoey standing a few feet away in full fire gear, her arms crossed over her chest, eyes narrowed at the approaching machine. Lux took a deep breath, steadying herself. The tension between them had only grown since the last time they’d spoken, and now she had to bring Zoey on board—literally and figuratively.

Jay stepped out and grabbed a hose. That left just enough space for Zoey.

Lux unbuckled her harness, pushed open the door, and hopped down onto the rough ground. Dust and ash swirled around her feet as she approached Zoey and gestured toward the helicopter. “Get in.”

Zoey shook her head. “I’m better off staying with my team. We’ve got ground to cover.”

Lux squared her shoulders. “You’re wasting time. You need to see this from above to make a real plan. We’ll be quicker, more efficient.”

Zoey’s jaw tightened. “My team is already stretched thin. If I leave now?—”

“You won’t be any good to them if you don’t have the full picture,” Lux interrupted, stepping closer. “You can direct them better from up there.”

Zoey glanced at the helicopter then back at Lux. The hesitation was clear. “I’m not sure this is a good idea.”

Lux softened her tone, trying to bridge the gap between them. “It’s not about whether it’s a good idea. It’s about what’s necessary. Get in. Let’s do this.”

For a moment, Zoey seemed ready to argue again, but then she nodded, her face set in determination. “Fine. But this better be worth it.”

Lux turned and climbed back into the cockpit, feeling Zoey’s presence close behind her. As they strapped in, Lux handed Zoey a headset. “You’ll need this.”

Zoey took it without a word, adjusting it over her ears. Lux powered up the helicopter, the rotors spinning faster, kicking up more dust and debris. They lifted off the ground, the noise of the engine drowning out everything else for a moment.

Once they were airborne, Zoey leaned closer to the window, staring at the burning landscape below. The fire had spread farther than Zoey had anticipated, swallowing acres of forest and inching closer to the small town that lay beyond the hills.

“You see?” Lux said, her voice crackling through the headset. “We need to get ahead of this.”



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Zoey scanned the ground. “I see it, but we can’t just focus on the fire. We have to look for anyone who might be trapped. There are isolated cabins out there.”

Lux tightened her grip on the controls. “If we don’t stop this thing from spreading, there won’t be anything left to save. We need to focus on containment.”

Zoey turned her head, her expression hard. “And what if people are out there waiting for help? We can’t just leave them to burn.”

“I’m not saying we ignore them,” Lux said. “But we can’t be reckless either. We need to fight this fire, and we need to do it smartly.”

Zoey crossed her arms, her gaze locked on the flames below. “We can do both. We need to do both.”

Lux’s frustration flared. “You’re not seeing the bigger picture, Zoey. The fire is unpredictable, and if we don’t contain it, we could lose control of the entire situation.”

“And if we focus only on the fire, we’re risking lives,” Zoey shot back. “There are families out there who might be trapped. We can’t just prioritize one over the other.”

Lux clenched her jaw, her eyes flicking between the horizon and Zoey. Both were beautiful, and neither was on her side. She frowned and stared at the controls instead.

“I didn’t say we’re prioritizing anything. I’m saying we need to act strategically.”

Zoey's hand gripped the edge of her seat. "Strategic doesn't mean ignoring the people who need us."

Lux inhaled sharply, the air in the cockpit thick with the heat of their argument and the intensity of the fire below. She felt the weight of Zoey's words, the concern and urgency they carried. But she also knew the reality of the situation they were in.

"Look," Lux said, we'll scan the area for survivors, but we can't lose sight of the bigger problem. The fire is moving fast. We have to be faster."

Zoey's eyes softened slightly, but her resolve remained. "I get that. But I need you to understand those people are counting on us. We can't fail them."

Lux exhaled, the tension between them crackling like the fire below. "I know that. But you need to trust me on this. I've done this before. We can do both, but we need to be smart about it."

Zoey's gaze met hers, and for a moment, the intensity of the fire below was matched by the heat in Zoey's eyes.

"Fine," Zoey said finally. "But if I see anyone down there, we're going in. No arguments."

Lux nodded, a part of her relieved that they had reached some kind of agreement, even if it was a fragile one. "No arguments."

8

ZOEY

The constant thrum of the helicopter's blades was a dull ache in Zoey's ears as she

leaned forward, eyes fixed on the expanding fire line below. The flames were relentless, tearing through dry brush and timber like a predator on the hunt.

The fire's orange glow was bright, even in the harsh light of midday, and casted long shadows across the rocky terrain they hovered over.

Zoey clenched her jaw, anxiety twisting her gut into knots. "It's moving too fast," she muttered, more to herself than to Lux, who sat beside her in the cockpit. "If the wind keeps up like this, we're going to lose the entire section."

Lux's gaze was locked on the same burning horizon. "We can't let it get into that rocky terrain. If it does, we won't have a chance of containing it. The ground teams can't navigate those rocks."

Zoey knew she was right. The rocky terrain ahead was treacherous—steep and filled with boulders the size of cars. If the fire spread into that area, it would be nearly impossible to control, and they would have to wait for it to burn itself out. That could take days, and the damage would be catastrophic.

"We don't have enough air support," Zoey said. "If we get too close, we'll be putting everyone in danger. We can't afford to lose the helicopter."

Lux turned to look at her, and Zoey felt a strange jolt in her chest at the intensity of Lux's gaze. "We need to go in closer," Lux said. "We need to hit it hard before it spreads any farther."

Zoey shook her head. "That's reckless. We need to hold it back long enough for the ground teams to get the campers and hunters out. They're still evacuating."

"We've got to think bigger than that, Zoey. If we don't stop this fire now, it's going to keep spreading, and there won't be anything left to save. The ground teams can

handle the evacuation. We need to focus on the fire.”

Zoey bristled at the suggestion. It wasn’t just about the fire; it was about the people on the ground. Their safety had to come first. “You’re not listening,” she said, her tone sharper than she intended. “If we go in too close and something goes wrong, we could crash. We can’t help anyone if we’re dead.”

Lux didn’t back down. “I know it’s risky, but we have to try. If we don’t stop it here, it’s going to spread into the next valley. And then we’re looking at a full-scale disaster.”

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Zoey exhaled, her mind racing as she weighed the options. She could feel the pressure mounting, the weight of responsibility crushing her. She glanced back at the fire. The flames licked higher into the sky, driven by the fierce wind that showed no sign of letting up.

She couldn't deny that Lux had a point. The fire was moving fast—faster than she'd ever seen—and if they didn't do something drastic, they would lose control of the situation completely.

But the idea of flying the helicopter closer to the fire made her stomach churn. It was a huge risk, and she wasn't sure she was ready to take it. "You're being reckless," she said, finally voicing the thought that had been circling in her mind since Lux had first suggested the plan.

Lux met her eyes, unflinching. "Maybe. But I'd rather be reckless and give us a fighting chance than sit back and watch the fire win."

There was a fire in Lux's eyes that matched the one below them—burning, intense, and impossible to ignore. Zoey felt her heart skip a beat and her breath catch in her throat. Despite everything, despite the dire circumstances, there was an undeniable pull between them, something electric that made her pulse race and skin tingle.

But she couldn't afford to let herself be distracted by those feelings now. She had to focus on the task at hand, on making the right decision for everyone involved.

She glanced back out the window, her eyes tracing the flames' path as they devoured everything. She could see the ground teams moving, tiny figures against the vast

landscape, working tirelessly to create firebreaks and evacuate anyone still in the area.

It was chaos, pure and simple, and the wind wasn't helping. It was pushing the fire in unpredictable directions, making it even harder to contain. Every second that passed, the fire gained more ground, and the stakes climbed higher.

Zoey felt the weight of the decision pressing down on her. She knew what Lux was asking of her, knew the risk they would be taking if they followed her plan. But she also knew that sometimes in situations like this, you had to take risks. Calculated risks, sure, but risks nonetheless.

She turned back to Lux. "Fine," she said. "We'll do it your way. But you better hope this works or it's going to be hell."

Lux's eyes lit up, and Zoey could see gratitude there, too, mingling with her resolve. They were in this together now, and whatever happened next, they would face it side by side.

Zoey took a deep breath, steeling herself for what was to come. They were about to dive headfirst into the heart of the fire, into the unknown, with nothing but their skills and guts to guide them. She only hoped it would be enough, even though her gut screamed at her. Zoey's hands gripped the edge of her seat, her knuckles turning white.

The helicopter vibrated under them, a constant reminder of how close they were to the danger below. She could feel the heat from the fire even at this altitude, a suffocating presence that clawed at her nerves. The sky was a haze of smoke, thick and oppressive, making it hard to see anything.

Lux leaned over her, reaching for a switch just above Zoey's head. The scent of her, a

mix of sweat and something distinctly Lux, filled Zoey's senses, overwhelming her.

The closeness was intoxicating, and for a moment, Zoey forgot about the fire, about the danger, about everything but Lux's presence. The proximity made her heart pound, and she was acutely aware of Lux's breath against her cheek.

They were close, too close. Zoey could feel Lux's warmth, the steady rise and fall of her chest as she reached for the switch. Her lips were just inches away, and for a heartbeat, Zoey wondered what it would be like to close that distance. To give in to the pull she felt every time Lux was near.

But then the helicopter jolted, a reminder of where they were and what they were doing. Zoey snapped back to reality, her face heating up as she realized how easily she'd been distracted. Lux's hand brushed against her arm as she adjusted the switch, sending a jolt of electricity through Zoey's body.

Lux didn't seem to notice the effect she had. She was focused, her eyes sharp and alert, taking in every detail of their surroundings. "We're losing altitude. We need to climb," Lux said.

But before she could make the adjustment, the helicopter shuddered violently. The engine sputtered, and Zoey's heart leaped into her throat.

"Something's wrong," Lux said.

Zoey's breath quickened as she fought to keep the panic at bay. She could feel the tension radiating off Lux and see the concentration etched into every line of her face.

For a moment, the world narrowed to just the two of them, the roar of the helicopter fading into the background. Zoey's pulse raced as her hands moved with practiced ease over the controls.

“Keep it steady,” Lux instructed, leaving no room for argument.

Zoey gripped the controls, her palms slick with sweat as she tried to keep the helicopter level while Lux worked on something behind her. The helicopter jerked again, and Zoey’s stomach lurched, fear clawing at her insides.

“I need you to hold it steady for just a few more seconds,” Lux said.

Zoey could barely breathe, her attention split between keeping the helicopter in the air and the unbearable closeness of Lux. Her heart pounded and her skin tingled with the awareness of Lux’s presence. Every time Lux moved, every brush of her arm or leg against Zoey’s, a shiver rippled through her.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Lux straightened, her eyes meeting Zoey’s. “It should hold for now,” she said. “But we need to get back to the main strategy.”

Zoey’s relief was short-lived as Lux’s words registered. The argument they’d had earlier flared up in her mind again, and the tension between them thickened. “You’re still pushing for that?”

“We have to,” Lux said, her tone leaving no room for debate. “If we don’t get ahead of this fire now, we won’t have a chance later. We can’t afford to wait.”

Zoey shook her head, anger bubbling up inside her. “And what about the people on the ground? If we crash, they have to fight the fire without us while trying to save us and any civilians. Our priority should be landing as quickly as we can to help bring people to safety.”



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“They’re handling the evacuations,” Lux countered. “But if this fire spreads any farther, there won’t be anything left for them to come back to. We need to think bigger, Zoey. This is about more than just the immediate danger. And I can fly this helicopter into anything. She’ll hold, I know it.”

Zoey’s hands tightened on the controls, her jaw clenched as she struggled to keep her emotions in check. Lux’s determination, her unwavering focus on the fire, was maddening. “You’re not thinking about the risks,” Zoey said. “If we push too hard too fast, we could lose everything.”

“And if we don’t, we’ll lose even more,” Lux shot back. “This isn’t just about saving a few lives today. It’s about preventing a disaster that could affect hundreds, maybe thousands, in the long run.”

Zoey’s frustration boiled over, her emotions a chaotic mess inside her. She understood where Lux was coming from; she really did. But the thought of making the wrong call and leaving anyone behind, of not doing everything they could to save as many people as possible, was unbearable. Again.

Lux’s eyes softened, just a fraction, as she saw the conflict on Zoey’s face. “I know you care about them, Zoey. I do too. But sometimes we have to make the hard calls. We have to look at the bigger picture.”

Zoey looked away, her gaze fixed on the flames below. The fire was a living thing, hungry and relentless, and it was spreading faster than they could keep up with. She knew Lux was right and knew they needed to act fast if they were going to have any hope of stopping it.

But that didn't make the decision any easier.

Lux reached out, her hand brushing against Zoey's arm, sending a shiver through her. "Trust me on this," Lux said. "We can do this. Together."

Zoey turned to meet her gaze. The conviction in Lux's eyes made Zoey's heart ache. Despite everything, despite the fear and the tension, she wanted to trust Lux. Wanted to believe that they could pull this off.

"Fine," Zoey said. "But if this goes wrong..."

"It won't," Lux said.

9

LUX

Lux's fingers drummed against the console as the helicopter hovered over the blazing forest. The flames were fierce, their orange and red hues licking at the sky.

The heat was stifling, even inside the cockpit, and she felt sweat trickling down her back and adrenaline coursing through her veins.

Zoey sat beside her, her eyes fixed on the chaos below and her brow furrowed with concern. Lux couldn't help but glance at her, the tension between them palpable. Zoey's decision to prioritize the ground team's evacuation had been a point of contention.

Now, as she watched the flames grow stronger, Lux couldn't shake the feeling that they were losing control.

“They’re almost clear,” Zoey said.

Lux nodded, but the tension in her chest didn’t ease. She was too aware of how quickly the situation could turn. The fire was unpredictable, and every second they spent in the air felt like a gamble.

The radio crackled to life, and a voice filled the cockpit. “Ground team is clear. All personnel evacuated.”

Zoey let out a breath she hadn’t realized she had been holding, and Lux felt a small measure of relief. But it was short-lived. The flames were spreading faster now, fanned by the wind.

“We need to move in,” Lux said. “We can’t let this get any worse.”

Zoey nodded, her eyes finally meeting Lux’s. There was something in her gaze—concern, maybe, or regret. Lux couldn’t tell. All she knew was that they needed to act fast.

“Let’s do it,” Zoey said.

Lux adjusted the controls, guiding the helicopter closer to the fire. The heat was like a physical force pressing down on them, making it hard to breathe. The flames roared, and sweat beaded on Lux’s forehead.

Zoey was focused, her hands steady on the controls as they maneuvered the helicopter into position. Lux could feel the tension between them, the unspoken words that hung in the air. She knew Zoey was worried—about the fire, about the people, about the risks they were taking. But there was something else there too. Something Lux couldn’t quite put her finger on.

The helicopter shuddered, and Lux glanced at the console, her stomach twisting as she saw the warning lights blinking. The heat was affecting the electrical systems, and they were losing control.

“Lux,” Zoey said.

“I see it.” Her hands moved quickly over the controls as she tried to steady the craft. But the helicopter was unresponsive and jerking violently as more systems failed.

“We’re going down,” Lux said.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:48 pm*

Zoey's eyes widened, but she didn't panic. Instead, her mind worked to find a solution. Lux admired that about her, the way she could stay steady even in the worst situations. But it didn't change the fact that they were in serious trouble.

Lux pulled back on the controls, trying to guide the helicopter away from the worst of the flames. They were losing altitude fast, and the ground rushed up to meet them.

"Hold on," Lux said.

"We're losing control!"

Zoey's panic seemed to come all at once. One second, she was calm; the next, she was screaming at the top of her lungs. Lux struggled in vain to guide the helicopter back into the air.

The treetops loomed closer now, and Lux knew they didn't have much time. She steered the helicopter toward a dense canopy of trees, hoping the branches would help cushion their descent.

The helicopter slammed into the trees, and the sound of metal crunching and glass shattering filled the air. The impact had thrown Lux forward, her head cracking against the console. Pain exploded behind her eyes, and for a moment, everything went black.

When she came to, the world was a chaotic blur of smoke and flames. The helicopter was tilted at an awkward angle, the nose buried in the ground, the tail sticking up like a broken limb. Lux's head throbbed, and she could taste blood pooling in her mouth.

“Zoey,” Lux croaked.

She turned her head, panic gripping her as she searched for Zoey. The cockpit was a mess, debris and broken equipment scattered everywhere.

She squinted through the haze, her heart pounding as she struggled to orient herself. The world around her was a mess of tangled wreckage and flames. The helicopter had gone down hard, and she knew the chances of survival were slim.

Her fingers, slick with sweat, unfastened the seat belt. The cockpit was barely recognizable, crushed and twisted like a discarded toy. Instruments dangled uselessly from broken panels, and the control stick was jammed against her seat. The windshield was shattered, and through the jagged hole, she could see the smoldering remains of the fuselage scattered across the forest floor. The engine, torn free from its mounts, lay a few yards away, still smoking.

Lux gasped shallowly. She could feel the heat of the fire creeping closer, the flames licking at the twisted metal. Her pulse quickened as she took stock of the situation. The wreckage was surrounded by trees, and the forest was dense and oppressive. The smell of burning fuel mixed with the earthy scents of pine and damp soil created a nauseating combination.

She tried to move, but her left leg was pinned under a piece of the dashboard. Pain shot through her as she tried to pull it free, and the metal cut into her skin. She bit back a scream, panic rising in her throat. The fire was spreading fast, and the heat intensified with each passing second. Her hands trembled as she reached for the radio, but it was dead. Smashed in the crash.

“Zoey,” she whispered, her voice barely audible over the crackling of the flames. “Where are you, please...?”

Suddenly, she heard movement outside the cockpit and she turned her head, straining to see through the smoke. She blinked, trying to clear her vision. It was Zoey. Her breath caught in her throat as she watched Zoey clamber back into the cockpit, her face covered in soot.

“Lux! Hold on!” Zoey shouted.

Lux felt a surge of relief mixed with a jolt of fear. Zoey was coming for her. She wasn’t alone. But the fire was growing, and she could feel the heat getting closer.

“I’m pinned,” Lux said, her voice trembling. “I can’t move my leg.”

Zoey reached for the metal trapping Lux’s leg. Her fingers were raw and bloody, but she didn’t hesitate. She pulled with all her strength, grunting with the effort.

“I’m going to get you out of here,” Zoey said.

Lux winced as the metal shifted, the pain in her leg sharp and unrelenting. She clutched the sides of the seat, and her knuckles turned white. The smell of burning fabric and oil filled her nostrils, making her cough.

“It hurts,” Lux said, her voice cracking. “Zoey, it hurts so much.”

“I know. Just hold on a little longer. I’ve almost got it.”

The dashboard creaked as Zoey applied more pressure, her muscles straining. Lux felt the weight lift slightly, enough for her to pull her leg free. She gasped in pain as she moved, the cut on her leg bleeding heavily.

“Okay, you’re free,” Zoey said, helping her up. “Can you walk?”

Lux nodded, though she wasn't sure if she could. Her leg throbbed with each movement, but she forced herself to stand. Zoey wrapped an arm around her waist, supporting her as they made their way out of the wreckage.

The air was thick with smoke, and Lux's lungs burned as she inhaled. She stumbled over a piece of the landing gear when her foot caught on the jagged metal.

"Easy," Zoey said, steadying her. "We're almost clear."

They moved as quickly as Lux's injured leg would allow, the flames snapping at their heels. She could feel her hands shaking and her breath coming in short, sharp bursts.



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“Zoey,” she said. “What if... What if it explodes?”

Zoey glanced back at the wreckage, the fire now consuming the cockpit. She tightened her grip on Lux, her face set in determination.

“We’ll be out of range,” Zoey said. “Just focus on moving forward. We’re going to make it.”

Lux nodded, though her fear didn’t subside. Every step felt like a battle, her injured leg protesting each movement. The forest seemed endless, and the trees closed in around them.

Finally, they broke through to a clearing far enough away from the burning wreck. Lux collapsed onto the ground, her body trembling from pain and exhaustion. Zoey knelt beside her.

“Are you okay?” Zoey asked, her hand resting on Lux’s shoulder as she tried to catch her breath.

Lux nodded, though she wasn’t sure if it was true. Her leg throbbed, and she could feel the blood soaking through her pants. But she was alive. They both were.

“I...I thought I was going to die,” Lux said. “I thought that was it.”

Zoey’s hand tightened on her shoulder. “But you didn’t. You’re safe now.”

Lux looked up at Zoey, her eyes stinging with tears. She could see the worry etched

on Zoey's face, the lines of stress and fear that hadn't been there before. She reached out, her hand trembling, and gripped Zoey's arm.

"Thank you. Thank you for coming back for me."

Zoey shook her head. "I wasn't going to leave you."

A tear escaped, slid down her cheek, and mixed with the soot and sweat. She was shaking, her body still in shock from the crash. Zoey pulled her closer and wrapped her arms around her. Lux clung to her, burying her face in Zoey's shoulder.

"I'm so scared," Lux whispered.

"I know. But you're not alone. I'm here. We're going to be okay."

Lux closed her eyes, focusing on the warmth of Zoey's embrace. The fear was still there, gnawing at her, but it was tempered by Zoey's presence. For the first time since the crash, she allowed herself to believe that they might make it out of this.

10

ZOEY

Zoey kept her arm around Lux's waist as they moved through the clearing. Lux limped, dragging her injured leg with each step. Zoey could see the strain on her face, the way her lips pressed into a tight line, and the faint tremble in her movements. Lux's usual confidence was gone, replaced by a vulnerability that surprised Zoey.

"Let's take a break." Zoey gently guided Lux to a fallen tree. "You need to rest."

Lux shook her head. "We need to keep moving. What if the fire spreads?"

“The wind’s blowing the other way.” Zoey crouched in front of her til they were eye to eye. “We have some time.”

Lux hesitated, her gaze shifting toward the distant plume of smoke from the crash site. Zoey could tell she was still fighting the urge to push on despite her obvious pain. But when Lux finally sat on the tree trunk, Zoey could see the relief in her eyes.

Zoey knelt and unlaced Lux’s boot, her fingers moving with care. The leather was stained with dirt and soot, the laces frayed from wear. She eased the boot off slowly, mindful of Lux’s sharp intake of breath. Underneath, Lux’s sock was soaked with blood, the fabric sticking to her skin.

“You should have said something sooner.” Zoey frowned as she inspected the injury. “This looks bad.”

“It’s just a scratch. I’ve had worse.”

Zoey wasn’t convinced. She peeled the sock back, revealing a deep gash running along the side of Lux’s foot that continued up to her leg. The skin was raw and inflamed, the edges of the cut jagged where the metal had bitten into her flesh. Zoey felt a surge of anger at the sight, though she wasn’t sure who it was directed at—herself for not noticing sooner or the universe for putting them in this situation.

“This isn’t just a scratch,” Zoey said, her tone firm. “We need to take care of this.”

Lux leaned back and closed her eyes. “We don’t have much in the way of medical supplies.”

“I’ll make do.”

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She tore a strip from the hem of her shirt, using it to bind the wound as best she could. The fabric was rough, but it was better than nothing. Lux winced as Zoey tied the makeshift bandage, but she didn't complain.

When Zoey finished, she sat next to Lux on the log. Zoey could see the exhaustion in her posture, the way her shoulders slumped and her breath came in shallow gasps.

"We can't go far like this," Zoey said. "You need to rest."

"We need to get to higher ground," Lux said, opening her eyes. "It's safer uphill."

Zoey glanced at the slope ahead of them. The ground was covered in a thick layer of underbrush. The trees were dense and their branches cast long shadows in the fading light. It was the logical choice—they'd have a better view of the area, and it would be harder for the fire to reach them. But Zoey could also see how difficult the climb would be, especially for Lux in her current state.

"You can't make it up there right now," Zoey said. "Not with that leg."

Lux's jaw tightened, and for a moment, Zoey thought she was going to argue, but Lux sighed..

"I hate this," Lux said. "I hate feeling so helpless."

"You're not helpless." Zoey reached out to squeeze her hand. "You're hurt, and we need to be smart about this."

Lux looked down at their joined hands, and she brushed her thumb over Zoey's knuckles. "I just...I don't want to be a burden."

"You're not. We're in this together. We'll figure it out. Let's just rest for a few minutes and think."

Lux nodded, though she still looked uncertain. Zoey could see the conflict in her eyes—the desire to push forward battling with the reality of her injuries. It was a struggle Zoey knew all too well, the instinct to keep moving even when every part of her body screamed to stop.

They fell into a comfortable silence with the only sounds rustling leaves and fire crackling. The stress of their situation weighed heavily on Zoey, but she pushed those thoughts aside.

"Lux," Zoey said after a while, "we need to talk about what we're going to do next."

Lux opened her eyes and met Zoey's gaze. "I know."

"I don't think you're in any shape to climb that hill. We're better off staying here and waiting for rescue."

"But what if no one comes?" Lux said, her voice tinged with fear. "What if we're stuck here?"

"We're not going to think like that," Zoey said. "We have to believe that help is on the way."

Lux looked away; her brow furrowed. "I don't want to stay here. It feels too exposed."

“I know,” Zoey said. “But we need to be realistic. We’re close to the crash site, which means any rescue team will start looking for us there. And we’ll be easier to find if we stay put.”

Lux was silent for a moment, her eyes distant as she considered Zoey’s words. Zoey could see the fear and uncertainty in her expression, the way her fingers twisted in the hem of her shirt.

“What if the fire spreads?” Lux asked.

“Then we’ll move. But right now, it’s our best option.”

Lux’s shoulders slumped as she exhaled. “I just hate sitting here doing nothing.”

Zoey reached out, placing a hand on her arm. “You’re not doing nothing. You’re recovering your strength. And that’s just as important.”

Lux looked at her, her eyes searching Zoey’s face. Zoey held her gaze, hoping to convey the strength and reassurance she didn’t entirely feel.

“Okay,” Lux agreed. “We’ll stay here.”

Zoey felt a small surge of relief, though she knew their situation was still precarious. The wreckage was a stark reminder of the danger they were in, the charred metal and twisted debris scattered across the ground like a graveyard of their hopes.

“Let’s make a plan.” Zoey stood and brushed off her hands. “We need to set up a safe area, away from the fire and make some sort of shelter.”

Lux nodded, following Zoey’s lead. Zoey could see the effort it took for her to move, the pain etched into her features with each step, but Lux never complained.

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They found a small, sheltered area on the edge of the clearing, far enough from the fire to feel safe. The ground was soft and covered in pine needles, and the trees provided a natural barrier from the wind. Zoey cleared away some of the debris, making a space for them to sit.

“This will do.” Zoey motioned for Lux to sit.

Lux lowered herself to the ground with a sigh and leaned against a tree trunk. “It’s not exactly the Ritz.”

Zoey managed a small smile. “It’s not, but it’s better than nothing.”

They sat in silence for a moment, the weight of the situation settling over them like a heavy blanket. Zoey could feel the exhaustion tugging at her, the adrenaline that had kept her going now fading away. But she forced herself to stay alert because she knew they couldn’t afford to let their guard down.

“We should gather some supplies.” Zoey glanced back toward the crash site. “Anything we can use to make this more comfortable.”

Lux nodded, though she didn’t move. “I’ll stay here.”

“I’ll be quick,” Zoey said, getting to her feet. “Just sit tight.”

Zoey made her way back to the wreckage, her eyes scanning the debris for anything useful. The sight of the destroyed chopper was a sobering reminder of how close they had come to death. The fuselage was crumpled, and the propellers had snapped like

twigs. The engine, now a twisted heap of metal, lay smoking in the distance.

Zoey found a few items—a blanket, first-aid kit, satellite phone, bottle of water—scattered among the wreckage. She gathered them and moved quickly as the heat from the wreckage subsided.

Zoey watched Lux closely as they settled into their makeshift camp. Despite the pain and exhaustion, Lux maintained a calm demeanor.

Lux's composure under pressure was something Zoey admired. It was reassuring in the midst of all the chaos, and it made Zoey feel stronger, like she could handle whatever came next because Lux was there beside her.

She handed Lux the bottle of water she'd found, and Lux took it with a small nod of thanks. Zoey sat next to her, close enough that their shoulders brushed.

She could feel the warmth of Lux's skin even through their clothing, and it sent a subtle thrill through her. The chemistry between them, which had been there since they met, seemed to hum more intensely now.

"Phoenix Ridge," Lux said after taking a sip of water. "Do you think anyone saw the chopper go down? They'd send a team, right?"

Zoey nodded. "They should have. The fire crews are always on alert for things like this. If they saw the smoke, they'd start moving."

Lux looked thoughtful. "Phoenix Ridge has the best fire department, they know the terrain and know how to get in and out of the forest safely."

"I've heard that," Zoey said.



“Phoenix Ridge is a tight-knit community,” Lux said, a hint of a smile touching her lips. “They take care of their own. And anyone who’s lost out here becomes one of theirs until they’re found.”

Zoey felt a warmth in her chest at the thought. “That’s good to know.”

Lux turned her gaze to Zoey, studying her face. “What about Forest Vale? What was that like?”

Zoey felt a tightness in her throat, an instinctual reaction to the question. She didn’t want to talk about her previous station. The memories were too raw, too complicated. She looked away, pretending to focus on a nearby tree. “It’s not important. What matters is that we’re here now.”

Lux’s eyes lingered on her for a moment longer, sensing the unspoken tension. But she didn’t press. “You’re right. We’re here, and we’ll get through this.”

Zoey was grateful for the change in topic. “We will,” she said and met Lux’s eyes again. “We’ll stay put, keep ourselves safe, and wait for rescue.”

“And if the fire gets too close, we move.”

Zoey felt her heart swell at Lux’s words. “Exactly. We’re in this together.”

They fell into a comfortable silence, the connection between them growing stronger with each shared glance, each reassuring word.

Zoey could feel it in the way Lux looked at her, the way their hands occasionally brushed against each other as they shifted positions.

She had just one thought now. Stay alive. Every other one shouldn’t matter—or so

she hoped.

LUX

Lux looked up at the sky, noting how the orange hue of the setting sun mixed with the darkening clouds above. They had spent the entire afternoon waiting for a rescue team that never came. Her hopes had slowly faded with each passing hour, and now, it was almost evening. The cold started to creep in.

“I keep thinking about the station,” Lux said after a while. “I wonder if they’re worried about us.”

“They probably are,” Zoey said. “People don’t just disappear without anyone noticing.”

“I hope they’re looking for us.”

The night had settled in around them, and the forest was alive with the sounds of crickets and distant rustling in the bushes.

Zoey shifted uncomfortably, her eyes flickering open in the dim light of the fire. Lux, who had been lying close to her, noticed the movement immediately.

“You okay?” Lux asked softly.

Zoey nodded, rubbing her arms as she tried to find a more comfortable position. “Just can’t get warm. It’s colder than I expected.”

Lux reached over, her hand resting lightly on Zoey’s arm. The contact sent a jolt

through her, something warm and electric that she hadn't expected. "We should share the blanket," she suggested, her voice steady despite the flutter in her chest.

Zoey hesitated, glancing at the blanket, which was barely big enough for one person. "It's okay. You should use it. You need the warmth more."

Lux shook her head. "We both do. Come on, we'll be warmer together."

Zoey finally relented, shifting closer as Lux draped it over both of them, their bodies pressing together under the thin cover. Lux's heart quickened, the closeness making her hyper-aware of every detail—the warmth of Zoey's skin against hers, the steady rise and fall of her breathing, the smokey scent of her hair, and the way their legs brushed together.

"You're shivering," Zoey said after a while, her voice low.

Lux hadn't realized she was until Zoey pointed it out. "Yeah, I guess I am."

Zoey shifted, pulling the blanket tighter around them. "I'm sorry about earlier. I know I can be a bit...intense."

Lux shook her head, even though Zoey couldn't see it in the darkness. "Don't apologize. You're just trying to do what you think is best."

Zoey sighed. "It's just this whole situation is so messed up. I hate feeling powerless."

Lux could relate to that. She was used to being in control and knowing what to do in a crisis. But here, stranded in the middle of nowhere with nothing but each other and the remnants of the helicopter, she felt just as lost.

"My dad is a firefighter too. He's the strongest person I know, and he seems to

always know what to do, no matter how bad things get” Lux said suddenly, the words spilling out before she could stop them.

Zoey was quiet for a moment before she reached out and brushed her fingers against Lux’s cheek. The touch was gentle, almost hesitant. “You’re strong too, Lux. You’re still here, still fighting.”

Lux’s breath hitched at the contact, her heart skipping a beat. Zoey’s words were warm and comforting, but it was the way she looked at her that made Lux’s chest tighten with something more. There was an intensity in Zoey’s brown eyes and a softness that Lux hadn’t expected.

“Thanks,” Lux said.

Zoey pulled back slightly, the moment between them lingering. She reached down to remove her jacket, the fabric rustling as she pulled it off and tossed it aside. The movement revealed a strip of bare skin at her waist, and Lux couldn’t help but stare, her eyes tracing her curves.

The sight made Lux’s mouth go dry and her pulse quicken. She felt a sudden, overwhelming urge to close the distance between them, to press her lips against Zoey’s skin and taste the warmth there. But she held back, unsure if she should, unsure if Zoey would welcome it.

Instead, Lux shifted closer, their bodies now fully aligned under the blanket. Zoey didn’t move away, and Lux took that as a good sign. The fire crackled softly beside them, the only sound in the otherwise silent night.

“Is this okay?” Lux asked.

Zoey nodded, her breath brushing against Lux’s ear. “Yeah. It’s okay.”

The both settled in, the fire blanket doing little to keep out the cold, but the shared body heat made up for it. Lux couldn't stop her thoughts from wandering back to Zoey's body, her eyes drawn to the smooth lines of Zoey's exposed skin. The attraction she felt was undeniable, a pull she didn't want to resist.

But she did. She knew now wasn't the time. They needed to focus on staying safe and surviving. Still, the desire lingered, a quiet hum beneath the surface.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 3:41 pm*

Zoey shifted again, and she wrapped around Lux's waist. The gesture was simple, almost casual, but it sent a thrill through Lux, a warmth that had nothing to do with the fire.

"Let's try to get some sleep," Zoey murmured, half asleep already.

Lux closed her eyes, even as she was acutely aware of every point of contact between them. "Goodnight, Zoey."

"Goodnight, Lux."

They lay there in the darkness as the fire cast shadows around them. Lux's mind raced with thoughts of what could be and what she wanted.

But she kept those thoughts to herself, letting the comfort of Zoey's presence lull her into a restless, but contented, sleep.

12

ZOEY

Zoey's stomach growled.

She opened her eyes, the pain in her muscles from yesterday's crash still sharp. The smell of dirt and burnt wood filled her nostrils as she glanced over to Lux, who was still asleep. Her lips were slightly parted, and her skin, even with splotches of dirt on it, was beautiful.

Zoey considered waking her but decided against it. She would let her sleep a little longer. They both needed rest. She pushed herself up slowly, trying not to make a sound. Her body protested every movement. She needed food, something to keep up her strength.

She scanned the area, but didn't find anything in the clearing.

She stepped away, the forest silent except for the occasional rustle of leaves. Zoey took a deep breath and tried to steady herself.

Her stomach growled again. There had to be something to eat nearby, maybe some wild berries.

She didn't get far.

Lux stirred, a soft groan escaping her lips as she woke. Zoey turned back, watching her sit up slowly, wincing as she moved her injured leg.

"Where are you going?" Lux asked, her voice rough from sleep.

Zoey hesitated. "Just looking for food. We need to eat."

Lux rubbed her eyes. "Don't go alone. We shouldn't separate."

Zoey considered arguing but didn't. She couldn't leave Lux behind, not after everything that had happened. "Okay. Let's go together."

Lux smiled weakly and stood. Zoey waited and watched as Lux struggled to stand and stretch her legs before stabilizing.

They walked into the dense forest. The ground was uneven, and Zoey could feel her



feet sinking into the soft earth with each step. The air was humid, making the walk even more exhausting.

As they walked, Zoey pulled out the phone they'd found earlier, hoping for a signal. The screen remained blank, mocking her. She tried again, holding it up, but it was useless. The forest was too dense, and they didn't have a clear line of sight of the sky.

"Any signal?" Lux asked, though she probably already knew the answer.

"No," Zoey said. "I'll keep trying, though."

They continued walking, the forest growing thicker around them. Zoey's stomach growled again, louder this time. Lux glanced at her.

"Hungry?"

Zoey nodded. "Starving. We need to find something soon."

Lux looked around, scanning the trees. "There has to be something edible out here. We just have to look."

The forest seemed endless, and the trees towered above them, blocking most of the sunlight. Zoey's eyes darted from tree to tree, searching for any sign of fruit. She spotted something up ahead, a small patch of light breaking through the dense canopy.

“Over there.” Zoey pointed.

They headed toward the light, pushing through the underbrush. The ground became softer, almost muddy, and Zoey realized they were nearing water. The light grew brighter, and soon they broke through the trees, emerging into a small clearing.

A stream flowed through the center of the clearing, and the water was clear and cool. Zoey’s eyes widened as she spotted a small cluster of berry bushes near the edge of the stream.

“Finally,” she said, heading toward the bushes.

Zoey picked the berries, filling her hands with as many as she could. Lux reached the bushes minutes after her, picking a few berries and eating them slowly. Zoey watched her, noticing how tired she looked. Her blue eyes were dull.

“Are you okay?” Zoey asked.

Lux looked up. “I’m fine. Just tired.”

They ate in silence for a while, and the only sounds were the gentle trickle of the stream and distant bird calls. A couple handfuls of berries later, Lux glanced at the stream. “I’m going to wash up.”

Zoey watched as Lux walked toward the stream. When Lux reached the water’s edge, she started to undress, peeling off her dirty clothes and tossing them aside. Zoey’s eyes followed the movements.

Zoey tore her eyes away, feeling a flush of heat rise in her cheeks. She shouldn't have been looking, shouldn't have been feeling this way. But it was hard to ignore the way her heart fluttered, the way her body reacted to the sight of Lux's bare skin.

She swallowed hard, trying to focus on anything else—the trees, the stream, the berries still clutched in her hand. But her gaze kept drifting back to Lux and to the way the water flowed over her body.

Lux had her back turned toward Zoey as she watched, feeling like she was intruding. Her heart pounded in her chest and her mind raced with thoughts she knew she shouldn't have. Lux turned slightly, and Zoey caught a glimpse of her face, her expression relaxed, almost peaceful.

Zoey's breath caught in her throat, and she quickly looked away, focusing on the berries in her hand. She forced herself to eat, trying to ignore her heart pounding and the heat spreading through her body.

But the sight of Lux's bare breasts glistening with water was burned into Zoey's mind. She tried to shake it off, but it was no use. The attraction was too overwhelming to ignore.

Zoey clenched her fists, trying to steady her breathing. But even as she told herself this, Zoey knew it was a losing battle.

She risked a glance back at Lux, and her resolve crumbled. The sight of Lux's body sent a jolt of desire through Zoey's veins. She bit her lip, trying in vain to keep her breathing steady.

"Why don't you join me?" Lux said.

Zoey hesitated. "Are you sure?"

“Come on.”

“We’d still need to set up a better place to sleep when we get back,” Zoey said without thinking.

Lux rolled her eyes. Zoey heaved. There was no getting out of this now. She wasn’t even sure she wanted to get out of it.

Zoey nodded and slowly stripped off her clothes, feeling Lux’s gaze on her the entire time. The air was cool against her skin, but her body felt warm, heat radiating from deep within her.

Lux reached out to take Zoey’s hand and lead her into the water. The stream was cold at first, the shock of it making Zoey shiver, but Lux’s hand was warm and firm in hers, grounding her.

The chill of the water sent goosebumps over her skin, but it did nothing to quell the heat building inside her.

Lux moved closer, and their bodies almost touched. Zoey could feel the warmth radiating off Lux and hear her soft breathing. Lux’s hand slid up Zoey’s arm, her touch gentle. Zoey’s breath caught, and she looked up to meet Lux’s gaze.

Without thinking, Zoey leaned in, her lips brushing against Lux’s. The kiss was soft at first, tentative.

But then Lux’s hand cupped Zoey’s face, and the kiss deepened, becoming more urgent, more demanding. Zoey wrapped her arms around Lux’s waist, pulling her closer, feeling the press of their bodies together.

Lux moaned softly against Zoey’s lips, and the sound sent a shiver down Zoey’s

spine. She could feel Lux's hands moving, sliding down her back, over her hips, exploring her body with a hunger that matched Zoey's own.

Zoey's fingers trailed over Lux's wet skin, feeling the way her muscles moved under her touch.

They kissed deeply, their breaths mingling. Zoey's hands slid up Lux's back, pulling her even closer, wanting to feel every inch of her.

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Lux's fingers found their way into Zoey's hair, tugging gently, tilting her head back to deepen the kiss. Zoey's knees went weak, and her heart pounded. They moved together, the water splashing around them, but neither of them noticed.

Lux's hands were everywhere—touching, caressing, exploring—and Zoey was lost in the sensation, in the feel of Lux's skin against hers. She couldn't think about anything except the way Lux's body fit against hers and the way their breaths came in short, ragged gasps.

Zoey's hand slid down Lux's back, feeling the curve of her spine and softness of her skin. Lux's breath hitched, her body arching into Zoey's touch, and Zoey felt a rush of satisfaction at the response she was drawing from her.

She kissed Lux again, harder this time, more demanding, and Lux responded with a fervor that took Zoey's breath away.

They broke apart for a moment, both gasping for air. Lux looked at Zoey, her eyes filled with desire, her lips swollen from their kisses.

“Zoey...” Lux whispered.

Zoey didn't answer with words. Instead, she closed the distance between their lips in another searing kiss. Lux's hands slid down her arms, pulling her closer. Their bodies pressed together, skin against skin, the water swirling around them.

The world around them faded away, leaving just the two of them wrapped up in each other. Zoey could feel Lux's heart pounding against her chest, matching the frantic

beat of her own.

She moved her hands over Lux's body, exploring, feeling, and committing every curve and dip to memory.

Lux gasped as Zoey's hands slid lower, her body responding to Zoey's.

Zoey felt her own right hand instinctively seeking between Lux's legs and as she felt the wetness she had been seeking- that different kind of wetness- she smiled to herself and pushed her fingers inside. She enjoyed Lux's gasp as she entered her and she felt Lux's own right hand pushing between Zoey's legs. She parted her legs further, putting her foot up on a rock to allow Lux easier access. She wanted this so badly... no, she needed this so badly. This, Lux's fingers pushing inside of her.

She heard her own deep guttural groan.

"Fuck, Lux. Yes.. like that." She felt Lux's fingers moving inside of her, seeking her G spot and beginning to thrust in and out. Her own fingers were doing the exact same inside of Lux.

Lux's moans, soft and breathless, sent shivers down Zoey's spine. Her blue eyes were glazed with lust.

Zoey could feel Lux's body responding to her touch, the way her muscles tensed and relaxed, the way her breath caught in her throat.

Zoey pressed her lips to Lux's neck, trailing kisses down her throat, tasting the salt and smoke of her skin, feeling the warmth of her body.

She felt the tension building between them until it felt like she might burst.

Lux's fingers moved in rhythm with her own.

"Oh god, oh yes.. fuck me..." Lux growled and Zoey obliged. She felt Lux's thumb tight against her clitoris.

And then, suddenly, everything turned beautifully white. Lux cried out, her body arching against Zoey's, and Zoey followed her, the world around them fading away as they were both consumed by the intensity of their release.

For a moment, everything was still. The only sounds were their ragged breathing, the water trickling around them, and the distant chirping of birds. Zoey felt the aftershocks of their pleasure still rippling through her and her body trembling from the intensity of it all.

She pulled back slightly, looking at Lux, who was still catching her breath. Lux's eyes met Zoey's, and there was a soft smile on her lips, a look of satisfaction and contentment that made Zoey's heart swell.

"That was..." Lux began but let the words trail off.

Terrible? Wrong? Stupid?

"Amazing," Lux finished.

"That it was," Zoey said.

They stayed like that for a few moments, their bodies still entwined, the water gently lapping at their legs.

She loved every bit of the sex she just had with Lux, but the questions just wouldn't leave her mind. What's wrong with you, Zoey?



How could they be having sex while trapped here? How could she be getting this attracted to someone under these circumstances?

But then Zoey noticed something out of the corner of her eye—a movement on the bank. She looked around and saw nothing, then she heard the rattle. She pulled back, her body tensing as she spotted the source of the movement.

“Lux, don’t move.”

13

LUX

The rattlesnake was coiled and had its head raised, poised to attack.

Lux kept her eyes locked on the snake. Her body was tense, but her mind was clear. Panic would only make things worse.

“Stay still,” Zoey whispered.

Lux kept her gaze on the snake. “It’s a timber rattlesnake. The rattle is a warning.”

Zoey swallowed hard, her eyes darting between Lux and the snake. “What do we do?”

“Just stay calm,” Lux said. “It’s probably just as scared as we are. We need to slowly back away.”

Lux took a slow, deep breath as she steadied herself. She could feel the cold water lapping at her legs, the dampness of the air clinging to her skin. Every sense was heightened, every sound amplified in the stillness. The snake’s tongue flicked out, tasting the air, but it didn’t move.

Lux stepped back carefully, and Zoey followed her lead. Every muscle in Lux’s body

was tense, but she kept her movements smooth and controlled. The snake watched them, its head swaying slightly, but it didn't strike.

Lux kept talking, her voice low and calm, hoping it would soothe both Zoey and the snake.

"They're most dangerous when they feel threatened," Lux said.

"Does it feel threatened?"

"How would I know?"

"Well, you're the snake expert."

"Shhh, don't upset it." Lux stopped backing away. "If we give it space, it should leave us alone."

"Should?"

"Back away slowly. I can't tell what it's thinking right now."

Zoey nodded. "I've never been this close to a snake before."

"Neither have I, not like this," Lux admitted.

The snake remained where it was, its gaze still fixed on them, but it made no move to follow. Lux kept her eyes on it, watching for any sign that it might strike, but it remained coiled, its body still.

Lux slowly straightened, still keeping her movements slow and deliberate. "Okay, we're almost out of its range," she said softly.

They took a few more steps back, and then the snake finally moved. It lowered its head, its body relaxing slightly as it slithered away.

Lux watched it go, her heart pounding in her chest. She didn't move until the snake was out of sight, disappearing into the underbrush. Only then did she let out the breath she'd been holding.

Zoey let out a shaky laugh, her hand coming up to cover her mouth. "I can't believe that just happened."

"Neither can I."

"How did you stay so calm?"

"That was calm?" Lux laughed. "I nearly peed my pants."

"You're not wearing any."

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They both laughed, and Lux chuckled the loudest. She glanced at Zoey's face and smiled.

"Can't believe a snake saw me naked," Lux said.

"Who knows, maybe that's why it didn't attack."

"Don't even get started, you're"—she glanced at Zoey's body again—"damn."

Zoey backed away and cleared her throat. "We should get dressed."

Didn't she want this? Lux nodded and walked over to pick her clothes. Zoey did the same. Lux couldn't take her eyes off Zoey's beautiful round ass as she bent over. There was a memory that would stay with her forever.

"We should head back to camp," Lux said, as soon as they were done dressing. "We need to get dry and make sure we're ready for the next leg of the journey."

Zoey nodded, but she didn't move. Her eyes were still locked on Lux's, her expression softening. "Lux...?"

"Yes?"

Zoey hesitated, her hand still resting on Lux's arm. She could see the conflict in Zoey's lovely brown eyes.

"Nothing. Let's go."

Lux nodded, though she couldn't shake the feeling that there was something Zoey had wanted to say. But she didn't press, knowing that they had already been through enough for one day. They turned and began to make their way back to camp.

The tension from the rattlesnake encounter still buzzed in her veins, but she forced herself to try to relax. Zoey's hand brushed against Lux's, and her heart skipped a beat.

She reminded herself she wasn't supposed to feel this way. It was supposed to be just sex, nothing more. She didn't do more. She wasn't looking for anything deeper and didn't want to risk hurting Zoey when she inevitably got bored of her.

"Lux," Zoey started, "what do you think you'll do after all this is over?"

Lux's stomach tightened. She knew the question was coming, even if it wasn't the dreaded "what are we" talk. She needed to keep things light, keep the walls up.

"I don't know. Maybe take a long shower and eat something that isn't wild berries. You?"

Zoey laughed, but it was a little forced. "I guess I haven't really thought about it. It feels like we've been out here forever."

"Yeah," Lux agreed, keeping her tone casual, though her thoughts were anything but. She liked Zoey, more than she should. But she wasn't the type to settle down. It was easier to keep things physical to avoid the emotional entanglements that came with letting someone in.

Zoey hesitated, then reached out, her fingers brushing Lux's arm. The touch was light, but it sent a jolt of electricity through Lux.

“You okay?” Zoey asked, her eyes searching Lux’s face.

Lux nodded, forcing a smile. “Yeah, just tired.”

Lux swallowed, her throat suddenly dry. She wanted to say something, but the words were stuck. Instead, she nodded again, her smile feeling tight.

Lux’s heart twisted. She knew she was on the edge of something she couldn’t control, something that terrified her more than the fire or the snake. But she couldn’t bring herself to pull away.

Not yet.

She reached out, tucking a loose strand of dark hair behind Zoey’s ear, her fingers lingering against Zoey’s cheek.

The space between them seemed to shrink, the air around them thick with unspoken feelings. Lux wanted to close the gap, to give in to the pull she felt toward Zoey. But the fear of what might happen after held her back.

Instead, she stepped away, breaking the moment. “We should get some more rest,” Lux said, even though her heart was racing.

Zoey nodded, the disappointment clear in her eyes, but she didn’t press. “Yeah, you’re right.”

As they settled down, Lux couldn’t help but wonder how much longer she could keep up this balancing act, caught between what she wanted and what she was afraid to have.

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As much as she loved being with Zoey, she didn't want to think of anything after this episode. Commitment just wasn't her thing.

Zoey smiled, and it was that soft, genuine smile that Lux had come to love seeing. "Well, I'm glad you were here. I would've probably freaked out."

Lux chuckled softly. "You're tougher than you give yourself credit for."

Zoey shook her head, a playful glint in her eyes. "Not when it comes to snakes."

They both laughed, the sound carrying through the trees. It felt good to laugh, to share this light moment after the intensity of the situation. It had brought them closer in a way that Lux hadn't expected.

As they continued walking, the camp came into view, the faint glow of the fire a welcome sight in the dark forest. But neither of them seemed in a hurry to rejoin the others.

Zoey stopped walking, turning to face Lux fully. The look in her eyes was intense, but not in the way it had been with the snake. This was different—more personal, more vulnerable.

Zoey took a small step closer, her eyes never leaving Lux's. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

Lux swallowed hard. She didn't know what to say or how to respond to her raw honesty. "Come on, Zoey. You'd be fine."



Zoey shook her head, her eyes shining with something Lux couldn't quite place. "Maybe. But I'd rather not find out."

The space between them felt like it was shrinking, drawing them together in a way that was both thrilling and terrifying. Lux could feel the heat radiating off Zoey's skin, could see the way her chest rose and fell with each breath.

"Zoey," Lux began, her voice trembling slightly. "I?—"

But before she could finish, Zoey closed the gap between them, her lips pressing softly against Lux's. The kiss was gentle at first.

But then it deepened, the hesitation melting away as they lost themselves in each other.

Lux's hands found their way to Zoey's waist, pulling her closer as the kiss became more urgent. She could feel Zoey's heart pounding against her chest and could taste the faint sweetness of her lips.

When they finally pulled apart, they rested their foreheads against each other's.

"Lux," Zoey whispered, her voice shaky. "Why do I want you this much?"

"Why do you ask so many questions?"

Zoey's hands cupped Lux's face, her thumbs brushing gently over her cheeks. "You're just something else, aren't you?"

Zoey's lips found Lux's again, more insistent this time. Lux responded eagerly, her hands roaming over Zoey's back, feeling the smooth skin beneath her fingertips.

They moved together, instinctively finding a rhythm that felt right and natural. Every touch, every kiss was filled with a longing that had been building for so long and finally found its release.

Lux guided Zoey to the ground, the cool earth beneath them a stark contrast to the heat between their bodies. They moved slowly, savoring each moment.

Surely one more time wouldn't hurt.

Zoey's hands were everywhere, exploring Lux's body with a reverence that made her heart ache with affection.

Lux moved quickly pulling down Zoey's fire pants and underwear from her hips to her ankles and off in one smooth move.

She pushed Zoey's T shirt and bra upwards exposing her beautiful breasts.

She's so fucking beautiful.

Lux pinned Zoey's eager hands above her head as she took Zoey's nipple in her mouth, sucking, biting enjoying Zoey's gasps.

Zoey tried again to release her hands.

"Keep your hands there," Lux commanded. "I want to worship your body,"

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Zoey shuddered as she nodded and her hands stayed above her head as Lux moved down her body with her mouth, kissing, licking, biting her belly and her hips getting closer and closer to where she really wanted to taste.

She was hungry with desire for Zoey.

She moved lower, parting Zoey's legs so she could kneel between them. She dipped her head and ran a long slow stroke of her tongue through Zoey's labia. She felt her own lust buzzing harder in her veins as she licked again and again. Long strokes with her tongue, pushing deep inside, tasting her.

Zoey's eyes were closed and she was moaning in appreciation, the sweetest sounds to Lux's ears.

She took Zoey's clitoris in her mouth and sucked feeling it swell in her mouth. Zoey whimpered and Lux felt throbbing between her own legs as though she might come herself just from licking Zoey.

Lux enjoyed the feel of Zoey's clit in her mouth so much that she kept it there alternating long slow sucks of it with massaging it with the flat of her tongue.

She moved her right hand to join in, her fingers delving Zoey's wetness before pushing deep inside. Zoey gasped and her legs began to shake. She whimpered again.

Oh fuck, she is so good to fuck.

Lux sucked gently yet persistently on Zoey's clitoris as her fingers began to fuck her.

She felt Zoey's pussy tightening around her fingers, she felt Zoey's whole body begin to tighten pre-orgasm. She felt a throbbing between her own thighs more insistent than anything she had ever felt before.

Lux slid her left hand inside her own pants and pressed against her own clitoris.

Zoey called out loudly and shuddered and gushed as her orgasm flooded through her.

Lux pressed tightly against her own clitoris and it was enough to tip her over the edge, her orgasm coming in a way it never had before. Her body convulsed as her climax rushed to every part of her lighting her up in all the best ways possible.

When she opened her eyes, she still had her fingers inside Zoey and a pool of Zoey's climax in the palm of her hand. Zoey's orgasm had passed and her body relaxed. Her beautiful brown eyes looked up through heavy lids to Lux. Lux felt her heart swell as her orgasm subsided.

Well, fuck...

14

ZOEY

Zoey lay next to Lux, her body still tingling from the aftershocks of their lovemaking.

The air around them felt warm and heavy with the lingering scent of sweat and earth. Zoey turned on her side, propping herself up on one elbow to look at Lux. She was still catching her breath, her chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm that was almost hypnotic.

"That was...amazing," Zoey said softly, her voice still a little breathless.

Lux smiled, her eyes half-closed in contentment. “Yeah, it was.”

For a moment, they just looked at each other, the silence between them comfortable and easy. Zoey reached out, her fingers brushing a strand of hair away from Lux’s face. The touch was light, almost reverent.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Zoey said.

Lux opened her eyes fully, meeting Zoey’s gaze. There was a softness in her expression, a vulnerability that Zoey hadn’t seen before. “Glad you’re stuck in the Phoenix Ridge forests with me?”

Zoey laughed. “I wouldn’t wish to be trapped here with anyone else.”

“I guess that’s some comfort anyway,” Lux said. “I bet if my dad were here, he’d tease me about having my partner’s back.”

“Sounds like a great guy.”

“He is. He always says that being a firefighter is more than just a job; it was a calling. He believes in it so much, and I guess that belief just rubbed off on me.”

“That’s why you joined the fire department, isn’t it? To follow in his footsteps?”

“Yeah,” Lux said, a hint of pride returning to her voice. “I wanted to help people, like he did.”

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“You’re amazing, you know that?”

Lux chuckled softly, shaking her head. “I’m just doing my job, Zoey.”

Zoey shook her head, her expression earnest. “No, it’s more than that. You’re brave, and strong, and you care so much about the people around you. That’s not just doing your job; that’s being an incredible person.”

Lux looked at her, a warmth in her blue eyes that made Zoey’s heart flutter. “Thank you.”

“He’s still in Phoenix Ridge?” Zoey asked. “Your father?”

“Yeah. Sometimes he shows up at the station just to give the Chief Thompson hell.”

Zoey raised her brow. “Hell?”

“In a good way,” Lux said, laughing. “Chief Thompson is...well, she’s like a mother to me, really.”

Zoey could hear the affection in Lux’s voice, and it made her smile. “It sounds like you’re really close.”

“We are.”

“And Jay?” Zoey asked, curious about the person Lux spent so much time with in the air.

“Jay.” Lux said, a fond smile spreading across her face. “She’s a good woman. A bit of a joker, but she’s solid. We’ve been partners for a while now, and there’s no one else I’d trust more up there with me. She’s always got my back.”

“That’s nice.”

They fell into a comfortable silence

Zoey let the quiet linger, savoring the warmth of Lux’s hand in hers. She could feel the steady beat of her own heart, a comforting rhythm that seemed to sync with Lux’s breathing. The world outside their little bubble had faded away, leaving only the two of them, connected in a way that felt both profound and intimate.

Lux’s fingers tightened around hers, grounding her in the moment. Zoey’s gaze drifted over Lux’s face, taking in the way her lips curved into a gentle smile, the way her eyes held a softness that made Zoey’s chest ache with something she couldn’t quite name.

“Can I ask you something?” Zoey said, her voice breaking the silence.

“Of course,” Lux replied, her thumb still tracing slow circles on Zoey’s hand.

Zoey hesitated for a moment, gathering her thoughts. “Why did you become a firefighter? I mean, I know you said you wanted to follow in your dad’s footsteps, but...why this? Why something so dangerous?”

Lux’s smile faded a little. “It’s a good question. I guess part of it is that I just loved the thrill. With my dad being my only parent, I grew up having a thing for danger.”

Zoey nodded. “That makes sense.”

“Dad didn’t think it did at first.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. So I first became a pilot.”

“Smart.”

“But it’s more than that too. There’s something about it...the adrenaline, the challenge. It’s like every time I go out there, I’m reminded of what I’m capable of. It’s hard to explain, but it’s almost like...it gives me a purpose.”

“You’re really brave, you know that?” Zoey felt a surge of admiration for Lux, for the courage it took to face danger day in and day out.

Lux’s lips quivered into a small smile. “I don’t always feel brave. Sometimes I’m scared out of my mind. But I think that’s part of it too.”

“I think that makes you even braver. Doing what needs to be done, even when you feel scared.”

Lux’s smile widened, a warmth spreading through her eyes. “Thanks, Zoey.”



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Zoey returned the smile, her heart feeling light and full at the same time. She shifted closer, her body drawn to Lux's like a magnet. Their legs brushed together, and Zoey felt a spark of electricity pass between them, a reminder of the passion they had shared earlier.

She leaned in closer, her lips brushing against Lux's in a soft, tender kiss. Lux responded immediately, her hand sliding up to cup Zoey's cheek, holding her close as their lips moved together in a slow, deliberate dance.

The kiss deepened, and Zoey felt a rush of warmth spread through her body, a sensation that was both comforting and exhilarating. She could feel Lux's heartbeat against her chest and the way their bodies seemed to fit together perfectly.

When they finally pulled away, Zoey's breath was ragged, her lips tingling from the intensity of the kiss. Lux's eyes were full of longing, and Zoey felt a similar pull deep within her own chest.

"Zoey?" Lux murmured, her voice low and full of emotion.

"I'm right here."

Lux's lips curved into a soft smile, and she leaned in to kiss Zoey again, this time slower, savoring the moment. Zoey melted into the kiss, her hands sliding up to tangle in Lux's hair, holding her close as their lips moved together in a perfect rhythm.

When they finally broke apart, Zoey rested her forehead against Lux's, her breath

coming in shallow gasps. Then she leaned in, pressing a soft kiss to Lux's lips, savoring the warmth and tenderness that passed between them.

Lux's hand moved to Zoey's hair, her fingers gently stroking through the strands. Zoey let out a soft sigh of contentment, feeling completely at peace in Lux's arms.

Zoey took a deep breath, gathering her thoughts. "I wasn't just transferred here," she began. "I requested a transfer."

Lux shifted slightly. "What were you running away from?"

Zoey's lips twitched into a small smile. "I was the leader of a team in the department. We were a tight-knit group, and we worked together for years. We went into disaster zones and pulled people out of collapsed buildings, that sort of thing."

Lux's eyes held a mixture of curiosity and understanding. "What happened?"

Zoey felt a lump form in her throat, and she had to take a moment to steady herself before continuing. "There was...an incident. We were responding to a call. A fire had broken out in this old building, and there were people trapped inside. We went in, did what we always did—worked together and got as many people out as we could."

Zoey paused, her breath hitching slightly as the memories came rushing back. She could see the flames and thick smoke; she felt the heat against her skin.

Lux's hand slipped into hers, squeezing gently. "You don't have to talk about it if it's too hard."

Zoey shook her head, swallowing against the tightness in her throat. "No, I need to. I've kept this inside for too long."

She took another deep breath, willing herself to keep going. “We were almost done, almost out. But then, we heard this sound. It was faint but unmistakable: a child crying. We couldn’t just leave, you know? We had to go back.”

Zoey closed her eyes, the memory playing out in her mind like a movie she couldn’t turn off.

“We split up, covering more ground that way. But the fire was getting worse, spreading faster than we expected. The heat was intense, and the smoke was so thick it was hard to see, hard to breathe.”

She felt the tears welling up in her eyes, and she blinked them back, determined to keep going.

“I found the child. She was so small and scared. I picked her up and tried to get her out as fast as I could, but the fire...it was everywhere. There was no clear path out.”

Lux’s other hand cupped Zoey’s cheek, her thumb brushing away a tear that had slipped free.

“Zoey...”

Zoey’s voice cracked, and she had to stop for a moment, the pain of the memory almost too much to bear.

“We were trapped. And then...the floor gave way. I don’t remember much after that except the sound of everything collapsing around us. And the heat...the heat was unbearable.”

Lux’s arms wrapped around her, pulling her close. Zoey could feel the warmth of Lux’s body against hers, could feel the steady rise and fall of Lux’s chest as she

breathed. It was comforting, grounding her in the present, even as the past threatened to pull her under.

“We lost her,” Zoey whispered. “We lost the child. And I lost part of myself that day.”

Lux’s hold on her tightened, and Zoey could feel the tears streaming down her face now, hot and unchecked. She buried her face in Lux’s shoulder, her body shaking with the force of her emotions.

“If only I’d been a little more careful,” Zoey said. “If only I’d focused more on saving people than just fighting the fires, that kid would’ve lived.”

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Lux's grip felt tighter around Zoey's body. "That explains why you wanted a rescue-first operation."

Zoey nodded, saying nothing.

They stayed like that for a while longer, the silence between them filled with unspoken understanding. Zoey felt a sense of peace settle over her, a feeling of safety that she hadn't experienced in a long time.

"Thank you," Zoey said.

Lux smiled, her eyes soft and full of warmth. "You don't have to thank me. I'm just glad you felt like you could share that part of yourself with me."

When they pulled back, Zoey rested her forehead against Lux's, her breath mingling with Lux's in the small space between them.

"I don't know what comes next," Zoey said. "But I'd hoped that Phoenix Ridge would save me."

"It will, if you let it," Lux said and her dreamy blue eyes focussed on Zoey.

"Right now, we should focus on getting more food to eat. Those berries won't save us for long."

"I bet if we followed that little stream a little, we'd find some fish," Zoey said.

“You bet or you know?”

“Wild guess,” Zoey said.

“Let’s catch our breath before checking it out,” Lux said. “Deal?”

Zoey laughed. “Deal.”

15

LUX

Zoey was right after all. There was a space not so far off from the spot where they had their bath where they could catch fish.

They stood in the middle of the river, their hands submerged. Lux stood beside Zoey and demonstrated to her how to catch a fish by hand.

Zoey tried to emulate Lux, but she tipped over and fell in the water, and Lux watched with an amused smile.

The sun started to rise, casting long shadows over the water, making it feel surreal.

“Here, do it like this,” Lux said, stepping closer to Zoey and holding her hands poised over the water. Her touch was gentle but firm, and Zoey’s chest fluttered.

“Like this?” Zoey tilted her head back to look at Lux, who nodded.

“Yeah, just like that,” Lux said. “Now, flick your wrist a little as you drop your arm in the water when you see a fish.”

“I’m really not good at this,” Zoey said, her cheeks growing warm.

“It takes practice,” Lux said. “My dad taught me when I was little. He used to take my brother and me out every weekend, rain or shine. Fishing was his way of keeping us connected, I guess.”

Zoey glanced at Lux, noticing the way her eyes softened as she spoke about her father. There was a warmth in her voice that made Zoey want to know more.

“You must be close to him,” Zoey said.

Lux nodded, her gaze fixed on the water. “Yeah, I am. Especially after my mom passed. I was just a kid, and my brother wasn’t much older. It was tough, but my dad did everything he could to make sure we didn’t feel like we were missing out on anything.”

“I’m sorry about your mom,” Zoey said quietly, not sure what else to say.

Lux shrugged, but there was a tightness in her expression. “It was a long time ago, but it still hurts sometimes. I miss her, you know? But I had my dad and my brother. They made it easier.”

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Zoey could see the pain in Lux's eyes, the kind of pain that never really went away, no matter how much time passed.

"What was she like?" Zoey asked, hoping it wasn't too personal.

Lux smiled, a distant look in her eyes. "She was amazing. Strong, kind, funny. She had this way of making everyone around her feel special. At least that's what my dad told me."

"Wait, you didn't—"

"I didn't get to meet her. I mean, I did, but I don't have any memory of her. I was still so little when she died."

"I'm so sorry about that."

Lux crouched, eyeing the fish swimming by. The sun continued to rise, casting a soft, golden light across the water. She could hear the gentle lapping of the water against the shore, the distant chirping of birds.

Zoey stood beside her, watching closely. "So, you really know how to fish?"

Zoey mimicked Lux's position, and Lux chuckled.

"Relax your shoulders," Lux said. "You're too tense."

Zoey sighed and loosened her body. "I'm just worried I'll mess it up."



“You won’t,” Lux assured her. “Just follow my lead.”

They both stood, staring at the water. When a particularly large fish swam close to them, Lux said, “Now!”

Zoey squeezed her eyes shut and thrust her arm in the water. She swiped like Lux had shown her, and she pulled out the wriggling, slimy fish.

“We did it!” Zoey said, her face lighting up with joy as she clutched the flailing fish.

Lux couldn’t help but smile, the sight of Zoey’s happiness warming something inside her. “You did it,” she corrected, her voice filled with pride.

Zoey looked at the fish, then back at Lux, her expression one of disbelief. “I actually caught a fish.”

“You did,” Lux said, her smile widening. “Not bad for your first time.”

Zoey laughed, the sound light and carefree. “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

Lux felt something shift inside her. Maybe, just maybe, she could let herself be open to this, to whatever it was that was growing between them.

Maybe she could let herself be vulnerable, just this once.

They walked back to shore, Zoey still clutching the fish that stopped moving.

Lux glanced at her, studying her face for a moment. “You don’t have any siblings, do you?”

Zoey shook her head. “I’ve got two. My brother’s in the military. My older sister

works as a teacher.”

“Middle child?” Lux raised a brow.

“Middle child,” Zoey said.

They fell into a comfortable silence, the sound of the river filling the space between them. Zoey watched the soft ripples in the water as her thoughts drifted.

A faint crackling sound broke through the quiet. They both turned their heads toward the source, eyes widening as they realized what it was.

“The phone,” Zoey said, scrambling to her feet.

They hurried over to where they had left it, beside a tree a few feet away from the riverbank. Zoey grabbed the phone, her hands shaking slightly as she stared at the screen and accepted the call.

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“Hello? This is Zoey Knight. Can you hear me?”

There was a moment of static, and then a voice crackled through, faint but audible.

“Lieutenant, it’s Jay.”

“Thank goodness, Jay. We’ve been trying to establish contact?—”

“We?” Jay’s voice crackled from the other end. “Is Lux with you?”

“Yes, I’m here,” Lux said. “How soon can you get a chopper down to our location?”

“As soon as we’re able to triangulate your coordinates.”

“And how long would that take?”

“We’ve triangulated the site of the crash. Are you guys close to the wreckage?”

“Yes.” Lux could feel her heart race.

“We’re dealing with some serious fire activity here,” Jay said, her voice tense. “But we’ve got teams out there. The priority is getting you both back safely. Can you make it back to the wreckage?”

Zoey glanced at Lux, who nodded. “We can make it back,” Zoey said into the phone.

“We’re heading there now.”

“Good,” Jay said. “Stay safe. We’ll try to keep in touch.”

She lowered the phone, turning to Lux. “We need to get back.”

Lux nodded, already moving toward their gear. “Let’s go.”

They packed up quickly, the mood between them shifting to something more urgent. The sky was darkening and the shadows stretched longer as they made their way back through the trees.

As they walked, Zoey found herself glancing at Lux, her mind replaying the conversation they’d had by the river. There was a heaviness to Lux that Zoey hadn’t seen before, a vulnerability that made Zoey want to reach out, to offer some kind of comfort.

When they reached the clearing, they dropped their gear by their salvaged supplies, both of them breathing a little harder from the quick pace they’d kept.

“We’re safe,” Lux said, more to herself than to Zoey. “We’re finally going home.”

Zoey nodded, her eyes meeting Lux’s. “Yeah, we are.”

There was a beat of silence as they just stood there looking at each other. Zoey felt something shift between them.

“What happens now, Lux?”

Without thinking, Zoey stepped closer, her heart pounding in her chest. Lux didn’t move away or break eye contact. Zoey’s breath hitched as she leaned in, her lips brushing against Lux’s in a tentative kiss.

Lux responded immediately, her hand coming up to cup Zoey’s cheek, pulling her closer. The kiss deepened, and for a moment, everything else fell away—the fires, the

danger, the uncertainty. It was just them standing in the fading light, finding something real in the midst of all the chaos.

When they finally broke apart, both were breathing heavily, faces flushed. Lux opened her mouth to speak, but Zoey beat her to it.

“I can’t believe we might actually get out of here,” Zoey said, her voice shaky but with a small, teasing smile playing on her lips. “What’s the first thing you want to do when we’re back?”

Lux chuckled. “Honestly? I want a big, greasy burger. And maybe a hot shower. In that order.”

Zoey laughed, the sound lifting some of the weight off her chest. “Good call. I’ll take a burger too. And then I want to sleep for a week. Maybe longer.”

“I can see that.” Lux smiled. “Though, you sleep too long, and you might miss out on some things. Like me beating everyone at the station at bowling.”

“Bowling?” Zoey raised a brow.

“Bowling. Arm wrestling. You name it.”

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Zoey raised an eyebrow, feigning disbelief. “You think you can beat me? Dream on, Valentine.”

Lux grinned. “Oh, I know I can. We’ll make a day of it: burgers, arm wrestling, and then we’ll hit the beach.”

“You and the beach,” Zoey teased. “Why am I not surprised?”

“Hey, I need my ocean fix,” Lux said, her tone light. “You’re just lucky you’re cute enough to invite along.”

Zoey rolled her eyes but couldn’t stop the smile that tugged at her lips. “Fine, fine. But I get to pick the movie for when we crash on the couch after. And no complaints if it’s a cheesy rom-com.”

“Deal,” Lux said, the word coming out softer than she intended. She took a deep breath, the playfulness slipping away as she looked at Zoey. “I’m going to miss this, though. Us.”

Zoey’s smile faltered slightly. “Yeah, me too.”

“Zoey, there’s something I’ve been wanting to say.” Lux’s voice was quieter now, more serious. “I like you. A lot. But I’ve never been good at...this. Commitment. I just?—”

“I understand,” Zoey cut in. “And honestly? I don’t want to commit either. Not right now, anyway.”

Lux blinked, the surprise evident in her eyes. She didn't mean to lead Zoey on and then toss her to the side. She didn't mean to keep her around either.

Ugh.

She didn't mean anything. It was all just beautiful, and the thought of commitment still scared her so much. How could she want someone this much yet still not want them too?

"Really? I didn't mean..." The words wouldn't form. "You get it, don't you?"

Zoey nodded, her smile bittersweet. "I care about you, Lux. But I think we both have a lot of stuff to figure out first. Maybe when we're out of here and things aren't so intense, we can see where this goes. But for now, no pressure. Just...us."

Lux sighed. She'd glanced at the horizon while they were fishing earlier. The orange glow of the fires were closing in on them. She knew it was almost a farce.

There was always pressure.

16

ZOEY

They stared at the phone as it beeped.

Zoey wondered what was going through Lux's mind. Was she hoping the line would crackle and they'd be heading back to the station? Was she thinking about her? What did that mean for everything they had shared so far?

Lux didn't need to say anything; Zoey could feel the same need coursing through her,

drawing her toward Lux.

Zoey reached out, her fingers trembling slightly as they brushed against Lux's arm. Lux's skin was warm under her touch, and the contact sent a jolt of electricity through Zoey. She wanted more—needed more.

“You think they're close?” Zoey asked.

“If I know Jay well enough, she'd be flying right here already.”

Zoey's let out a deep breath. When she'd woken up this morning, she hadn't expected that this would be their last moments together.

This should be a happy moment, right?

She should be feeling excited that she'd finally go back home. Why, then, did it feel this heavy in her heart?

“Lux,” Zoey said, her voice rough with desire, “I'll miss you.”

Lux's response was immediate. She pulled Zoey close, their bodies pressing together, and Zoey could feel the heat radiating off her. Lux's lips found hers.

Her hands roamed over Lux's body, feeling the lean muscle under her clothes and the way her body responded to each touch. She tugged at Lux's belt and the fastening of her pants and pushed her back against a tree.



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Zoey's mouth found Lux's neck, trailing kisses along her collarbone and down to her chest. Lux's hands tangled in Zoey's hair, tugging her closer, and Zoey responded, her tongue flicking out to taste the salt on Lux's skin.

"Zoey," Lux moaned, her voice filled with need, and it was all she needed to hear.

Zoey's hand pushed inside the waistband of Lux's Calvin Kleins. Her fingers went to work, sliding against her clitoris. Lux moaned and her hips bucked against Zoey's touch.

The sound of Lux's pleasure drove Zoey wild, and she pressed harder, her fingers working to push Lux closer and closer to climax. Lux's fingers gripped Zoey's back tightly, her breath coming in short, ragged gasps.

"Zoey, I'm—" Lux started, but the rest of her words were lost in a moan as her body tensed, her back arching off the tree as she came, her entire body trembling with the force of it.

Zoey didn't let up, drawing out Lux's pleasure until she finally collapsed back against the tree, her chest heaving as she tried to catch her breath.

Zoey smiled as she held Lux up, her own body thrumming with need, but she couldn't take her eyes off Lux. Her cheeks were flushed and her dark hair was a wild mess around her face and she looked more beautiful than Zoey had ever seen her.

Lux's lovely blue eyes fluttered open, and when she looked at Zoey, there was a fire in her gaze that made Zoey's breath catch in her throat.

“Come here,” Lux said, her voice still rough from her orgasm, and Zoey didn’t hesitate.

She leaned in to Lux, but Lux wasn’t having it. She rolled her over, pinning Zoey between her and the tree, and Zoey’s breath hitched as Lux’s body pressed into hers.

“You’re incredible,” Lux said, her voice low.

Zoey’s hands slid up Lux’s back, pulling her in for another kiss, and Lux responded eagerly, her body moving against Zoey’s in a way that made her head spin.

Lux’s hands were on Zoey’s thighs, pushing them apart and then seeking down inside the waistband of her fire pants and her underwear, and Zoey’s breath caught as Lux’s fingers found her, teasing her, sliding through her wetness, making her squirm.

“Lux,” Zoey moaned, her hands tightening on Lux’s hips, urging her on.

Lux’s mouth moved to Zoey’s neck, kissing and nipping at her skin as her fingers slid inside, making Zoey cry out. She arched her back, pushing herself closer to Lux, needing more, and Lux obliged, her fingers moving in a steady rhythm that had Zoey panting, her body tense with pleasure.

“Don’t stop,” Zoey gasped, her nails digging into Lux’s back as the waves of pleasure built inside her, making her feel like she was about to explode.

Lux’s mouth moved lower, her teeth finding Zoey’s nipple through her shirt, and the added sensation pushed Zoey over the edge. Her body tensed, her breath catching in her throat as the orgasm crashed over her and her entire body shook with the intensity of it.

Lux didn’t stop or let up until Zoey was a trembling, breathless mess under her, her

mind spinning from the sheer pleasure of it all.

When Lux finally pulled back, Zoey could barely move, her body still tingling from the aftershocks. She looked at Lux, who was watching her with a satisfied smile, and Zoey couldn't help but smile back.

"That was..." Zoey started, but she couldn't find the words to finish.

"Incredible," Lux finished for her.

Zoey nodded, still trying to catch her breath. "Yeah, it was."

Their bodies were still close, and their breathing was slowly returning to normal.

"You're amazing, you know that?" Zoey said.

Lux's smile softened, and she brushed a strand of hair from Zoey's face. "So are you. I've never felt anything like this before."

Zoey's heart skipped a beat at the admission, and she leaned in to gently kiss Lux's lips. It was different from the desperate kisses they'd shared earlier. This one was soft, tender, and full of unspoken feelings that neither of them was ready to put into words yet.

They stayed a while, just holding each other, the only sound was the soft rustling of the wind. Zoey felt a sense of peace that she hadn't felt in a long time, like everything in the world had finally fallen into place.

Eventually, Lux shifted, "What happens now?" she asked, her voice quiet, but there was a hint of uncertainty in her ocean blue eyes.

Zoey reached to trace her fingers along Lux's strong jaw, her touch light but reassuring. "We take it one step at a time. We figure it out together."

Lux nodded, her eyes searching Zoey's face for a moment before she leaned to kiss her again, slow and lingering like she was trying to memorize every detail.

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Zoey melted into the kiss, her arms wrapping around Lux's shoulders, pulling her closer. When they finally broke apart, Zoey rested her forehead against Lux's, closing her eyes as she let herself enjoy the quiet moment.

They didn't need to say anything else. Everything they needed to say had already been said in the way they touched, kissed, and held each other like they never wanted to let go.

And for now, that was enough.

Zoey looked up at the trees as the reality of what just happened settled in.

The warmth of Lux's body pressed against her was comforting, but her mind raced. The sex had been incredible, even better than the first time, but now, in the quiet aftermath, doubts began to creep in.

Lux shifted beside her, her fingers lightly running over Zoey's skin under her shirt. The gentle touch sent a shiver through Zoey, but it also reminded her of all the relationships that hadn't worked out before.

She had been in this place before: the thrill of something new, the hope that maybe this time it would be different, only for it to fall apart. Zoey didn't want to go through that again.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Lux asked, but Zoey could hear the curiosity in it.

Zoey hesitated, not sure how much she wanted to share. "I was just thinking," she

said, her voice trailing off as she tried to find the right words. “This...this is nice.”

Lux looked at Zoey with a small smile. “Nice? That’s all?”

Zoey laughed softly, shaking her head. “Okay, it’s more than nice. It’s amazing. But...” She hesitated again, not sure how to continue.

“But?” Lux pressed.

“Why do I have a feeling that you didn’t quite understand what I meant the last time we spoke about this?”

“We didn’t speak about this,” Lux said. “I talked, and you just agreed. I...don’t know how that made me feel, but it’s fine.”

“Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Act like it’s all fun and roses when you’ve got a lot to say.” Zoey ran her hand over her face. Talking any longer might ruin things for the both of them, but she knew it was worth it.

Lux stayed quiet.

“I didn’t want to feel rejected,” Zoey said. “Not again.”

“Rejected?” Lux replied, clearly baffled. “Why on earth would you feel that way? You’re...you’re you.”

Zoey sighed, turning her head to look at Lux. “I’ve been in a few relationships before,

and they never ended well. I guess I'm just trying to keep my expectations in check, you know?"

"Trust me, I know that feeling." Lux's expression softened. "I get it. It's hard not to get caught up in the moment, especially with everything that's going on."

Zoey nodded, grateful that Lux understood. "Yeah. I don't want to get hurt again."

Lux reached out, brushing a strand of dark hair from Zoey's face. Zoey smiled, but it didn't quite reach her eyes.

"Maybe it's better if we just...enjoy what we have right now without expecting anything more."

Lux didn't respond right away, her eyes searching Zoey's. "So, you're saying we should just focus on the sex and not worry about what happens next?"

Zoey nodded. "Yeah. I mean, the sex is great, and we might die out here. Maybe it is better not to overthink it."

"Jay is on her way," Lux reminded her. "Let's not jinx it, okay?"

"I just don't want to complicate things. We're already dealing with enough out here."

Lux squeezed her hand back, her smile returning. "Okay. No drama. Just great sex."

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Zoey laughed, easing slightly. “So, after all this goes away, after here?”

“Why don’t we wait until after here to figure it out?” Lux said.

“Is it me or does it feel hotter here?” Lux asked.

Zoey squirmed. It did feel hotter than it was a few seconds ago. She looked around suddenly on alert. It was burning orange in the distance and heading uphill fast. Thick, brown smoke was already filling the sky.

“How did it get this far so fast?” Zoey asked, shocked.

“Trade winds, Zoey. Phoenix Ridge gets a lot of them blowing uphill.”

“We have to move,” Zoey said.

“We have to hope Jay and the team get here as soon as possible.”

17

LUX

Lux heard the faint sound of a helicopter approaching. The noise grew louder, and she looked over at Zoey, who was already on her feet, staring up at the sky.

“It’s getting closer,” Lux said, her voice steady.



“We need to signal them,” Zoey said. The helicopter was getting closer, the sound now a deep, pulsing thrum that seemed to echo off the trees around them. Zoey’s heart pounded, her senses on high alert.

Zoey turned her head sharply, her eyes widening in horror as she saw the flames surging toward them faster than she had ever seen before. The fire had found a new fuel source, and it was barreling toward them with a force that made her stomach drop.

“Lux, we have to go,” Zoey shouted, her voice carrying over the roaring flames.

Lux spun around. She came back toward Zoey, her eyes locked on the approaching danger.

Zoey moved frantically. They couldn’t stay here any longer. The fire was too close and approaching too quickly. She glanced back toward the sky, but the flames and smoke made it impossible to see anything clearly.

“Run!” Zoey yelled.

“But, Jay,” Lux said. “She’s still up there.”

“She clearly can’t land. Hopefully, if we get to higher ground, she’ll be able to rescue us.”

“We should?—”

A branch snapped and crashed to the ground. Lux moved just in time, pulling Zoey along with her. She looked up, trying to locate the chopper, but the smoke was too thick above them.

They took off, their feet pounding against the dry, cracked earth as they ran through the forest. Her eyes stung and her lungs burned, but she didn't slow down.

Zoey was just ahead, her movements quick and agile. Lux could see the strain on her face and the way her jaw was set with determination. They both knew their lives were at stake.

As they ran, Zoey's foot caught on something, and she stumbled, falling hard to the ground. Lux was there right away, pulling her back to her feet.

"Come on, Zoey."

The flames were closer now, licking at the trees around them, the heat so intense that it felt like it was burning her skin. She didn't dare look back, afraid of what she might see.

They reached a small clearing, and for a moment, Zoey thought they might have found a safe spot. But the fire was relentless, consuming everything in its path. She could hear the crackling of burning wood, the roaring of the flames, and above it all, the distant thrum of the helicopter still searching for them.

"We have to keep going," Lux said, her voice tight with fear. "We can't stop here."

Zoey nodded again, her throat too dry to speak. She followed Lux, her legs heavy with exhaustion. They had been running for what felt like forever, and she wasn't sure how much longer she could keep it up.

But they had no choice.

As they pushed through the underbrush, Lux felt the rocks and roots threatening to trip her at every step. She stumbled, but Zoey was there, steadying her, keeping her moving.

Suddenly, the ground dropped away in front of them, revealing a slope that led down into a narrow ravine. Zoey skidded to a stop, her heart pounding in her ears.

“This way,” Lux said, her voice strained as she pointed down the slope. “We can use the ravine to get away from the fire.”

Zoey hesitated for a moment, the drop making her stomach churn. But the flames were too close. She could feel the heat at her back, the crackling of the fire growing louder by the second.

With a deep breath, she nodded and followed Lux down the slope, their feet slipping and sliding on the loose dirt and rocks. The descent was treacherous, and Zoey’s hands scraped against the rough surface as she tried to keep her balance.

They reached the bottom, their breaths coming in ragged gasps. Zoey looked around, her eyes scanning the narrow ravine. The walls were high, offering some protection from the flames, but they couldn’t stay here for long. Jay would have no hope of spotting them.

“We need to keep moving,” Lux said as she started down the ravine.

Zoey followed, her legs trembling with exhaustion. The ravine was narrow and winding, the walls pressing in on either side of them. The air was cooler here, but the smell of smoke still hung heavy, a constant reminder of the fire that raged above.

As they rounded a bend, Zoey felt something catch her foot, and she stumbled again. She cried out as pain shot through her ankle, the sharp, sudden jolt bringing tears to her eyes.

Lux was at her side in an instant, her hands gripping Zoey's arms as she tried to help her up.

"I think I twisted it," Zoey said, her voice tight with pain.

Lux looked up at the ravine, her eyes filled with worry. "We can't stop here, Zoey. The fire?—"

"I know," Zoey said, cutting her off. She gritted her teeth and forced herself to stand, leaning heavily on Lux for support. Every step sent a jolt of pain through her ankle, but she didn't let herself think about it.

They kept moving, the ravine winding its way through the forest. The smoke was thinner here, and Zoey could feel the temperature dropping as they put more distance between themselves and the fire.

But they weren't safe yet. The fire was still out there, still chasing them, and Zoey knew they couldn't let their guard down. They had to keep moving, keep pushing forward, no matter how exhausted they were.

As they reached the end of the ravine, Zoey could see the sky through the trees, dark clouds of smoke hanging heavy above them. The sound of the helicopter was gone, lost in the chaos of the fire.

“We need to find somewhere she can see us,” Lux said as she scanned the area.

“Jay, she was here,” Zoey said. “We missed her, Lux. We missed her.”

“She’d still be around here somewhere,” Lux said. “She has to be.”

“And if she isn’t?” Zoey asked. “What if she somehow had issues with the chopper and couldn’t hang around any longer?”

“We just have to hope she didn’t leave, Zoey. She can’t leave.”

“What if she did, Lux?” Zoey asked.

Lux stopped pacing and stared at Zoey. She raised a finger and pointed it up the mountain. “Then we’d better get up that mountain or we’re toast. Literally.”

“Fine. Come on,” Zoey said, moving ahead of Lux.

The trail was narrow, and the dense trees on either side offered some shade from the heat.

“We need to get as far away from here as possible,” Zoey said, glancing over at Lux.

“Yeah,” Lux said. She didn’t add that the steepness was starting to wear on her.

The ground beneath them got rockier. Lux adjusted her footing, careful not to slip. Zoey was ahead, her gaze fixed on the trail.

“Watch your step,” Zoey said.

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Lux nodded, focusing on her footing. The rocks were loose, shifting slightly under her weight, but she managed to keep her balance. Zoey was just a few steps ahead, moving at a steady pace.

“Have you ever been stuck out here before?” Zoey asked.

“No,” Lux replied. “I did get lost in a game reserve once, though.”

“Are you serious?”

“True story. Luckily, my father found me in less than five minutes.”

“That doesn’t count as being lost, does it?” Zoey asked.

“When you’re wondering which wild animal would find you first, time moves pretty slowly.”

“I know that feeling.”

Lux groaned as her ankle hit against a stem. She slowed down.

“You okay?” Zoey asked, slowing down, too.

“It’s fine. I’m fine.” Lux continued walking. “Walking has never been my strong suit.”

“No arguments there,” Zoey said. “Explains why you chose to fly a chopper instead.”

Lux chuckled. "You could say that."

After what felt like hours of walking, they came across a small stream. The water trickled gently over smooth stones, the sound soothing against the backdrop of their heavy breathing.

"Let's take a quick break," Zoey said, dropping her pack on the ground. "We could use a bath."

Lux hesitated, looking up the mountain. She knew they needed to keep moving, but the thought of washing off the dirt and sweat was tempting.

"Just a few minutes," Zoey added, already pulling off her boots.

Lux finally nodded, setting her pack down. She knelt by the stream, dipping her fingers into the water. It was warmer than she expected, but felt good against her skin.

"Feels nice," Zoey said, wading into the shallow water.

Lux followed, the warm water lapping at her legs. The stream wasn't deep, just covering her ankles, but it was enough to wash away the grime that clung to her skin.

Zoey cupped her hands, splashing water over her arms and neck. Lux did the same, the warmth of the water soothing her aching muscles. They moved slowly, almost lazily, letting the water rinse away the dirt and sweat.

Lux glanced over at Zoey, noticing how the water clung to her skin and the way her wet hair stuck to her neck. Zoey looked up, meeting Lux's gaze. She flashed a small, almost shy smile.

“Better?” Zoey asked.

Lux nodded. “Yeah. Better.”

They stayed in the water for a few more minutes, letting the warmth soak into their skin. Lux could feel the tension in her body easing, the steady thrum of anxiety quieting just a bit.

But they couldn’t stay there forever.

Zoey was the first to move, stepping out of the stream and reaching for her boots and pack. Lux followed, reluctantly pulling herself out of the water and drying off as best as she could.

“We should keep going,” Zoey said.

Lux nodded, slipping her boots back on. The moment of peace was over, but it had been enough to keep her going. She could still feel the warmth of the water on her skin as they started walking again.

They continued up the mountain. The ground was rougher, and the rocks were less stable. Lux’s legs ached with every step, but she kept moving, determined not to slow down.



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As they walked, Zoey spotted a cluster of bushes along the trail, their branches heavy with dark, ripe berries. She paused, reaching out to pluck a few.

“Berries,” she said, holding one out to Lux.

Lux took it, the sweet taste bursting on her tongue as she bit into it. It was a small comfort, but it was something. They ate in silence; the only sounds were the crunch of leaves under their boots and the occasional rustle of the wind in the trees.

The trail was narrower here, the trees thinning out as they got higher. The air was cooler, a welcome change from the heat that had followed them for so long.

After what felt like an eternity, Lux spotted a break in the trees up ahead. The ground leveled out slightly as the dense forest gave way to a small clearing. The sky was visible through the branches, and the clouds hung low and heavy.

“I think we’ve found a clearing,” Zoey said.

Lux stepped into the clearing, her eyes scanning the scene. The ground was covered in soft grass, and the air was filled with the scent of pine and earth. It was peaceful, almost serene, but Lux couldn’t shake the worry gnawing at the back of her mind.

She looked over at Zoey, who was staring up at the sky. The concern was still there, lingering in her eyes despite the calm.

“We’ll make it,” Zoey said.

Lux nodded, forcing herself to believe it.

“We should rest here for a bit,” she said, glancing around the clearing.

Zoey agreed, her body finally giving in to the exhaustion.

Lux sank onto the grass, letting the cool air wash over her. Zoey sat beside her, the two of them sharing a moment of quiet.

For now, it was enough.

18

ZOEY

“Do you think we’re safe here?” Zoey asked. Her voice was rough from the smoke and lack of water.

Lux nodded slowly, looking around. “For now. But we can’t stay too long.”

Zoey sighed, leaning back against a tree. She closed her eyes for a second, trying to ignore the dryness in her throat. She wanted to ask more questions, but her mind was too clouded with exhaustion to think straight.

“I need to confess something. The phone’s gone, I must have dropped it,” Lux said.

Zoey sighed. “So, we’re really on our own then.” She felt a knot forming in her stomach as the realization that they were completely cut off from any help and any chance of getting out of this quickly settled in.

“They’ll keep looking for us, right?” she asked, but she could hear the uncertainty in

her voice.

“Maybe.” Lux’s voice was strained, her gaze fixed on the ground. “But with the fire spreading like this, it’s possible they’ll think we didn’t make it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Since some of our stuff got burnt, they might think we were caught in the fire.”

“They wouldn’t just give up on us,” Zoey said, more to convince herself than anything.

Lux didn’t respond immediately. Instead, she stared at the horizon, her jaw clenched. Zoey could see the tension in her shoulders, the way her hands had curled into fists at her sides.

“Lux?” Zoey said.

“They’d better not,” Lux finally said. “Maybe we should assume that they already have, though.”

Zoey’s chest tightened. “We can’t think like that. We’ll get out of this.”

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Lux let out a bitter laugh, shaking her head. “I’m not trying to be negative, Zoey. I’m just being realistic. We’re up against a fire that’s only getting worse, and we have no way to communicate. The odds aren’t exactly in our favor.”

“So, what do we do now?” Zoey asked, hating how small her voice sounded.

Lux looked at her, her expression softening just a little. “We keep moving and try to stay ahead of the fire. And we pray that the fire burns itself out before we get to the summit.”

Zoey nodded, feeling a little steadier. Lux stood up, brushing the dirt from her pants.

“We should get going,” she said.

Zoey stood up, too, though her legs protested.

“Yeah. Let’s go.”

They started walking again. Zoey kept close to Lux, her breath coming in short gasps as they climbed. Now and then, she glanced over at Lux, watching the way she moved with purpose, even though the strain was evident on her face.

“I’m sorry,” Zoey blurted out, unable to keep the words from spilling out.

Lux glanced at her, confused. “For what?”

“For dragging you into this mess,” Zoey said. “If I hadn’t?—”

“Stop,” Lux cut in, her tone sharp. “This isn’t your fault, Zoey.”

Zoey nodded, but the guilt still gnawed at her. She hadn’t asked for this, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that she was somehow to blame for their situation.

They walked in silence for a while, and the only sound was the crunch of their boots on the dry earth. The sky above them was a dull gray, the sun barely visible through the haze of smoke. The air was thick, making it hard to breathe, and Zoey felt the burn in her lungs with every step.

“Do you think we’ll make it out of this?” Zoey asked.

“I don’t know, Zoey. I don’t.”

The bluntness of her words hit Zoey hard, but she appreciated the honesty. It was better than false hope, at least.

Zoey stared at the ground as they walked, her mind swirling with thoughts. She was exhausted, both physically and mentally, and it was getting harder to keep up with Lux’s pace. Her legs felt like lead, and her lungs burned with every breath.

“We need to rest,” Zoey said, finally coming to a stop. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest and her vision blurring at the edges.

Lux stopped, too, turning to face her. She looked like she was about to argue, but then she saw the state Zoey was in and nodded. “Okay. Just for a few minutes.”

Zoey sank to the ground. She closed her eyes, trying to steady her breathing. Her whole body was trembling, and she felt tears pricking at the corners of her eyes. She didn’t want to break down now, not in front of Lux, but the stress and fear were becoming too much to hold back.

Lux knelt beside her, placing a hand on Zoey's back. "Hey, you're okay. Just breathe."

Zoey nodded, trying to do as Lux said. She focused on her breathing, taking slow, deep breaths. Lux's hand on her back was grounding, a reminder that she wasn't alone, even though everything else felt like it was falling apart.

"I'm sorry," Zoey whispered, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand.

"You don't have to apologize," Lux said. "We're both scared. It's okay to be scared."

Zoey nodded again, grateful for the reassurance. She took another deep breath, feeling the tightness in her chest start to ease.

"Thank you," she said.

Lux gave her a small smile. "We'll be okay, Zoey. We just have to keep going."

Zoey didn't know if she believed it, but she nodded anyway. She couldn't afford to break down now, not when they were still in danger. She had to keep going, no matter how much she wanted to curl up and give in to the exhaustion.

They rested for a few more minutes before Lux stood up, extending a hand to help Zoey to her feet. Zoey took it, pulling herself up with a grunt.

“Let’s keep moving,” Lux said.

Zoey nodded, following her as they started walking again. She kept her eyes on Lux’s back, using her as a focal point to keep her mind from spiraling. They were in this together, and as long as they stayed together, they had a chance.

But as they walked, Zoey couldn’t shake the feeling that they were being left behind, that their chances of survival were slipping away with every step. The thought made her chest tighten again, but she pushed it down, focusing on the ground beneath her feet and the woman walking in front of her.

They climbed for what felt like hours. Zoey’s legs were screaming in protest, and her lungs burned with every breath. She could see the strain on Lux’s face, too, the tightness in her jaw and the sweat dripping down her forehead.

“We need to stop,” Zoey said.

Lux didn’t argue this time. She nodded, sinking to the ground with a heavy sigh.

Zoey leaned against the rough bark of a tall pine tree, taking in the scenery around them. They were surrounded by dense forest, and the towering trees stood guard like silent sentinels.

Zoey noticed the sky was a dull gray, the sun barely visible behind the smoke. It was hard to believe that just a few days ago, everything had been normal.

She glanced at Lux, who sat a few feet away, her expression tense.

Zoey could see the strain on her face, the worry etched into her features. She felt a pang of guilt for dragging Lux into this situation, but she quickly pushed the thought aside.

There was no time for regrets.

Zoey's thoughts drifted to her parents. She wondered what they would think if they knew where she was right now. Her mom would probably be worried sick, imagining the worst.

Her dad, though, he would try to be practical, try to figure out a solution, but deep down, she knew he would be just as scared.

What if she never got to see them again?

The thought made her stomach clench. She remembered the day she came out to them, how nervous she had been. The memory brought a small sense of comfort, but it was fleeting.

Her eyes settled on Lux again. There was something about her that made Zoey feel...something. It was too early to say if Lux was the one, but she couldn't deny the pull she felt toward her.

She shrugged off the thought, not wanting to get lost in feelings she couldn't afford to dwell on right now. There were more pressing matters at hand, like figuring out how they were going to get out of this mess.

"Maybe we should head toward the fire," Zoey said, breaking the silence. "The firefighters could be fighting a path to us."

Lux looked at her, considering the suggestion. She shook her head. "They would be



at the other end of the fires. Even if they could fight their way to us, the fires are moving rapidly uphill because of the direction of the wind. They won't expend all their resources to fight it to the last. They'd just contain it and make sure it doesn't spread."

Zoey nodded, realizing the logic in what Lux was saying. Everything felt so hopeless, but she wouldn't let herself spiral. They had to stay focused if they were going to survive.

"We're better off staying on the path we are on," Lux added, her tone softening. "Moving closer to the fire would just put us in more danger."

Zoey let out a sigh, her shoulders slumping. "You're right. I just...I don't know what else to do."

"We'll figure something out. We just need to stay calm."

Zoey appreciated Lux's attempt to reassure her, but she could see the worry in her eyes. It was the same worry gnawing at her own insides. Still, it was comforting to know she wasn't alone in this.

Zoey shifted her position and noticed Lux wince slightly. "Your leg," she said. "Let me take a look."

Lux hesitated but eventually extended her leg toward Zoey. Zoey gently pulled off her boot and sock and took Lux's leg in her hands, feeling the warmth of her skin. The area around the cut was swollen, and Zoey could see bruises started to form. At least the cut didn't look infected and was healing well.

She massaged the area, applying gentle pressure. Lux closed her eyes, leaning against the tree. She didn't say anything, but Zoey could tell by the way she relaxed slightly

that the massage helped.

Zoey focused on her task, trying to block out the thoughts racing through her mind. But it was impossible not to think about what might happen next.

Would they make it out of here alive? What if they didn't? The uncertainty was terrifying.

Her eyes drifted back to Lux, who still had her eyes closed. There was something about the way Lux held herself, the quiet strength she exuded, that made Zoey's heart ache. It was different from anything she had ever felt before.

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Loving a woman like Lux felt...freeing. It was like looking into a mirror and seeing both the similarities and the differences. And it was those differences that made the connection so beautiful.

It was like finding someone who understood her in a way no one else could.

Zoey kept massaging Lux's ankle and leg, her mind swirling with thoughts and emotions. She didn't know what would happen next, but as she admired Lux's quiet strength, she couldn't help but feel a glimmer of hope. Maybe, just maybe, they would find a way out of this together.

As Lux's breathing evened out, Zoey found herself lost in the moment.

The fire was still out there and the danger was real, but for this moment, Zoey allowed herself to find peace in the presence of the woman beside her. She wasn't sure what the future held, but she knew that whatever happened, she wasn't alone.

19

LUX

Lux leaned back against the tree, her eyes closed as Zoey continued to gently caress her lower leg and foot. The pain was still there, a dull throb that pulsed with each beat of her heart, but Zoey's touch made it bearable.

She wasn't sure if it was the massage itself or just the fact that Zoey was the one doing it, but it didn't matter. What mattered was the warmth spreading from Zoey's

hands into her skin, a warmth that seemed to reach straight to her chest.

She had been trying not to think too much about her feelings for Zoey, but it was impossible now. Every touch made it harder to deny what was happening.

She was falling in love.

The thought should have terrified her, and maybe it did a little, but not as much as she would have expected. There was no jolt of fear, no urge to pull away and protect herself. Instead, there was just a pull toward Zoey that she didn't want to resist.

She opened her eyes and looked at Zoey, who had her brow furrowed in concentration. Zoey had a way of looking at the world that fascinated Lux. There was a softness in her beautiful brown eyes, a kind of quiet determination that made Lux want to know everything about her.

But there was also a distance there, especially when Zoey talked about leaving people behind. Lux could see the pain it caused her, the way it made her withdraw into herself, and it made Lux wonder what it was like for Zoey to be with her, someone who was so scared of letting people in.

“What was it like for you growing up?” Lux asked. “Did you always know you were meant to love a woman?”

Zoey smiled.

“I think I always knew, but it took me a while to figure it out. I did have this crush on a girl in high school. She was a year older than me—really pretty and really smart and straight. I thought she was perfect. You can guess how the rest played out.”

“What happened?” Lux asked, curious.

“I told her how I felt, and she didn’t feel the same way,” Zoey said, shrugging like it didn’t matter, but Lux could see the hurt in her eyes. “It was tough, but it taught me a lot about myself. I realized that I’m the kind of person who goes all in, a thousand percent, even when I know it might not work out.”

Lux felt a pang in her chest at Zoey’s words. She wasn’t sure if she was ready for someone like that, someone who would give everything and expect the same in return.

But at the same time, the thought didn’t scare her the way it usually did. Instead, she found herself wanting to be the person Zoey could depend on, the one who wouldn’t let her down.

She looked away, trying to hide the confusion written on her face. She wasn’t sure what to do with these feelings or how to handle the fact that she was starting to fall for Zoey, but she didn’t want to push her away either.

The last thing she wanted was to hurt Zoey, but she couldn’t deny the pull she felt, the way she wanted to kiss Zoey every time they were close.

“What’s on your mind?” Zoey asked.

Lux hesitated, not sure how to answer. She didn’t want to admit what she was thinking, so she deflected with a joke.

“I’m just thinking about how nice it would be if we had some marshmallows right now. A campfire and some s’mores would make this whole situation a lot more bearable.”

Zoey chuckled, a sound that made Lux’s heart flutter. “You always know how to lighten the mood, don’t you?”

“It’s a gift,” Lux said with a grin. “But seriously, I’m just trying to figure out when we’re going to get out of here. I mean, I’m not exactly in a hurry to get back to reality, but it would be nice to know we’re not going to be stuck out here forever.”

Lux found herself relaxing, letting go of some of the tension she had been carrying. It felt good to just be with Zoey, to not have to pretend or put up walls. She hadn’t felt this way in a long time, and it scared her, but it also felt right.

Zoey’s hands moved up her leg, massaging her thigh through her pants, and Lux let out a sigh of relief. The pain was still there, but it was manageable, and Zoey’s touch was soothing in a way Lux hadn’t expected.

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“What about you?” Zoey asked suddenly, breaking the silence. “Did you always know?”

Lux thought about the question for a moment before answering. “I think I always knew, too, but it took me a long time to accept it. I was scared of what it meant and how people would react. It wasn’t until I met someone who made me realize it was okay to be myself that I accepted it.”

Zoey looked at her, curiosity in her eyes. “What happened to her?”

Lux shrugged, trying to sound nonchalant. “It didn’t work out. I guess I wasn’t ready for it, for the whole relationship thing. I’ve always had a hard time letting people in and letting them get close. But I’m trying to be better about that. I think losing my mom so young, I have serious abandonment issues. Trust issues. You know, well all of it.”

Zoey nodded, understanding. “It’s not easy, but it would be worth it, I think.” Her brown eyes were warm and welcoming.

Lux looked at Zoey, feeling a sudden urge to kiss her and close the distance between them, to just give in to what she was feeling. But she held back, warning herself not to get too close or let herself fall too hard, too fast. She didn’t want to hurt Zoey or make promises she wasn’t sure she could keep.

She closed her eyes, leaning back against the tree, and let herself relax. She wasn’t sure what would happen next, but for now, she was content to just be here with Zoey.

Zoey's hands moved on her leg again, this time massaging the area around her knee, and Lux felt a shiver run through her. She opened her eyes and looked at Zoey.

There was something beautiful about loving a woman like Zoey. It wasn't just about the physical attraction, though that was certainly there. It was about the connection, the understanding, the way they could just be themselves with each other.

Lux let out a sigh, closing her eyes again as she let herself get lost in the moment. She watched as Zoey's fingers traced the outline of her ankle, her touch gentle. She could feel Zoey's warmth through her touch, and it sent a tingling sensation up her leg.

Lux shifted slightly, trying to ignore the way her heart sped up just being this close to Zoey. It was hard to believe how much her feelings for Zoey had changed in such a short time.

When they first met, Lux saw Zoey as just another person she had to work with, someone to keep at arm's length. But now, everything was different. She was falling in love, and that realization terrified her.

She found herself wanting to be around Zoey constantly. The thought of kissing Zoey always lingered in her mind, and the way Zoey's hand rested on her leg only made that desire stronger.

Lux noticed the way Zoey's eyes seemed distant whenever she talked about leaving anyone behind. Losing a kid in a fire would do that for you. For sure. Lux understood the need to keep her distance, but she wondered what it was like for Zoey to be with her.

Did Zoey feel the same pull? Did she want to kiss her as badly as Lux did?

"Are you okay?" Zoey asked, looking up from Lux's ankle with a concerned



expression.

“Yeah, just thinking,” Lux said, trying to sound casual.

“About?”

Lux forced a smile. “Just thinking about when we’ll be rescued. Trying to stay optimistic, you know?”

Zoey nodded. “We’ll make it out of here, Lux. I promise.”

Lux’s heart skipped a beat. She wanted to believe Zoey and trust that everything would be okay. But part of her was still scared.

Scared of getting too close, scared of what might happen if she did. To lighten the mood, Lux decided to crack a joke. “If we don’t make it out, at least I can say I spent my last days with a real-life action hero.”

Zoey laughed, and the sound made Lux’s chest tighten in the best way. “If you’re lucky, I’ll even let you see some of my stunts.”

Lux grinned, but her mind was still racing. She didn’t want to hurt Zoey or get too close, only to pull away later. But the more she thought about it, the more she realized she didn’t feel the usual fear. She wanted to get closer and kiss Zoey again.

Zoey’s hand rested on Lux’s ankle, her fingers tracing light patterns that made Lux’s skin tingle. Lux felt a warmth spreading through her, her body reacting to Zoey’s touch in ways she couldn’t control. She shifted slightly, feeling a growing tension between them, one that was becoming harder to ignore.

Zoey’s fingers moved higher up Lux’s thigh, and Lux’s breath hitched. She could feel

her pulse quicken and her body responding to Zoey in a way that was both thrilling and terrifying. Lux looked at Zoey, their eyes locking, and she could see the same desire reflected in her.

Without thinking, Lux leaned in, her lips brushing against Zoey's in a brief but electric kiss. It was enough to send a jolt of electricity through her, leaving her wanting more.

But before they could go any further, the sound of hooves running uphill distracted them.

Lux pulled back, and she looked around. Three deer raced past. Then another.

“What’s going on?”

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Zoey's eyes followed the animals, her brow furrowing. "The fire must be getting closer. They're trying to escape."

Lux nodded, trying to push down the disappointment she felt at being interrupted. "Should we follow them?"

Zoey considered it for a moment, then nodded. "Animals have an instinct for where it's safe. We should head in the same direction."

"I used to have a dog who was the opposite. He always got into trouble."

"Sounds like you were always part of the mischief," Zoey said.

Lux was about to suggest going straight uphill but changed her mind. Zoey's point made sense, and she didn't want to argue.

"Let's go, then."

They started moving in the same direction as the animals, the sounds of the fire growing louder behind them.

Lux tried to stay focused, but her mind kept drifting back to that kiss and the way Zoey's hand had felt on her thigh. She wanted to feel it again and lose herself in Zoey's touch.

Lux heard vibrations, a low rumble that seemed to come from deep within the earth tried to pinpoint where it was coming from.

“Did you hear that?”

Zoey paused, listening. “Hear what?”

“That rumbling,” Lux said, feeling a knot of unease forming in her stomach. “Maybe it’s nothing, but?—”

Another loud rumble cut her off, this time unmistakable. It was louder, more intense, and it made the ground beneath them tremble. Lux froze, her eyes wide with fear as she looked at Zoey.

“What the hell was that?” Zoey asked.

Lux shook her head, her mind racing. “I don’t know, but it doesn’t sound good.”

They stood there for a moment, both of them unsure of what to do. The rumbling grew louder and more persistent, and Lux could feel the vibrations in her bones. She swallowed hard, trying to keep her fear in check, but it was no use. This was bad, really bad.

“Maybe we should—” Zoey started to say, but another rumble cut her off, this one even louder than before.

Lux’s heart pounded in her chest as she realized what was happening. “We need to move now!”

20

ZOEY

Zoey’s heart pounded as the rumbling grew louder, the vibrations beneath her feet

increasing with every passing second. She barely had time to process what was happening before she felt the ground shift beneath them.

“Lux, we need to move,” Zoey said.

She grabbed Lux’s hand, pulling her along as they scrambled to find stable footing. But the earth was treacherous, slipping away under their boots as the landslide began to take shape.

Lux nodded, but Zoey could see the pain etched on her face. Each step was a struggle, but there was no time to stop. They both knew that hesitating now could mean the end. The ground continued to tremble, small rocks tumbling down the hillside, followed by larger ones. The sound of the landslide was like a roar, growing louder and louder until it drowned out everything else.

“Stay close!” Zoey shouted.

She looked over at Lux, her heart tightening when she saw her wince with every step. But Lux kept moving, her jaw set in determination. Zoey focused on the path ahead, trying to find a route that would lead them away from the worst of it.

“We’re almost there, just a little more!” Zoey said.

The air was thick with dust, making it hard to breathe. Zoey’s lungs burned, but she didn’t dare stop. Her eyes stung, and she blinked rapidly to clear them, but it was like trying to see through a cloud. Lux’s grip on her hand was strong, and Zoey held on tight, determined not to let go.

The ground continued to shift beneath them, and the incline made it even harder to keep their footing. Zoey could hear the crack of trees snapping somewhere below them, the sound echoing through the chaos. She had to remind herself to breathe.

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“Watch out!” Zoey yelled as a large rock tumbled down, barely missing them.

They dodged to the side, but the ground was giving way faster than they could move. Zoey’s heart was in her throat as she pulled Lux to her feet again. The strain on Lux’s face was impossible to ignore, and Zoey knew that she was pushing herself to the limit.

“Zoey, I—” Lux started.

“Don’t. We’re not stopping.” Zoey’s voice was fierce, leaving no room for argument.

They continued their desperate climb, the ground shifting underfoot, but Zoey’s focus was entirely on getting them to safety. She barely noticed the scrapes on her hands and knees or the sting of dirt and rocks as they pelted her skin. All that mattered was moving forward.

The noise around them was deafening, the roar of the landslide filling her ears. Zoey felt the ground lurch again, and her heart skipped a beat as she saw a massive section of the hillside give way, sliding down with a terrifying speed.

“Move now!” Zoey said.

They surged forward, adrenaline coursing through Zoey’s veins. She could hear Lux’s labored breathing, but she didn’t slow down. There was no time. The ground continued to crumble beneath them, but Zoey refused to let fear take over.

“We’re going to make it,” she said, more to herself than to Lux.

They kept moving, but Zoey could feel the strain in her muscles, the fatigue setting in. Her legs felt heavy, her breath coming in ragged gasps, but she pushed it all aside. There was no room for weakness here, not when their lives were on the line.

Suddenly, the ground beneath them gave a violent jolt, and Zoey felt herself lose her balance. She let out a gasp as she stumbled, pulling Lux down with her. They both hit the ground hard, but Zoey didn't waste a second. She was back on her feet in an instant, pulling Lux up beside her.

"Come on!" Zoey urged.

Lux winced as she tried to stand, her ankle buckling beneath her. Zoey's heart dropped at the sight, but there was no time to dwell on it. She wrapped an arm around Lux's waist, supporting her as they stumbled forward.

"We're almost there," Zoey said again, even though she wasn't sure where "there" was. All she knew was that they couldn't stay where they were.

The roar of the landslide was deafening now, the ground beneath them shaking with an intensity that made it hard to stay upright. Zoey could feel the fear clawing at her insides, but she shoved it down, focusing on Lux and the path ahead.

They moved as fast as they could, but the ground was slick with mud and debris, making every step a battle. Zoey's legs burned with the effort, but she didn't stop. She couldn't stop. Not when they were so close to getting out of this alive.

But then she heard it—a crack, louder than anything else around them. Zoey's eyes widened in horror as she looked up to see a massive boulder breaking free from the hillside above them.

"Run!" Zoey screamed, but there was nowhere to go.

The boulder crashed, and the ground trembled beneath the impact. Zoey's heart pounded as she tried to move, but the ground was shifting too fast and the mud pulled at her feet. She could feel the panic rising in her chest, but she forced herself to stay calm.

"Zoey!" Lux's voice was filled with fear, and Zoey turned just in time to see her stumble again, her ankle giving out beneath her.

"Lux!" Zoey's voice cracked as she reached out, grabbing Lux's hand just as she started to fall.

But the ground beneath them was giving way. Zoey could feel herself being pulled down, the weight of the mud dragging her down with it. She struggled to hold on, her grip on Lux's hand slipping as the ground shifted beneath them.

"No, no, no!" Zoey's voice was frantic as she tried to pull Lux back up, but it was no use.

Lux's foot was caught, and her ankle twisted painfully beneath the weight of the debris. Lux let out a cry of pain, her face contorting in agony as she tried to free herself. Zoey watched, helpless.

"Not again," Lux whispered.

Zoey's hands trembled as she tried to dig Lux's foot out, but the mud was too thick and the rocks too heavy. She could feel the panic rising in her chest, the fear threatening to overwhelm her. But she couldn't let that happen. She couldn't let Lux get hurt again.

"Hold on, Lux. I'm going to get you out of this," Zoey said.



But even as she said the words, Zoey could feel the ground shifting beneath them again, the landslide continuing its relentless descent. She heard the roar of the earth around them, the sound of trees snapping and rocks tumbling down the hillside. And in that moment, Zoey knew that they were running out of time.

She looked at Lux, her heart breaking at the sight of her in so much pain. But there was no time to hesitate, no time to think about what could happen next. Zoey had to act, and she had to act fast.

“Zoey, you have to go,” Lux said.

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“No. I’m not leaving you.”

“Zoey, please,” Lux said. “I can’t do this again. I can’t let you get hurt because of me.”

Zoey shook her head, her jaw set in determination. “I’m not leaving you.”

She could see the fear in Lux’s eyes. But she also saw something else: trust. Lux trusted her, and Zoey wasn’t about to let her down.

“I’m going to get you out of this,” Zoey said. “I promise.”

The ground had stopped rumbling, but the aftermath of the landslide had left chaos in its wake. Trees were uprooted, boulders scattered, and the path they’d been on was obliterated. Zoey’s hands shook as she tried to clear the debris around Lux’s leg, her breath coming in shallow gasps.

She glanced up at Lux, whose face was pale and streaked with dirt. “You have to hold on.”

Lux nodded weakly, her lips pressed into a thin line. “I’m trying, Zoey.”

Zoey saw the pain in her eyes. Lux’s leg was pinned under a large branch, and every time Zoey tried to move it, Lux winced.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” Zoey whispered as she continued to pull at the branch. Her arms ached, and her hands were raw, but she didn’t stop. She couldn’t stop. She could

feel her panic rising, but she forced it down.

“It’s not your fault,” Lux said softly. “Just...get me out of here.”

Zoey put all her strength into moving the branch. It took several tries, but finally, with a grunt, she managed to shift it enough for Lux to pull her leg free. Lux let out a cry of pain as she did, and Zoey immediately knelt beside her, helping her sit up.

“Are you okay? Can you move?” Zoey asked, her eyes wide with concern.

Lux shook her head, tears welling. “My ankle...it’s worse.” She tried to move her foot, but the pain was too much, and she quickly stopped.

Zoey felt a surge of helplessness wash over her. She didn’t know what to do. They were alone, far from any help, and Lux was injured. She swallowed hard, trying to think. They had to keep moving. They couldn’t stay here, not with the fire still so close.

“Lux, we have to go. I’ll help you. Lean on me, okay?”

Lux hesitated, then nodded. “Okay.” Zoey helped her to her feet, and Lux leaned heavily on her as they started to make their way uphill again. Every step was a struggle, and Zoey could feel Lux’s weight dragging her down, but she didn’t complain. She just kept going, putting one foot in front of the other.

The air was thick with smoke, and Zoey’s lungs burned with every breath. She could hear the crackling of the fire behind them, but it wasn’t as close as before.

That was something, at least.

But the climb was steep, and with Lux injured, it was slow going. Zoey’s muscles

screamed in protest, but she pushed through the pain, determined to get them to safety.

Lux was silent, her face pale and sweaty. Zoey knew she was in a lot of pain, but she didn't say anything. She just kept going, Lux's grip on her shoulder tightening with every step.

"Just a little farther," Zoey said.

Zoey was careful with every step, making sure she didn't slip and bring them both down.

"We should try to find a place to rest," Lux said after a moment, wincing as she shifted her weight. "Somewhere we can wait for help."

Zoey wiped her eyes, taking a deep breath. "Okay. But we need to take it slow. I don't want you hurting yourself even more."

"I'll be fine," she said. "I just need to catch my breath."

The terrain was rough, and Lux's ankle was giving her trouble, but she didn't complain. Zoey kept a close eye on her, ready to catch her if she stumbled.

They walked in silence for a while, both too exhausted to talk. The forest around them was eerily quiet, the only sound the distant crackling of the fire. Zoey's mind was racing, thinking about everything that had happened, everything that could still happen. But she tried to push those thoughts away, focusing on the present, on getting them to safety.

After a while, they found an area sheltered by trees. It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing. Zoey helped Lux sit down, then collapsed beside her, her body aching

all over.

“We’ll rest here for now,” Zoey said. “We’ll figure out what to do next once we’ve had some sleep.”

21

LUX

Lux shifted slightly, trying to sit up without putting too much pressure on her injured leg. The movement didn't go unnoticed. Zoey glanced over her shoulder, her eyes softening as she met Lux's gaze.

It had been an hour since the landslide incident, and her leg felt slightly better.

"How are you feeling?" Zoey asked, carrying a tenderness that Lux had grown to crave.

Lux managed to smile, though it was laced with discomfort.

"Better, I think. The leg still hurts, but it's not unbearable."

Zoey scooted over to meet Lux. "There should be a river close by. We could find something to eat maybe?"

"More berries?"

"Yeah," Zoey responded.

Lux didn't care for fruit at the moment. She wanted to reach out, pull Zoey closer, and let her know how much she meant to her. But she held back, her mind wrestling with the tension between desire and caution.

But they were both exhausted, physically and emotionally. The last thing she wanted was to push too far, too fast.

Zoey shifted slightly, adjusting to look at Lux more directly. Her hand moved to Lux's cheek, and she leaned in, pressing her lips gently against hers. The kiss was soft and tentative, but it sent a rush of warmth through Lux's body, waking something deep inside her. At that moment, Zoey's touch was everything she needed—gentle reassurance filled with a quiet passion impossible to ignore.

But just as quickly as it started, the kiss ended. Zoey pulled back, her expression a mix of affection and concern.

“You should rest,” she said softly. “I’ll go get us some food, okay?”

Lux nodded, though she wasn't ready to let Zoey go. “Be careful.”

Zoey smiled, that familiar warmth returning to her eyes. “I will. I’ll be back soon.”

Lux watched as Zoey walked away.

Once Zoey was gone, Lux lay back down, her thoughts spinning in a thousand different directions. The kiss lingered on her lips, and the memory of Zoey's touch sent sparks of desire through her.

Lux tried to push it aside, reminding herself they were still in a dangerous situation. But it was hard to ignore how her body responded to Zoey, how her heart seemed to beat a little faster whenever she was nearby.

She tried to focus on anything else—the sounds of the forest outside and the faint crackle of the fire—but it all circled back to Zoey. Lux closed her eyes, willing herself to calm down. No matter how strong they were, now wasn't the time to get

lost in her feelings.

After what felt like an eternity, Zoey finally returned. Lux opened her eyes, sitting up as best she could. But when she saw what Zoey was carrying, her breath caught in her throat.

She held a dead rabbit by its hind legs. Lux stared at it, shock rippling through her. “You...you hunted it?”

Zoey blinked, then let out a small laugh, though she seemed uncomfortable. “He was badly injured in the landslide, he was crying in pain. He wouldn’t have survived. It was a kindness.. and, I didn’t want him to go to waste.” she explained, setting the rabbit down on a flat stone.

Zoey seemed to sense Lux’s unease, and she quickly moved to change the subject. “I also found some fruit.” She pulled a small bundle of berries from her pocket. “They should help keep us going.”

Lux’s tension eased a little at the sight of the berries. She was grateful for Zoey’s thoughtfulness, even in such dire circumstances. “Thank you.”

Zoey handed Lux a few berries and sat beside her, taking one of Lux’s hands in hers. Lux looked down at their joined hands, her heart swelling with emotion. She could feel the warmth of Zoey’s touch and the steadiness of her presence, which brought her a sense of comfort she hadn’t felt in a long time.

After a while, Zoey shifted. “We should probably build a secure shelter,” she said. “Something that will keep us safe through the night.”

“We lost most of the stuff at the previous camp, Zoe,” Lux said. “We don’t have much here anymore.”



“Luckily, I was more than just a girl scout.”

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“You were a scout?”

Zoey saluted. “I learned to set up camp with just wood.”

“All right, lieutenant,” Lux said. “And how much wood do we need?”

“Not much,” Zoey said. “We only need something to keep above our heads while we sleep.”

Lux nodded. “What do you need me to do?”

Zoey smiled, genuinely making Lux’s heart skip a beat. “You can help me gather more sticks,” Zoey said.

Lux glanced around, her eyes scanning the makeshift lean-to they had started to build. The ground was rough and covered with scattered leaves and twigs. She watched Zoey thatch the branches together to form a perfect fit, her movements swift and confident.

Lux felt a swell of admiration for Zoey’s resourcefulness. They had gathered enough sticks to construct a simple shelter to give them a little protection.

“You’ve done this before, haven’t you?” Lux asked, her tone light.

“Not exactly,” Zoey said, concentrating on her task. “But I’ve seen it done enough times to have an idea. Plus, we don’t have much choice, right?”

Lux nodded, feeling a little more secure with Zoey's presence. "It's impressive, though. You just... you seem to know what you're doing."

Zoey gave her a small smile. "Survival instinct, I guess. I just do what needs to be done."

As Zoey finished, Lux stepped back to examine their work. It wasn't perfect, but it was better than nothing. The makeshift shelter had a decent frame with good cover from the elements.

Zoey wiped her hands on her pants and looked over at Lux. "Let's get more sticks. The bigger ones will work better for the walls."

The two of them worked silently, gathering sticks and larger branches, creating a pile near their shelter.

Once they had enough, Zoey placed them along the sides of the frame, leaning them against the frame. Lux watched her, occasionally helping when Zoey asked but mostly observing how Zoey worked.

"What's next?" Lux asked.

"Now we gather leafy branches to make a mat for on top of the roof. It'll help keep the rain off."

"Lux chuckled. "Rain?"

"We can't leave it to chance, can we?"

"I guess not." Lux gathered leafy branches and started placing them on the frame. "Got it."

“Perfect,” Zoey said, arranging the leaves to get the most coverage.

There was something captivating about how Zoey moved, her hands worked the materials, and her mind focused on the task. After a while, Zoey stepped back to assess their progress. “Not bad,” she said, tilting her head slightly. “It’ll do for now.”

Lux smiled, a bit of pride swelling in her chest. “Yeah, it’s not bad at all.”

They both stepped inside the makeshift structure, crouching slightly to fit under the low ceiling. It was cramped, but it provided some protection from the elements. The ground inside was still hard, but they could make it more comfortable later.

“At least we’re not completely exposed,” Zoey said, settling down on the ground.

Lux sat down beside her, their shoulders brushing. The closeness sent a warmth through Lux that made her heart beat a little faster. She could feel the tension in the air, the kind that had nothing to do with fear or survival but with something much more intimate.

“So...you’re okay with this?” Zoey asked.

Lux glanced at Zoey, noticing the way her eyes softened as she looked at her. “Yeah,” she said quietly. “I’m okay with it. More than okay.”

Zoey reached out and took Lux’s hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. Lux’s heart fluttered at the touch, her thoughts briefly straying to places she tried to avoid. She liked Zoey—more than liked her—but she wasn’t sure what that meant for them, especially in their current situation.

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Zoey let go of her hand and leaned back, closing her eyes. “We’re going to be okay, you know,” she said. “No matter what happens.”

Lux nodded, her gaze fixed on Zoey’s face. “Yeah,” she echoed. “We’ll be okay.”

Lux wanted to reach out again, touch Zoey and feel her close, but she held back, not wanting to push too far. She had to remind herself to stay calm and not let her emotions get the better of her.

Zoey reached out and gently cupped Lux’s cheek, her thumb brushing lightly against her skin. “I’m just glad I found you.”

Lux’s breath hitched at the touch, her heart pounding. She leaned into Zoey’s hand, closing her eyes as she savored the moment. Their connection felt undeniable.

Zoey leaned in closer, her breath warm against Lux’s skin. “I’m here,” she whispered. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Lux opened her eyes, meeting Zoey’s gaze. The intensity in Zoey’s eyes sent a shiver down her spine, and she felt herself leaning in, closing the distance between them. Their lips met in a soft, tentative kiss, one that quickly deepened as they lost themselves in the moment.

Zoey’s hand slid down to Lux’s waist, pulling her closer as the kiss intensified. Lux’s hands found their way to Zoey’s shoulders, gripping them tightly as the heat between them grew. She could feel the tension melting away, replaced by something much more powerful.

When they finally pulled apart, they were both breathless, their hearts racing in sync. Lux rested her forehead against Zoey's. Her eyes closed as she tried to calm the whirlwind of emotions inside her.

Zoey's voice was soft when she spoke, her breath still heavy. "We should probably get some rest."

Lux nodded, though sleep was the last thing on her mind. "Yeah."

They shifted slightly, making themselves more comfortable on the hard ground. Zoey wrapped an arm around Lux, pulling her close, and Lux nestled into her embrace, feeling a sense of safety and warmth that she hadn't felt in a long time.

As they lay there, the makeshift tent providing a barrier against the outside world, Lux allowed herself to relax. She listened to the steady rhythm of Zoey's breathing, letting it soothe her as she drifted closer to sleep.

Zoey's voice broke the silence, a soft murmur that made Lux's heart flutter. "I'm glad you're here with me, Lux."

Lux smiled, her eyes still closed as she replied, "I'm glad you're here too."

22

ZOEY

Zoey kept her eyes closed, feeling Lux's chest's gentle rise and fall against her side. It felt nice, like everything was okay at that small moment. She could stay like this forever, just the two of them, hidden away from the world. Zoey let herself get lost in the rhythm of Lux's breathing, letting it calm her.

She was awake, but she didn't want to break the stillness.

Zoey could feel the soft brush of her hair against her cheek, the faint warmth of her breath on her neck. She reached out, her fingers barely grazing Lux's cheek. The touch was so light, so careful, like she was afraid to wake her.

Her heart squeezed in her chest as she took in Lux's features. The curve of her lips, her eyelashes rested against her skin, the faint freckles across her nose—everything about Lux was beautiful to Zoey. She let her hand fall away, feeling a warmth in her chest that she hadn't felt in a long time.

She cared about Lux more than she had allowed herself to realize. It scared her how much she felt, how deeply she cared. It wasn't just the physical attraction.

It was more. She wanted this, wanted Lux.

Zoey thought about the last time they made love as she lay there, watching Lux sleep. Zoey felt a lump rise in her throat.

Zoey's mind wandered to how Lux had leaned into her, how their kiss had felt so right, so natural. It wasn't just about survival or the situation they were in. It was about their connection and the bond that had grown between them over the past few days. She didn't want to lose that. She couldn't lose that.

Lux's eyes fluttered open. "Morning," she said softly.

"Morning," Zoey said. She felt a nervousness in her stomach, but she pushed it down, trying to keep her expression calm.

Lux stretched, her hand brushing against Zoey's arm again, and Zoey felt a shiver run down her spine. She wanted to say something, anything to break the silence that had

settled between them, but her mind was blank. All she could think about was how close Lux was and how much she wanted to reach out and touch her again.

Lux shifted onto her side, facing Zoey. “You okay?”

Zoey nodded, swallowing hard. “Yeah.”



“You sure?” Lux asked.

Zoey nodded.

Lux’s hand moved to cover Zoey’s, and she turned her head slightly, pressing a soft kiss to Zoey’s palm. The gesture was so tender and so full of emotion that it took Zoey’s breath away. She felt a tear slip down her cheek but didn’t move to wipe it away. She just watched Lux, watched the way she looked at her with such care, such affection.

Zoey leaned in slowly, closing the distance between them until their lips met in a gentle kiss. It was soft, almost hesitant. But as the kiss deepened, Zoey felt a warmth spread through her chest, a warmth that chased away the fear and uncertainty.

Lux’s hand slid down to Zoey’s waist, pulling her closer, and Zoey responded by wrapping her arms around Lux, holding her tightly. The kiss became more urgent. Zoey felt her heart racing, her skin tingling with every touch, every brush of Lux’s lips against hers.

Zoey leaned in again, pressing another kiss to Lux’s lips, and she felt Lux smile against her mouth. The kiss was slow, unhurried. Zoey let herself get lost in the feeling, in the way Lux’s lips moved against hers, in the way their bodies fit together so perfectly.

Lux’s hand slid up Zoey’s back, her fingers tracing soft patterns against her skin. Zoey shivered at the touch, her breath hitching in her throat. She could feel the tension building between them, the slow burn of desire simmering just beneath the

surface.

Zoey pulled back slightly, her eyes searching Lux's face. "Are you okay?"

Lux nodded, her eyes shadowed with emotion. "I'm more than okay."

Zoey felt a surge at Lux's words, and she leaned in again, pressing a kiss to the corner of Lux's mouth. She let her lips linger there momentarily, feeling the warmth of Lux's skin against hers.

Lux's hand moved to Zoey's waist, pulling her closer, and Zoey felt a shiver run down her spine. She sighed softly as Lux's lips brushed against her jaw, trailing soft kisses down her neck. Zoey tilted her head back slightly, giving Lux better access, and she felt a rush of heat spread through her body.

Lux's lips moved back to Zoey's mouth, capturing it in a slow, deliberate kiss. Zoey responded eagerly, her hands tangling in Lux's hair as she pulled her closer. The kiss deepened, their tongues meeting in a slow, sensual dance that left Zoey breathless.

Lux's gaze softened as she looked at Zoey. Zoey's breath quickened, her heart racing as Lux's fingers traced a path from her cheek to her collarbone. Her touch was gentle, but it sent a surge of warmth through Zoey that she couldn't ignore.

"Zoey," Lux whispered.

Zoey's eyes met Lux's, and she could see their intensity. Lux wasn't just looking at her; she was seeing her, every part of her, and it made Zoey feel exposed but in the best way possible. She swallowed, trying to calm the flutter in her chest.

Lux's hand moved lower, fingers grazing over the edge of Zoey's tank top. Zoey's skin tingled when Lux's fingers touched it. She couldn't stop the shiver that ran

through her, nor did she want to. Lux glanced to where her hand rested and hesitated, looking back up at Zoey.

“Zoey,” Lux said again. “I...I love you.”

The words hung between them, and Zoey’s breath caught. Her mind raced, a mix of shock, confusion, and something deeper—something that made her chest tighten with emotion. Lux loved her. Zoey had hoped for it, but hearing it out loud felt surreal. She didn’t know how to respond, didn’t know what to say.

Instead of words, Zoey’s body reacted. She leaned in, closing the small distance between them, and kissed Lux with a softness that belied the storm of emotions inside her. Lux’s lips were warm, and the kiss deepened naturally like it was the only thing they could do.

Lux responded with equal enthusiasm, her arms wrapping around Zoey’s waist, pulling her closer. Zoey could feel Lux’s heartbeat against her chest, fast and strong, mirroring her own. Lux’s hands slid up Zoey’s back, fingers pressing into her skin, trying to hold on to something real, something solid.

Zoey’s mind was a blur, but one thing was clear: she needed Lux to feel her and be close to her in every way possible. She broke the kiss, only to catch her breath, and then their mouths found each other again, more urgent. Lux’s hands moved to Zoey’s waist, then lower, her touch igniting a fire that Zoey hadn’t felt before, not like this.

Without thinking, Zoey’s hands found the hem of Lux’s shirt, pulling it up and over her head swiftly. Lux helped, raising her arms, and then it was gone, leaving Lux’s skin bare to Zoey’s touch. Zoey ran her hands over Lux’s shoulders, down her arms, and back up again, marveling at the smoothness of her skin and the way it felt under her fingers.

Lux's breath hitched, and she let out a soft sigh, her head tilting back slightly as Zoey's lips trailed down her neck. Zoey's heart pounded, and she couldn't stop pressing closer, feeling the heat of Lux's body against hers. It was overwhelming in the best way, and Zoey wanted more.

Lux's hands were on Zoey's hips now, tugging at the waistband of her shorts, and Zoey didn't hesitate. She shifted, helping Lux pull them down, and then they were gone, discarded somewhere on the ground. Lux's hands roamed freely now, exploring every inch of Zoey's body with a tenderness that made Zoey's heart ache.

"Lux," Zoey finally managed to whisper, her voice shaky. She didn't know what she wanted to say, didn't know how to express everything she was feeling. But she didn't need to, because Lux was right there with her, understanding without words.

"I've got you," Lux said, her voice low and comforting.

Zoey felt Lux's lips on her skin again, moving from her neck to her shoulder, then lower. Every kiss, every touch sent a shiver down Zoey's spine, making her breath hitch. She closed her eyes, letting herself get lost in the sensation, in the feeling of Lux's hands and mouth on her.

When Lux's hand slipped between her legs, Zoey gasped, her eyes flying open. Lux paused, her gaze searching Zoey's face. Zoey nodded. That was all Lux needed. She moved her hand slowly, deliberately, drawing a soft moan from Zoey's lips.

Zoey's mind went blank, her body arching into Lux's touch as the sensations overwhelmed her. Lux's touch was gentle, but there was a purpose behind it, a need that matched Zoey's own. Zoey couldn't stop the soft cries that escaped her lips, couldn't stop her hands from clutching at Lux, pulling her closer, needing her more than ever.

Lux's lips found Zoey's again, and this time, the kiss was rougher, more desperate. Zoey could taste the urgency on Lux's lips, could feel it in the way Lux's body pressed against hers, and it only fueled the fire burning inside her. She kissed Lux back with everything she had, letting her emotions take over.

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They moved together, their bodies fitting perfectly, every touch, every kiss bringing them closer to the edge. Lux's hand moved with more purpose now, her fingers teasing and exploring in ways that made Zoey's head spin. Zoey's breath came in short, shallow gasps, her body trembling with anticipation.

Zoey's heart pounded in her chest, her body trembling with the intensity of it all. She could feel herself spiraling, losing control, but she didn't care. Lux was there, holding her, guiding her, making her feel things she'd never felt before.

It was too much, too intense, and Zoey's mind went blank as the sensations overwhelmed her. She cried out, her body arching into Lux's touch, her fingers digging into Lux's shoulders as she rode out the wave of pleasure that washed over her.

Lux held her through it all, her touch gentle and soothing, her lips pressing soft kisses to Zoey's skin. Zoey's body trembled, her breath coming in shallow gasps as she slowly came down from the high. Lux didn't let go, didn't pull away, and Zoey was grateful for that.

She wasn't ready to let go yet, wasn't ready for this moment to end. Lux seemed to understand, and she held Zoey close, her arms wrapped around her, their bodies still entwined.

They lay there together, their breathing slowly returning to normal. Zoey felt a warmth in her chest, a feeling she couldn't quite put into words. It wasn't just the afterglow of their lovemaking. It was something more, something deeper.

LUX

Lux lay on the rough ground, her body still brimming with warmth and the aftershocks of desire.

Zoey slept soundly beside her, resting on her body with a hand loosely cupping her breast. The cool air caressing her skin didn't sway her, not when it contrasted with the warmth on Zoey's body.

Lux couldn't sleep.

Her mind was too restless, too consumed with everything. She could still feel the weight of Zoey's hands on her, the softness of her lips, the way their bodies had moved together in perfect sync.

She turned her head slightly, looking at Zoey's face. It was hard to believe she had found something so raw and real under these circumstances, trapped in the forest with fire closing in on them.

Who'd have thought...?

It wasn't just the physical connection. It was more than that. It was how Zoey made her feel: safe, understood, cared for.

How did it come to this? How had she found love here, of all places? She had spent years avoiding anything that resembled a real relationship, keeping her heart locked away, safe from the possibility of getting hurt or hurting others.

But now, lying next to Zoey, she realized she had never really known what she was

missing until now. The last time she was this drawn to someone, it didn't end well.

Lux let out a quiet sigh, scanning the darkened sky above through the tiny cracks in their makeshift roof. The stars were faint, barely visible through the haze of smoke still in the air.

It had been days, and the fire hadn't slowed down. It still crept up the mountain. The higher they went, the closer it seemed to get.

Even now, she knew that time was running out. As beautiful as what they shared here, they couldn't stay much longer. She didn't even know how much farther they could go. They had already climbed so far up, and she was drained.

Lux shifted slightly, trying to get comfortable, but the unease in her chest made it impossible. It grew stronger with each passing second.

She couldn't shake the feeling that no matter what they did, the fire would catch up to them eventually. She couldn't bear the thought of losing Zoey here.

Not after she'd finally found someone who?—

Does she want you?

The thought hit Lux so forcefully that she winced.

She knew that Zoey was drawn to her. But what if it was just physical for her?

Would she still feel the way once they got off the mountain? Would they get even off this mountain?

And then what? What would they do when there was nowhere left to run?



She didn't have an answer, and that terrified her even more.

A rustle of leaves in the distance caught her attention, pulling her from her thoughts. The forest around them was alive with the chirping of insects, distant calls of nocturnal animals higher up the mountain, and the fire crackling in the distance.

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It felt like a countdown.

How fast could they go? What happened if the fire caught up with them?

Zoey stirred beside her, letting out a soft sigh in her sleep. Lux's heart clenched, a mix of love and fear swirling in her chest. She didn't know how they were going to get out of this.

She had just found her, just discovered what it felt like to care for someone, and now she was faced with the possibility of losing it all.

The idea of a life outside this mountain felt distant, almost unreal. Would they even make it out? Would they have a chance to see what could come of this thing between them?

She didn't know.

She turned her head slightly, looking at Zoey again. How was it possible to care this much this quickly?

She had spent so long avoiding this, avoiding the risk of getting close to someone. And now, here she was, head over heels for a woman she had met under the worst possible circumstances.

And yet, it felt right. It felt like the most natural thing in the world.

But the fire was still coming, and that was a reality they couldn't ignore. Lux reached

out, her hand brushing against Zoey's arm. The contact was enough to wake her, and Zoey's eyes fluttered open, her gaze meeting Lux's in the dim light.

"Lux?" Zoey's voice was soft, groggy from sleep.

Lux didn't respond immediately. She scanned the trees and saw the faint fire glowing in the distance.

"We need to keep moving," she finally said.

"Lux?"

"Sorry." She sighed. "I must've gotten carried away."

Zoey pecked her cheek and adjusted so Lux could lay on her back. They both remained there, breathing quietly.

"Want to see the beautiful sky?" Zoey asked, sitting up slowly. The makeshift shelter immediately felt cramped. There wasn't much space to begin with.

"Sure, why not."

They both made their way outside. They soon found a spot to lie down and stare at the sky. Zoey scooted closer to Lux, patting her sides until she found Lux's hands.

Lux sighed, hating how her heart raced for a millisecond, even though she loved the gesture.

The sky was endless and so very beautiful streaked with color.

"Tense?" Zoey asked.

Lux sighed. “It’s a new day, and we’re still here.”

“That’s what’s bothering you again?” Zoey asked.

Lux shrugged. Zoey rolled over. She was facing down on Lux now, with half her weight on Lux’s body. Their eyes met for the briefest of moments. Then her lips found Lux’s.

She soon backed away but remained arched over Lux.

“What’s bothering you? The fire?”

Lux shrugged. “It’s still coming,” she said. “We can’t stay here forever.”

Zoey nodded, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. “Where do we go then?”

“Up,” Lux said. “We keep going up.”

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Zoey looked at her, and for a moment, Lux saw the same fear she was feeling reflected in Zoey's eyes. But then Zoey nodded.

"We'll go up," she said. "We'll get off this mountain. We'll be fine."

"You're sure of that?"

Zoey chuckled and pecked her lips. "No, but I'm done being moody about it."

This time, Lux leaned in first for the kiss. She rolled above Zoey, pinning her down playfully as she ravaged her lips with sensual kisses. Her hands held Zoey's cheek, and her fingers tousled in her hair.

When she backed away, Zoey was still smiling.

"Well, that's the best good morning kiss ever."

She stared into Zoey's eyes for a little longer, then sighed and said, "You're just so naughty."

"If by naughty you mean sweet, then I'm guilty as charged."

They both remained on the ground, holding each other close. It wasn't long before the sun crept up the sky, and Lux stirred.

"Zoey?" she called.

“I know,” Zoey said. “We’ve gotta move.”

They gathered their things quickly, leaving their structure behind, and were soon on their way again. Lux could feel the heat in the air, the fire inching its way closer to them. There wasn’t much time.

The climb was challenging. Lux’s legs ached, her breath coming in short, sharp bursts. Zoey was just ahead, her movements steady, but Lux could see the strain on her face, the way her shoulders hunched slightly with each step.

“You sure we shouldn’t wait for a bit?” Lux said. “You haven’t gotten your strength yet.”

“Trust me, I can go on for hours,” Zoey said breathlessly.

“Yeah, as long as we don’t get turned into barbecue,” Lux said with a laugh.

“No doubt about that.”

They both laughed. After almost half the day, they reached a small plateau, a tree break that offered a brief reprieve from the climb. Lux sank to the ground, her legs trembling from the effort. Zoey sat beside her, her hand reaching out to rest on Lux’s knee.

“Look who’s tired now,” Zoey said with a laugh.

Lux nodded. The fire was still distant, so they had some time, but not much. Lux looked at Zoey, her heart aching with the weight of everything she wanted to say.

As the fire crept closer, Lux held on to that hope, that small, fragile thing that kept her going, kept her fighting. They would make it out of this. They had to.

Lux sat on the cool ground, her back pressed against the rough bark of a tree, lost in her thoughts as dusk faded into night. The night air was thick with smoke, the distant glow of the fire casting an eerie light over the landscape. Zoey was resting a few feet away, her breathing steady and calm, a stark contrast to the turmoil inside Lux.

She had tried to sleep, but her mind wouldn't quiet. Whenever she closed her eyes, images of the fire, them running, and Zoey's face as they struggled to survive flashed behind her eyelids. The reality of their situation pressed down on her, a weight she didn't know how to lift. She couldn't stop thinking about how close they were to the edge, how easily the flames could consume them in its path.

Her thoughts drifted back to the night before, to the words she had spoken to Zoey in a moment of passion and fear. She had told Zoey she loved her, and while it had felt right, she was now left wondering what it meant. Could she love someone in a situation like this? Did it even matter?

Lux's eyes scanned the darkened landscape, the outline of trees barely visible against the smoky sky. The fire was still advancing, but it felt like they were in a strange bubble of calm. She wanted to hold on to that feeling but knew it couldn't last.

The sound of movement pulled her from her thoughts, and she turned her head to see Zoey sitting up, searching for Lux in the smoke. Zoey's gaze found hers, and for a moment, they just looked at each other, the silence between them heavy.

Zoey stood up and walked over to Lux, her steps careful on the uneven ground. She sat beside her, close enough that their shoulders brushed, and Lux felt a warmth spread through her despite the coolness of the night.

"Still worried about the station?" Zoey asked.

"Nah, not that." she shrugged. "Right now, I'm more worried about the rumbling in

my stomach.”



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“Are you sure you’re just hungry?” Zoey asked.

“Well, not entirely,” Lux said.

Zoey’s eyes asked the rest of the questions. Lux hesitated, her eyes fixed on the ground in front of her. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to have this conversation.

“About last night,” she said quietly.

Zoey didn’t respond right away, and Lux could feel the tension in the air between them. “What about it?” Zoey finally asked.

Lux sighed, turning to look at Zoey. “I said something last night, something I’m not sure I should have said.”

Zoey’s expression softened, and she reached out, placing a hand on Lux’s arm. “You mean when you said you love me?”

Lux nodded, her heart pounding in her chest. “I didn’t mean to make things complicated. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Zoey looked at her for a long moment. “Do you regret it?”

Lux hesitated, then shook her head. “No, I don’t. I just...I don’t know what happens now. There’s no way for us to be rescued anymore. The station probably thinks we’ve been lost to the fire by now.”

Zoey's hand tightened on Lux's arm, a small gesture of comfort. "I've been thinking about that too," she said. "But we can't give up hope. We've made it this far."

Lux wanted to believe her and hold on to that hope, but it was slipping through her fingers like sand. "What if they've given up on us, Zoey? What if we're all alone out here?"

Zoey was silent momentarily, her gaze distant as she stared ahead. "Then we accept it," she said as she stood up. "Come on, we should keep going."

Lux stood up. "Okay."

24

ZOEY

Zoey trudged through the rocky terrain, her boots scuffing against the uneven ground. The trees thinned out as they climbed higher.

She glanced over at Lux, who was walking a few steps ahead. For most of the day, she'd seemed stuck in her thoughts. Even when she spoke up, something else was on her mind.

As much as she felt attracted to Lux, she didn't want to scare her off.

Attracted?

Zoey slowed down somewhat. This wasn't mere attraction. She was falling in love with Lux, as strange as it sounded to her own ears.

"Shit." She stumbled.

Lux turned. “You good back there?”

“Yeah, sure,” she replied hurriedly. “Just tripped on some stones.”

The ground was littered with shrubs, their tough roots gripping the rocky soil. This area differed from the dense forest they had left behind. It felt more open, more exposed.

“We should be easier to spot from the air now,” Zoey said.

“That’s if they’re looking,” Lux said.

“We’d better hope they are.”

Lux nodded, still focused on the path ahead. “Yeah, and hopefully, the fire won’t spread as quickly up here. There’s less fuel for it.”

Zoey’s gaze drifted upward, taking in the vast, clear sky. The smoke from the fire was still visible in the distance, but it felt like they had finally put some distance between themselves and the danger.

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“It’s a relief to be out of those trees,” she said. “I was starting to feel like we were trapped down there.”

Lux glanced back at her, a small smile tugging at the corners of her lips. “I know what you mean. It’s good to see clear sky again.”

They continued walking, the rocky ground crunching beneath their feet. The shrubs grew thicker as they moved farther up the terrain, and Zoey found herself brushing past the occasional prickly branch. It wasn’t easy going, but it was better than the constant threat of falling branches or getting lost in the dense underbrush.

After a while, they reached a slight rise, and Zoey’s breath caught in her throat as she saw something shimmering in the distance. “Is that...water?”

Lux followed her gaze. “Looks like it. Could be a lake or a pond.”

“Think we can try to catch something to eat?” Zoey asked.

“Sure, I’m famished,” Lux said.

They descended the slope, the terrain leveling as they approached the water. As they drew closer, Zoey could see it was indeed a lake, its surface calm as it reflected the pale blue sky. The air around it felt fresher, and Zoey breathed deeply, savoring the clean scent.

Lux crouched by the water’s edge, her fingers trailing through the surface.

“It’s clean,” she said, relief evident.

Zoey knelt beside her, the cool water lapping at her fingertips. “This is a good spot,” she said. “We should take a break here, maybe even camp for the night.”

Lux nodded. “Agreed. And if we’re lucky, we might be able to catch something.” She looked around.

Lux chuckled softly. “I’m sure we can figure something out.”

They spent the next few minutes gathering fishing supplies. They found long, sturdy branches that could serve as fishing rods and some discarded string and drinks cans another hiker must’ve left behind. It wasn’t perfect, but it was better than nothing.

They used the metal from the drinks cans to fashion hooks and put some berries on the end as bait. Do fish like berries? Time would tell on that front! Once their makeshift fishing rods were ready, they settled by the lake’s edge, casting their lines into the water. Zoey felt calmer as she watched the ripples spread across the surface, the quiet lapping of the water soothing her frayed nerves.

“This is nice,” Zoey said. She watched her line bob gently in the water. “It almost makes me forget about everything else.”

Lux glanced at her. “It’s strange, isn’t it? How something as simple as fishing can make everything seem...normal.”

Zoey nodded, her gaze still fixed on the water. “Yeah. I guess it’s a reminder that life goes on, no matter what.”

“Yeah. I can imagine the look on my dad’s face when I tell him I survived so many days out here. There’d be so many stories to share.”

“Yeah,” Zoey said. “Stories. They’d be scared now, you know.”

“Yeah, I know. But my dad won’t give up on me just yet.” Lux’s hands dropped slightly. “I bet he’d give them hell at the station if anyone dared suggest giving up.”

They laughed.

Zoey’s mind drifted, her thoughts wandering to her family and the life she had left behind. She wondered if they were worried about her or still hoping she was alive.

Had Becky Thompson the Fire Chief reached out to her parents already? Were they preparing for life without her?

She shifted slightly.

“You miss them, don’t you?”

Zoey nodded. “Yeah, I do. But I don’t want to think about that right now. I just want to focus on getting through this.”

Lux reached out, placing a hand on Zoey’s shoulder. “We’ll get through it. We’ve made it this far, haven’t we?”

Zoey smiled. “Yeah, we have.”

They continued fishing in silence, the tension easing as they focused on the task. After a while, Zoey felt a tug on her line, and she quickly reeled it in, her heart skipping a beat as she saw a fish wriggling on the end.

“Got one!” she said.

Lux grinned. “Nice catch!”

Zoey carefully removed the fish, holding it up for Lux to see. “It’s sizable.”

Lux laughed. “Who says sizable? That’s a big fish.” Her smile widened. “Let’s see if we can catch a few more.”

They spent the next hour or so fishing, catching a few more small fish.

Lux was in a playful mood as they finally gathered their small haul of fish by the lakeside. She leaned over, inspecting their catch with exaggerated seriousness.

“Well, it looks like we won’t starve after all,” she said, holding up a fish and examining it like it was the most precious thing she had ever seen. “We will knock up another camp fire to cook them on and then I’d say we’re practically gourmet chefs now.”

Zoey chuckled, laying out the fish beside the stones they had collected earlier.

“Gourmet chefs who can’t even start a fire,” she teased, her eyes twinkling.

“Hey now,” Lux said, picking up two stones with determination. “I told you, I’ve seen this in movies. How hard can it be? Of course we can start a fire. We are experts in fire.”

“Yeah, putting them out, not starting them!” Zoey laughed.

Lux struck the stones together aiming to create a spark for the kindling they had gathered. She scrunched her face in concentration, clearly hamming it up to get a rise from Zoey.

Zoey crossed her arms, watching with mock skepticism.

“Right, and in the movies, they usually succeed after two strikes. You’re on, what, twenty now?”

“Patience, grasshopper,” Lux said, grinning as she kept striking the stones together. “Mastering the art of fire making takes time...or at least a lot of trial and error.”

Zoey rolled her eyes but couldn’t suppress a smile. Despite the absurdity of their situation, Lux’s humor was infectious. It was hard not to feel a little lighter around her.

After several failed attempts, Lux flopped beside the fish, sighing dramatically. “Okay, so maybe I’m not quite the fire master I thought I was.”

Zoey nudged her with her shoulder. “We could try rubbing a stick into a hole in a piece of wood, old-school style.”

“Why not?” Lux said with a shrug. “We’re already living in survival mode.”

They spent the next few minutes trying to source suitable candidates for the stick and the piece of wood. Once they were sorted, Lux retook the lead, attempting to start the fire by rubbing the stick between her hands and attempting to create enough friction with the piece of wood to ignite the dry leaves they were aiming to use.



“This would be much easier if we had matches,” Zoey commented dryly.

Lux gave her a mock glare. “Where’s the fun in that? Besides, I’m pretty sure our ancestors did this all the time. If they could do it, so can we. I won’t be beaten.”

After what felt like an eternity of effort, during which Zoey began to doubt their fire making abilities seriously, they finally saw the tiniest flicker of smoke. Lux’s eyes widened, and she doubled her efforts.

“It’s working,” Lux said, her voice laced with surprise and triumph.

Zoey leaned closer, watching as the smoke thickened and a small flame began to take shape. They quickly added more dry leaves and small sticks, nurturing the fragile flame until it grew into a small but steady fire.

“We did it!” Zoey said, beaming as she looked at Lux.

Lux sat back, grinning like a kid discovering a hidden candy stash. “I told you we could do it. I was starting to worry we’d have to eat raw fish.”

Zoey laughed, the sound mingling with the crackling of the fire. “Well, we can enjoy our gourmet meal now.”

They carefully prepared the fish, skewering them on sticks and holding them over the fire. The midday sun was high, casting a warm glow over the rocky terrain. The atmosphere was surprisingly peaceful, the earlier tension from their journey dissipating as they relaxed.

Lux watched the fish roast, the skin turning a delicious golden brown. The scent of cooking fish filled the air, making her mouth water.

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“I have to admit,” Lux said, “this isn’t exactly how I pictured my week going, but it’s not so bad.”

Zoey glanced over at her, a soft smile playing on her lips. “Yeah, who would’ve thought we’d end up here? But at least we’re together.”

They ate in comfortable silence, savoring the simple meal. The fish tasted better than Lux had expected, or maybe it was just the satisfaction of knowing they had managed to catch and cook it themselves.

As they finished their meal, the air around them began to shift.

“Do you hear that?” Lux asked, her voice low.

Zoey tilted her head, listening intently. The sound grew louder and more defined.

“Helicopters!” Zoey exclaimed.

They both scrambled to their feet, scanning the sky. The sound of the helicopters grew louder, the deep thrum of the blades unmistakable now.

“There!” Zoey pointed, and Lux followed her gaze, her heart pounding with hope and disbelief.

Three helicopters appeared in the distance, their shapes small but unmistakable against the clear sky. They flew in formation, heading straight toward the rocky terrain where Lux and Zoey stood.

“They found us,” Lux said, her voice thick with emotion. “They found us!”

Zoey grabbed Lux’s hand, squeezing it tightly as they watched the helicopters draw closer. The noise was deafening now, the wind from the blades kicking up dust and debris around them.

One of the helicopters hovered above them, slowly lowering itself until it was just a few feet off the ground. The side door slid open, and a figure leaned out, waving at them.

Lux’s breath caught in her throat as she recognized the pilot’s gaudy orange hair.

“It’s Jay!” Lux shouted.

Zoey laughed, a sound of pure joy as she waved back at Jay. The helicopter touched down, and the wind from the rotors buffeted them, but they didn’t care. They were finally going to be safe.

Jay jumped out of the helicopter, waving to them with a wide smile. “You two sure know how to survive against the odds,” she said, her voice booming over the noise.

Lux threw her arms around her, hugging her tightly. “Took you long enough to find us!”

Jay chuckled, patting her back. “It takes more than a little fire to keep me away.”

Jay pulled back, looking at both of them with pride and concern. “Let’s get you out of here,” she said, leading them back to the helicopter.

Lux took one last look at the rocky terrain that had been their refuge as they climbed in. The fire still raged in the distance, but they left it behind, heading toward safety.

As the helicopter lifted off, Zoey reached for Lux's hand again, holding it tightly as they soared into the sky. Lux glanced over at her, their eyes meeting in a shared moment of understanding.

They had made it. Together.

The landscape below them blurred as they flew farther away from the fire, and Lux allowed herself to relax finally.

They were going home.

25

LUX

Lux took a deep breath, trying to shake off the residual unease that had settled in her chest since they'd been rescued.

"Is it me or did you grow fatter out there?"

Lux turned to see Joe, her older brother, on a chair next to her hospital bed, and a smile crept up her lips. He'd left his business in Vegas to come all the way to Phoenix Ridge as soon as he heard she was stuck in the fire.

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“You’re still the blond in an XL shirt,” Lux said.

Joe burst out laughing. “I knew it’d take more than a burning mountain to rid you of your scalding tongue.”

“You bet.” She looked around. “Where’s Dad?”

“He finally agreed to have some sleep,” Joey said. “The old man barely had any while you were still out there.”

“Old man?” Lux chuckled. “You should try calling him that to his face.”

“No, thank you.” Joe raised his hands and laughed. His silver cuffs caught the sun, reflecting in Lux’s face.

It had only been a day since they were airlifted off the mountain, and while she was relieved to be safe, a strange emptiness gnawed at her. The adrenaline that had kept her going through the ordeal was gone, replaced by a dull muscle ache and a lingering sense of disorientation.

But it wasn’t just the physical exhaustion that weighed on her.

Without thinking, Lux swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood up. Her body protested with a sharp twinge in her side, but she ignored it. She needed to see Zoey.

The hallway was quiet as Lux made her way to Zoey’s room. The sterile antiseptic smell hung in the air, mingling with the distant hum of hospital machinery. When she

reached Zoey's door, she paused, her hand hovering over the doorknob.

She could hear voices on the other side—familiar voices. She recognized Zoey's soft tone and the deeper, comforting sound of a man's voice, followed by the warm laughter of a woman.

Taking a deep breath, Lux knocked lightly on the door and pushed it open.

Zoey was sitting in bed, her face lighting up with a smile as soon as she saw Lux. Beside her, a woman turned to look at the door. It wasn't difficult to spot the resemblance. This woman had to be Zoey's Mom.

"You must be Lux," the woman said.

Lux nodded. "Yeah, that's me."

Before Lux could say anything else, the woman crossed the room and hugged her tightly. The embrace was solid and comforting, and for a moment, Lux was too stunned to react. It had been so long since anyone had hugged her with such genuine affection.

"Thank you," the woman said as she released Lux. "Thank you for keeping my daughter safe."

Lux felt a lump form in her throat as she looked at Zoey's mom. She wanted to say so much, but the words wouldn't come. She could only nod, her chest tight with gratitude and sadness. The warmth of the embrace lingered.

"Come in," Zoey's dad, said. "We were just talking about how glad we are to have her back."

Lux stepped into the room, feeling slightly out of place but welcomed. Zoey's dad had a kind face and warm eyes, the same as his daughter. He stood up and offered his hand, and Lux shook it, feeling a sense of relief wash over her.

"It's good to meet you finally," he said. "Zoey's told us so much about you."

Zoey blushed slightly, her eyes darting to Lux's before looking away. Lux felt her cheeks warm in response, but she managed a small smile.

"I'm glad to meet you too," Lux said, quiet but sincere. "I'm just glad we both made it out of there."

Zoey's mom gestured to the chair beside Zoey's bed. "Please, sit down. You must be exhausted."

Lux hesitated momentarily before sitting, the chair creaking softly under her weight.

Zoey's mom sat on the edge of the bed, her hand resting lightly on Zoey's. "It's a miracle you two are alive. We were so worried when we heard about the fire."

"It was rough," Lux said, her voice low. "But Zoey is a really strong woman."

Zoey glanced at Lux. "We kept each other going."

"Lux," Zoey's mom said, "how are you feeling? You went through just as much as Zoey did."

"I'm...I'm okay," she said slowly. "Just glad to be out of there, to be honest."

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Zoey's mom nodded. "It will take some time to recover, both physically and mentally. But you're strong, Lux. I can see that."

Lux wasn't sure how to respond to that.

Zoey's dad cleared his throat, his expression serious. "We can't thank you enough, Lux. For everything you did for Zoey."

"I didn't do anything special. I just did my job," Lux said.

Zoey's mom reached over and squeezed her hand. "That's more than enough, Lux. More than enough."

Lux swallowed hard, her eyes stinging with unshed tears. She wasn't used to this—this feeling of having a mother. "Thank you," she managed.

Zoey's parents exchanged a look, and her dad spoke up. "We should let you both get some rest. It's been a long few days."

Zoey's mom stood up and leaned down to kiss Zoey on the forehead. "We'll be back later, sweetheart. Get some rest, okay?"

Zoey nodded, her eyes filled with warmth as she watched her parents leave the room. Lux stood up as well, feeling a strange reluctance to leave.

"Thank you," she said.



Zoey's mom smiled and pulled Lux into another hug. "You're always welcome with us, Lux. Always."

When they finally pulled away, Lux watched Zoey's parents leave the room, the door closing softly behind them. She stood there for a moment, her heart full and heavy at the same time.

Zoey's voice broke through her thoughts. "You okay?"

Lux turned to look at Zoey, who watched her with those kind, understanding eyes. "Yeah," Lux said quietly. "I'm okay." Zoey patted the spot on the bed beside her. "Come here."

Zoey and Lux exchanged glances, but the door opened almost immediately.

It was the crew from the fire station.

"Hey, look who finally made it out of the wild," Jay said.

Zoey grinned, sitting up a little straighter. "You guys found us."

"We weren't going to stop until we did, Lieutenant," Ramirez said.

"I think we can drop the titles now, Ramirez," Zoey said. "It's Zoey."

"You had us all worried sick," Jay said.

Zoey smiled. "We were pretty worried ourselves."

Jay turned to Lux, her expression serious but kind. "You did well out there, Lux. You kept your cool and got Zoey through it. We're all proud of you."

Lux felt pride in her words, but she also felt overwhelmed by the attention. She wasn't used to being in the spotlight like this. "I just did what I had to."

"You did more than that," Jay said, her tone firm. "You kept her safe.."

Ramirez nodded in agreement, her eyes warm as she looked at Lux. "We're just glad you're both okay."

Lux shifted slightly. She was grateful for their support, but being the center of attention like this was uncomfortable.

Zoey's expression softened as she looked at Lux, then back at the crew. "I couldn't have made it without Lux. She was there every step of the way."

Jay nodded, her gaze steady. "You both made it. That's what matters."

The room fell into a comfortable silence as the crew settled in, filling the space with their familiar presence. Lux relaxed a little, the tension in her shoulders easing as she listened to the friendly banter between Zoey and her colleagues.

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After a while, there was another knock at the door, and the legendary Fire Chief Becky Thompson stepped inside.

“Chief,” Zoey said.

“Zoey, Lux, it’s good to see you both safe.”

“Thank you, Chief,” Zoey said. “For a moment, I was afraid we’d be mistaken for dead.”

Becky frowned and shook her head slowly. “Not around here, Lieutenant. We stick with our own. We never gave up on you- not for a second.”

“Thanks, Chief.”

Becky’s gaze shifted to Lux, and for a moment, she thought she saw the faintest hint of a smile. “Besides, Lux’s father and I go way back. He would have my neck if I didn’t get his princess back in one piece.”

Lux laughed. “I can imagine that.”

Becky nodded. “I’m proud of both of you.”

Zoey broke the silence. “Well, we’re here now, right? That’s what matters.”

Ramirez grinned, the tension in the room easing. “Yeah. That and your new awards.”

Everyone paused and exchanged glances. Ramirez's smile soon waned when she noticed that she was the only one still smiling.

"What's she talking about, Chief?" Lux asked.

Chief Thompson shook her head before clearing her throat. "Well, since that's already out there, the station has decided to award you two an award for your resilience and bravery."

"That doesn't come with an overdue leave, does it?" Zoey asked.

Chief Thompson laughed. "You can take as much rest as you want. The award ceremony will be in a week. You two should be discharged pretty soon and should be all good for the awards ceremony. Unless you run off up that mountain again."

The crew laughed. Lux found herself smiling too.

As the conversation flowed, Lux found herself listening more than speaking, content to soak in the presence of her colleagues. They were indeed family.

The chief stayed for a while, occasionally joining in the conversation but mostly observing. Lux noticed how her gaze would occasionally land on her. Just like her father, she was always looking out for her.

Eventually, the chief stood up, signaling it was time for her to leave. "I'll let you all get some rest."

The crew also stood, saying their goodbyes with promises to check in later.

As the last crew filed out of the room, Becky turned to Zoey and Lux one last time. "You both did well out there. Remember that."

Zoey nodded, her expression serious. “We will, Chief.”

Becky gave them a final nod before stepping out of the room, the door closing softly behind her. The room fell silent once more, the weight of everything that had happened settling over them.

Zoey let out a long breath, her shoulders sagging with exhaustion. “That was...a lot.”

“Yeah,” Lux said. “So, how does it feel to be a hero?”

Zoey chuckled, shaking her head. “Right, because getting us through a wildfire is just a casual stroll for you.” She rolled her eyes.

Lux smirked, leaning forward slightly. “Well, I did have some pretty great company. Couldn’t have done it without you.”

Zoey’s cheeks flushed a light pink as she met Lux’s gaze. “We make a good team.”

“That we do,” Lux agreed, her voice softening. She glanced around the room before returning her gaze to Zoey. “Think they’ll ever let us live this down?”

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Zoey laughed, her eyes sparkling. “Probably not. We’re going to be legends at the station.”

Lux grinned. “I always wanted to be remembered for something. Maybe not quite like this, though.”

“Hey, fame is fame,” Zoey teased. “I’m just glad we’re both here to tell the tale.”

Zoey’s smile softened as she closed the distance between them, pressing a gentle kiss to Lux’s lips. The moment was brief but filled with unspoken promises and relief.

As they pulled apart, Lux’s eyes shone with happiness. “You sure we won’t go on a vacation up that mountain sometime?”

Zoey chuckled, resting her forehead against Lux’s. “You’re impossible.”

“And you love it,” Lux replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

Zoey’s smile widened. “Yeah, I really do.”

Zoey squeezed her hand and gazed into her eyes. “I love you, too.” Zoey smiled and Lux felt her insides flutter.

She loves me.

## ZOEY

It'd been a week already. She spent most of the time with her parents and colleagues, who never stopped dropping by to see her. No matter how much she reminded them that she was better now, they still wouldn't stop with the gifts.

Zoey stood at the city hall's entrance, taking in the event's grandeur.

The room was filled with people dressed in their finest, the soft hum of conversations blending with the clinking of glasses and the occasional burst of laughter. The walls were draped in deep red and gold tapestries, giving the entire room a warm, almost festive feel.

The town organized the event to honor the bravery and dedication of firefighters and emergency responders, and tonight, Zoey and Lux will be among those recognized. Zoey felt a mix of pride and nervousness bubbling up inside her as she glanced around the room, searching for a familiar face.

She spotted Lux standing a few feet away in full best uniform. She was so striking looking and conversing with a tall man who looked like her. There was no mistaking the resemblance—thesame strong jawline and intense blue eyes. Zoey knew instantly that this had to be Lux's father.

Zoey observed their interaction, noting the ease with which they spoke and how Lux's eyes softened when she looked at him. It was clear that they shared a deep bond, one built on years of love and mutual respect. Zoey felt a pang of something she couldn't quite name—perhaps a mix of admiration and longing—watching them together.

As if sensing Zoey's gaze, Lux turned and caught her eye. A smile spread across Lux's face, and she waved Zoey over.

Zoey made her way through the crowd of people, her heart beating a little faster as she approached Lux and her father. When she reached them, Lux's father turned to face her, his expression warm and welcoming.

"Dad, this is Zoey," Lux said. "Zoey, this is my father, Robert Valentine."

Zoey extended her hand, her smile a little shy. "It's nice to meet you, Mr. Valentine."

Robert Valentine took her hand firmly, his smile reaching his eyes.

Lux's sharp blue gaze met Zoey's eyes and Zoey saw all the warmth of love in her eyes and she liked it.

Before she could find her voice to say anything else, the sound of a microphone being tapped filled the room, drawing everyone's attention to the stage at the front of the hall, the legendary Phoenix Ridge Fire Chief Becky Thompson stood there, her presence commanding and authoritative, yet there was a warmth in her eyes as she looked out over the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the chief began, her voice carrying easily across the room, "tonight, we are here to honor the bravery and dedication of those who have gone above and beyond the call of duty. We have faced many challenges this year, but our team has remained strong, committed, and unwavering in their resolve."

Zoey felt a surge of pride as she listened to the chief's words, knowing that she and Lux were part of that team. It was humbling to be recognized for something that had become integral to her identity.

The chief continued, her voice steady and filled with conviction. "Tonight, we want to pay special tribute to two of our own who showed extraordinary courage by putting their own lives at risk to save civilians and then determination to survive in the face



of overwhelming odds when they were trapped by the forest fire. Lieutenant Zoey Knight and Chief Pilot Lux Valentine, please join me on stage.”

Zoey’s heart skipped a beat as she heard her name. She glanced at Lux, who gave her an encouraging nod. Together, they made their way through the crowd, the significance of the moment settling over them.

As they stepped onto the stage, the applause was deafening and echoed off the hall’s walls. Zoey felt a rush of pride, gratitude, and a deep sense of accomplishment. But more than that, she felt an overwhelming sense of connection to Lux, who stood beside her, a steady presence amid the chaos.

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Becky handed them each a small, metal plaque. “Zoey Knight and Lux Valentine, for your bravery, dedication, and unwavering commitment to saving lives, we honor you tonight. You are a testament to the strength and resilience of this team, and we are proud to have you with us.”

Zoey felt a lump rise in her throat as she accepted the plaque. She glanced at Lux, who looked at her with a mixture of pride and something deeper, unspoken but understood.

They stepped off the stage, the applause still ringing in their ears, and Zoey found herself gravitating toward Lux. There was so much she wanted to say, so much she needed to express, but the words seemed to elude her.

Lux seemed to sense Zoey’s thoughts, and she reached out, taking Zoey’s hand in hers.

Zoey felt a deep sense of contentment as they walked through the crowd to return to their seats for the rest of the event. They had made it through the fire, fear, and uncertainty, and they came out stronger on the other side. And as long as she had Lux by her side, Zoey knew they could face whatever came next.

After the ceremony, everyone lingered to talk. Zoey glanced at Lux, standing a few feet away, conversing with some of their colleagues. The warmth of the event still lingered in the air, and the memory of receiving their awards felt surreal. But something else on Zoey’s mind had been brewing since they had made it back from the mountain.

The moment felt right. She'd been holding back, unsure of how Lux might react, but Zoey knew she had to leap. She approached Lux, her heart beating a little faster with each step.

"Lux," Zoey said.

Lux turned. "Hey, what's up?"

Zoey hesitated for a second. "I was thinking...now that everything's calmed down a bit, maybe we could, you know, go out sometime? Like, on a proper date."

Lux's eyes widened slightly, a hint of surprise flickering across her face, but then she smiled. "I'd like that."

Zoey exhaled the breath she'd been holding. "Great. How about tonight?"

"Tonight sounds perfect."

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Later that evening, Zoey stood outside a fancy restaurant, butterflies fluttering in her stomach. She'd chosen the place carefully, wanting everything to be just right for their first official date. The soft glow of the lights from the restaurant's windows cast a warm hue over the entrance, and the quiet hum of conversation floated through the air.

Zoey adjusted the collar of her jacket, glancing down the street for any sign of Lux. She didn't have to wait long. Lux soon appeared, walking toward her with that same confident stride Zoey had come to admire. She looked stunning, her outfit simple yet elegant, and the sight of her made Zoey's breath catch in her throat.

“Hey,” Zoey greeted.

“Hey yourself,” Lux replied. “You look great.”

“So do you,” Zoey said, feeling a warmth spread through her chest. “Ready to head in?”

Lux nodded. The interior was cozy and intimate, with dim lighting and plush seating offering privacy. A waiter led them to a table near the back, away from the bustle of the main dining area.

As they sat down, Zoey glanced at Lux, taking in the way the candlelight danced across her features. Zoey couldn’t take her eyes off Lux as they settled into their seats. The soft glow of the candlelight made Lux’s features even more striking, and Zoey felt that familiar flutter in her chest.

“It’s strange, isn’t it?” Lux said, her voice low and intimate. “How much I missed you even though we were only apart for a few days.”

Zoey smiled. “I know what you mean. I kept thinking about you the whole time. Even in the hospital, all I could think about was when I’d see you again.”

Lux’s gaze softened as she reached across the table, her fingers brushing lightly against Zoey’s hand. “It’s like we went through all that just to end up here, in this moment.”

Zoey’s breath hitched at the touch, and she turned her hand over, lacing her fingers with Lux’s. The connection between them felt electric, charged with the tension of everything they’d been through and the feelings they were finally allowing themselves to explore.

“You have no idea how much I missed you,” Zoey whispered.

Lux’s thumb traced small circles on the back of Zoey’s hand. “I think I have some idea,” she said, her tone playful.

Zoey’s pulse quickened as she leaned in closer, the space between them shrinking. The restaurant around them seemed to fade away, leaving the two in a bubble of shared emotion and anticipation.

“I couldn’t stop thinking about you,” Zoey admitted, her eyes locked on Lux’s lips.

Lux’s smile was slow and warm. “I couldn’t stop thinking about you either,” she said softly. “And now that we’re here, I don’t want to think about anything else.”

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Zoey's breath caught as Lux's hand tightened around hers, and for a moment, the world outside their little corner of the restaurant ceased to exist.

"That sounded so sweet," Lux said. "You're a keeper."

Zoey backed off somewhat. Lux squinted.

"I shouldn't have said that," Lux said. I?—"

"It's not that," Zoey replied. "It's just the last person who said that to me was...well, my ex."

Lux's expression softened. "You don't have to if you're not ready."

"No, I want to," Zoey said. "We were together for a few years. It started great, but I got so consumed with firefighting. I thought I could balance it all, but I couldn't. And then after the accident—the one I told you about, with the child—I just...shut down."

Lux squeezed her hand gently. "That's a lot to carry."

Zoey nodded, feeling a lump form in her throat. "I tried to make it work, but I wasn't present anymore, not for her or anyone. The guilt, the grief—it was all too much. She deserved better than that, better than me."

Lux leaned in closer, her voice soft but firm. "You're not that person anymore, Zoey. What happened wasn't your fault, and you've done everything possible to move forward. You deserve happiness too."

As the evening wore on, the conversation grew quieter and more intimate.

“I guess we should probably focus on enjoying tonight, huh?” Zoey said.

Lux chuckled. “Yeah, I think we’ve earned a little fun.”

Just then, the waiter approached with their meals, setting the plates down with a flourish. The delicious aroma filled the air, making Zoey’s stomach growl in anticipation.

“Looks amazing,” Zoey said, her eyes widening as she took in the beautifully plated dishes.

Lux grinned, picking up her fork. “I think it’s time to dig in.”

They both began to eat, the conversation shifting to lighter topics: favorite foods, funny stories from their childhoods, and plans for the future.

“My place?” Zoey suggested that the second they were done eating.

Lux’s eyes met Zoey’s, and for a moment, neither spoke. Then Lux nodded, a small smile playing on her lips. “I’d like that.”

27

LUX

Lux sat on the edge of Zoey’s couch, the soft fabric brushing against her fingers as she ran them along the seam. The room was dimly lit, with only the warm glow of a single lamp casting shadows that danced on the walls.

It was almost too quiet, and the silence seemed to amplify the thudding of Lux's heart in her chest.

Zoey was in the kitchen, her back turned to Lux as she poured two glasses of water. Lux watched her, taking in the way Zoey moved with a calm grace that she had come to admire. There was something comforting about being in Zoey's space surrounded by the little pieces of her life, yet Lux couldn't shake the nervous energy coursing through her.

Tonight had been perfect. Dinner had been filled with easy conversation, laughter, and a connection that had grown stronger with each passing moment. And now, here they were, alone in Zoey's apartment, the air between them thick with unspoken emotions.

Zoey returned with the glasses, offering one to Lux as she sat beside her on the couch. Their knees brushed as Zoey settled in.

"Thank you," Lux said.

Zoey smiled, her eyes soft as she looked at Lux. "No problem."

"You have a beautiful place here," Lux said.

Zoey chuckled playfully. "Now you're just teasing. I barely got settled in before we got our compulsory forest trip."



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Lux laughed. “No jokes, my house looks way worse.”

“Not me,” Zoey said. “Since my dad was in the military, everything had to be in order around the house. I bet he’d give me the side-eye if he saw my room looking this way.”

“He seemed like a pretty chill guy to me.”

“Oh, he is chill. Maybe even warmer now that he’s grown older.”

Lux loved the beauty in Zoey’s eyes when she talked about her father.

“Mom likes you,” Zoey said.

Lux’s heart skipped a beat.

Zoey chuckled and continued. “She kept asking about you.”

“And?”

“And I told her you’re fine.” Zoey pushed a stray bit of hair away from her eyes.

“She seemed to have this idea that we were an item.”

“Oh.” Lux let out an uncomfortable chuckle. Zoey joined in, but it fizzled out as awkwardly as it began.

They sat there for a moment, the silence stretching out between them. Lux felt her

emotions pressing down on her, urging her to speak and say the things she'd held back for so long. But the words were caught in her throat, tangled up with fear and uncertainty.

She glanced over at Zoey, taking in the way the light highlighted the curve of her jaw and the softness of her expression. Zoey's presence had become a balm for Lux's soul, soothing the raw edges of her heart in ways she hadn't expected. And yet the thought of opening up and exposing the vulnerability she'd kept hidden for so long was terrifying.

But Lux knew she had to do it. She couldn't keep running from her feelings, not when they had brought her to this moment, to this person.

"Zoey," Lux began.

Zoey turned to face her fully. "Yeah?"

Lux took a deep breath, trying to gather her thoughts. "I-I've been thinking a lot about us. About what we've been through and where we are now."

Zoey nodded, encouraging Lux to continue.

"I never expected any of this," Lux admitted. "I never expected to feel this way about someone, especially not in the middle of everything that's happened. But I do. I care about you, Zoey. A lot."

Zoey's eyes softened, a small smile tugging at the corners of her lips. "Lux..."

"I'm not good at this," Lux rushed on, her words coming faster now that she'd started. "I've never been good at letting people in, trusting them with my heart. But you? You make me want to try. You make me want to be better."

Zoey reached out, her hand gently covering Lux's where it rested on her knee. The touch was warm, grounding Lux in the moment and giving her the courage to keep going.

"I'm scared," Lux admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. "I'm scared of getting hurt, of messing this up. But more than that, I'm scared of not taking the chance. Of not seeing where this could go."

"Lux, you don't have to be scared. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere."

Lux felt a rush of emotion at Zoey's words, the sincerity in her voice wrapping around Lux's heart like a comforting embrace. She turned her hand over, intertwining her fingers with Zoey's, holding on tightly as if to anchor herself.

"I don't want to lose this," Lux said, trembling. "I don't want to lose you."

Zoey's thumb brushed over the back of Lux's hand. "You're not going to lose me, Lux. I promise."

For a moment, they just sat there, holding onto each other, letting the silence speak the words they didn't need to say. Lux could feel the steady beat of Zoey's heart through their joined hands, a rhythm that matched her own.

Lux hesitated for a second, then took a deep breath. "Zoey, would you be my girlfriend? Like, officially?"

Zoey's eyes sparkled with warmth, and she smiled.

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“I know it sounds a bit rushed, but I’m certain I want no one else, Zoey. I want you.”

“Yes,” she said softly. “I’d love that.”

Relief flooded through Lux, and she couldn’t help but smile back, a genuine, unguarded smile. “Good,” she said, her voice a little stronger now. “That’s good.”

Zoey leaned in for a kiss, her eyes never leaving Lux’s.

Lux melted into the kiss, letting go of the fear that had held her back for so long. There was no room for doubt or anything except the overwhelming sense of rightness that filled her. She caressed Zoey’s face with her fingers.

The kiss deepened, becoming more urgent. Zoey’s hands slid around Lux’s waist, pulling her closer, their bodies pressing together.

Lux’s fingers tangled in Zoey’s hair, and she could feel the heat of Zoey’s body against her own. Her scent was intoxicating, a blend of something floral and earthy. Lux’s heart raced as she became more aware of every sensation.

“I love you,” Lux whispered against Zoey’s lips, her voice trembling.

“I love you too,” Zoey replied, her breath warm against Lux’s skin. “So much.”

Their lips met again, more forcefully this time, with a desperation that spoke of all their shared feelings.

Lux's hands roamed Zoey's back, feeling her muscles tense and relax beneath her fingertips. Zoey's hands moved in slow, deliberate circles on Lux's sides, tracing the curve of her body. Lux could feel the heat of Zoey's touch radiating through her clothes.

"I want you," Lux murmured between kisses. "Badly."

"Me too," Zoey said, her voice a low murmur. "I didn't know how much I needed you until you were here."

The kisses became more fervent, their lips moving together with an urgent and perfect rhythm. Zoey's hands slid under Lux's shirt, touching the bare skin of her back.

Lux shivered, her breathing becoming more erratic. She reached up, tugging Zoey's shirt over her head, tossing it aside.

Zoey also responded by pulling off Lux's shirt, and they continued to kiss, their bodies pressed together. The sensation of skin against skin was electrifying.

It was different this time. They were both clean, uninjured. Zoey's hair was silky and smelled like honey.

Lux's hands explored the curves of Zoey's body, each touch drawing a gasp or a moan from both of them. They broke the kiss only to gasp for air before resuming, their lips meeting with equal enthusiasm.

"Tell me you love me," Lux said, her voice filled with need.

Zoey chuckled, stilling somewhat and holding Lux closer. "I love you." Her hands trailed Lux's sides. "I love you so much."

“I love you too,” Lux said, her voice choked with emotion. “More than I thought possible.”

Zoey’s kisses traveled from Lux’s lips to her neck, leaving a trail of warmth that made Lux’s entire body react.

Lux tilted her head back, giving Zoey better access. She could feel Zoey’s lips brushing against her collarbone, each touch sending a shiver down her spine.

Zoey’s hands moved to Lux’s pants, deftly undoing the button and zipper. Lux’s heart pounded as she felt Zoey’s touch against her skin, and she shivered with anticipation.

She reached for Zoey’s pants, her hands trembling slightly as she worked.

Once they were both undressed, they continued to explore each other’s bodies, their hands and lips moving with a sense of urgency and longing.

Lux felt a profound connection with Zoey, their bodies moving in sync as they expressed their love through touch and kisses.

“I’ve never felt this close to anyone,” Lux said.

“Neither have I. You mean everything to me.”

Lux was on top and she pushed with her right hand between Zoey’s legs.

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“Open your legs,” she urged and Zoey’s thighs obediently parted for her hand.

At the same time she felt Zoey’s hand seeking between her own legs and she opened to allow Zoey access.

They moved as though synchronised, sliding their fingers through each other’s wetness and Lux felt herself groaning in anticipation. She felt more turned on than she ever had before.

Zoey’s body was hot and writhing beneath her, her breasts pressing against Lux.

Her voice was breathy. “Please, Lux... Fuck me... I need to feel you inside me.”

Lux didn’t need asking twice. She pressed her fingers hard and deep inside Zoey enjoying Zoey’s loud moan as she did so.

She instantly felt Zoey’s fingers copying her actions and pressing hard and deep inside her own body.

“Oh, fuck, Zoey.” Lux growled, “You feel so fucking good.”

Lux had curved her fingers upwards to press against Zoey’s G spot and was beginning to rock them in and out. Zoey was doing the same to her. They moved in tandem, completely together and Lux felt Zoey begin to tighten around her fingers as her breathing got more ragged. Lux felt her own orgasm building.

“Come with me,” she growled as she pressed her thumb tight against Zoey’s clitoris

as she ground her own pelvis down seeking pressure on her own clit.

Delicious pleasure built deep within her.

“Always,” Zoey whispered and captured her mouth in a deep sensual kiss, their tongues tangling with each other’s.

Zoey exploded on her hand wet and hot and Lux felt her own orgasm crash through her at the exact same time.

They kissed right through it, deep and long. Their fingers still buried deep as they rode out the waves of their climax. Lux had never known anything like the intensity of it.

When their fingers finally slid out of each other Lux sat up straddling Zoey’s hips and brought her own fingers to her mouth tasting Zoey’s pleasure from her fingers. She licked them and then sucked them deep into her mouth. She looked into Zoey’s lovely brown eyes as she did.

Zoey didn’t look away.

“Sorry, “ Lux shrugged. “Couldn’t quite help myself. You taste fucking exquisite.” She smiled her most roguish smile at Zoey as she finished enjoying the taste of Zoey on her tongue and she watched as Zoey’s own right hand moved to her own mouth as she lay reclined beneath Lux.

Lux could see the slick wetness of her own orgasm on Zoey’s fingers. She watched in awe as Zoey began to sensually lick her fingers without breaking Lux’s gaze once. Slowly pushing each one into and out of her mouth with a satisfying wet pop.

It was the sexiest thing Lux had ever seen.



Lux swallowed, lost for words for maybe the first time ever.

“There’s something I’d really like,” Zoey purred when she finally removed her fingers from her mouth.

“What’s that?” Lux managed to find some words finally.

“I want to come in your mouth the exact same time you come in mine.”

“Oh, really?” Lux raised her eyebrows as she felt herself suddenly very very turned on again. “69?” she asked.

Zoey nodded, her eyes full of seduction, “Lie back, I want to be on top.”

Lux gulped again as Zoey sat up and pushed her backwards. Zoey was so incredibly sexy. Her dark silky hair was messy and her lips were so very sensual as she extracted herself and then spun herself around straddling a leg over Lux’s face.

As Lux watched Zoey’s beautiful wet pussy opening and lowering onto her face she thought she might combust there and then. But, she managed to hold off her own orgasm and set to tasting Zoey again and pleasing her with her tongue and mouth. Zoey’s groans and moans as she began to grind down onto Lux’s mouth made it very clear she was enjoying herself.

Lux pushed her tongue fully inside Zoey as far as she could and thought she might down in Zoey’s resulting wetness. She felt Zoey grinding her hips down, taking her pleasure.

Oh, fuck, she is so sexy.

Lux slid her tongue out and moved back to alternating long strokes that teased Zoey’s

anus and reached all the way up to her clit with nibbling and sucking at whatever she could put her mouth on.

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Zoey's breathing quickened, "Oh, Baby I'm so close," she purred and with that she dipped her head between Lux's legs and began to eat her out with no holding back.

Lux felt herself right up there on the edge of orgasm straight away as she ate Zoey out with equal hunger. They devoured each other as though they were the feast they had craved for so long.

When Lux felt Zoey begin to come and flood her mouth with joy, she released her own orgasm coming in hot wet pulses again and again. They kept their mouths on each other and they both kept coming in a way Lux had never really thought possible. It felt transcendent.

Lu thought she never ever wanted to stop licking Zoey but eventually they both did and Zoey rolled off her, turning around, they both lay in wetness as Zoey kissed her long and deep and mingling the tastes of both their sex. It felt like the most intimate moment in the world.

As their lovemaking peaked, Lux felt a wave of emotions flooding her. The connection she felt with Zoey was profound, and she knew that this moment was something they would both remember forever.

Something they'd both share forever.

They held each other close, their breathing gradually returning to normal as they lay in wetness and basked in the afterglow of their passion.

"I love you," Lux said again, her voice filled with awe and tenderness.

“I love you too,” Zoey replied, her eyes filled with affection. “Always.”

They remained in each other’s arms, savoring the closeness and warmth of their shared experience. The silence that followed was filled with a deep sense of contentment and connection as they both realized they had found something special in each other.

## EPILOGUE

### ZOEY

Zoey stepped onto the porch of their cozy home, the late afternoon sun casting a warm glow over the landscape. The house sat near the edge of the forest, where they had both found peace after everything they’d been through. The air was filled with the soft rustling of leaves and the distant chirping of birds, a soundtrack to the life they had built together.

She looked out over the yard where their rescue dogs Bill and Ben, chased each other around, their tails wagging with pure joy. Nearby, their cat, Binx, a sleek black creature with striking green eyes, lounged on a sun-warmed rock, watching the dogs with amusement and disdain.

The house itself was modest but filled with warmth. Zoey had fallen in love with it the moment she saw it. The wooden beams, the large windows that let in plenty of light, and the way it blended seamlessly with the surrounding nature were perfect. Inside, the walls were decorated with photos from their adventures, both before and after they had met, and mementos of the life they had started to build together.

Zoey glanced over her shoulder, smiling as she saw Lux moving around inside the house. She was preparing something in the kitchen, her movements sure and steady. It was a simple life, but it filled Zoey with a deep sense of contentment. This was what

they had both wanted: a life together, surrounded by the things they loved.

Lux caught Zoey watching her and smiled back, her eyes sparkling with that familiar warmth. “What are you doing out there? Just staring into space?” Lux asked, her voice carrying through the open window.

“Just thinking,” she said as she stepped back inside. She walked over to Lux, wrapping her arms around her from behind and resting her chin on her shoulder. “I still can’t believe this is our life now.”

Lux leaned back into her embrace, sighing contentedly. “It’s pretty great, isn’t it?”

Zoey nodded, pressing a kiss to Lux’s cheek. “Better than I ever imagined.”

Lux turned slightly to look at her, a playful smile tugging at her lips. “Even with the chaos of having three rescues?”

Zoey laughed, the sound light and carefree. “Especially with the chaos. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

The two of them stayed like that momentarily, enjoying their lives closeness and quiet rhythm. The smell of something delicious wafted from the stove, filling the house with a comforting aroma.

“What are you making?” Zoey asked.

“Just some pasta.” She glanced back at the stove. “Thought we could have something simple tonight.”

Zoey’s stomach growled in response, and she grinned. “Sounds perfect.”

Curious about what was happening in the kitchen, Binx padded over and rubbed against Zoey's leg, purring loudly. Zoey reached to scratch behind its ears, earning a satisfied chirp.

"You spoil them, you know that?" Lux teased..

Zoey shrugged, unrepentant. "They deserve it."

Lux shook her head, but her expression had no honest admonishment. Instead, she turned off the stove and dished out the pasta. They worked together, setting the table in comfortable silence.

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Once everything was ready, they sat down to eat, their conversation flowing easily as they talked about their day, their plans for the weekend, and the little things that made up their lives together. Zoey loved these moments. They were so simple and ordinary yet filled with so much love.

As they finished their meal, Zoey leaned back in her chair, looking out the window at the trees surrounding their home. The sky was beginning to darken, the first hints of twilight creeping in. It was a beautiful sight, one that never failed to calm her.

Lux followed her gaze, a soft smile on her lips. "It's so peaceful here."

Zoey nodded, reaching across the table to take Lux's hand. "I'm glad we found this place."

"Me too," Lux said, squeezing her hand gently. "It's home."

They sat like that for a while, their hands intertwined, the love they shared filling the space between them. Zoey felt a surge of gratitude for everything they had: each other, this home, the life they were building.

Lux suddenly stood up, a mischievous glint in her eye. "How about we dip in the lake before it gets too dark?"

Zoey raised an eyebrow, her curiosity piqued. "Now? You mean right now?"

Lux grinned, her enthusiasm infectious. "Why not? It's the perfect way to end the day."

Zoey couldn't help but laugh, shaking her head in disbelief. "You're impossible, you know that?"

"But you love me for it," Lux teased, already moving toward the door.

Zoey rolled her eyes playfully but couldn't stop the smile that spread across her face. "Yeah, I do."

She followed Lux outside, the cool evening air wrapping around them as they made their way down to the lake with Bill and Ben running enthusiastically ahead. The water was calm, reflecting the fading light of day. It was a place they often came to when they wanted to unwind, a private sanctuary just for the two of them.

Lux didn't waste any time, quickly shedding her clothes and wading naked into the water with a carefree laugh. Zoey watched her, her heart swelling with love for the woman who had become her everything. Lux's nude body was more beautiful than ever, all long lean muscles and beautiful firm breasts. Lux was so full of life, so fearless in her pursuit of happiness, and Zoey couldn't imagine her life without her.

"Well?" Lux called out, her voice echoing across the lake. "Are you coming in or what?"

Zoey chuckled, shaking her head in disbelief. "You're crazy."

"But you love me," Lux countered, her eyes shining with amusement.

Zoey smiled, warmth spreading through her as she began to undress. "Yeah, I do."

As she waded into the lake, the cool water enveloping her, Zoey felt a sense of peace settle over her. This was their life now, filled with love, laughter, and the quiet moments that made everything worthwhile.



And she wouldn't have it any other way.