

A Midwinter Night's Dream

A Misfile fanfiction by ShadowDragon8685

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She was warm. And comfortable. Warm and comfortable and content. She wasn't entirely sure where she was, but it was nice. Her eyes opened—oh, of course. The Upton house. Emily smiled softly, trying to remember details. They were hazy, but where she was was clear—she was lying on the couch (the couch that Rumisiel usually slept on, but he was nowhere in sight).

Mmm. Is that a movie?

Yes indeed; it was that ancient, stop motion animated movie about Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, playing on the TV, framed by the snow gently falling outside, lit by the light from the street, in the dark of night. She reached out—ahh; there were a lot of blankets curled up tightly around her, and something very, very soft and comfortable under her. A pillow? Emily's hand crept down. With a smile she realized she was lying on Ash, slightly lower on the couch so that her head rested between Ash's undeniably impressive breasts, with her back on Ash's stomach. It was *warm*.

With a soft, "Mmmmm," she rolled her shoulders—ah, yes; Ash's arms were around them, holding her warmly. She looked up—Ash was watching the movie, with half-attention paid to her. Emily clasped her orange-haired tuner's hands, tenderly squeezing them. She was squeezed back in return, and Emily leaned up, twisting. Ash leaned down—lips met.

My Ash. Not yours, tramp. My Ash...

"Emily! Emily!"

It wasn't Ash's voice; Emily realized her mother was in the doorway, looking quite, *quite* angry. A blush, hotter than the sun, ran over Emily's face.

"Wake up!"

McArthur Residence, December 2004, 6:40 AM

With a start, Emily shot upright. She wasn't in the Upton house; she was in her own bed, decidedly alone, though she had somehow worked herself into more or less the same position on her bed with her back on a pillow. Pale sunlight was filtering in from the window, but just barely. It was dawn.

"Emily, it's nearly seven! What's gotten into you?"

Emily's face was red-hot, looking around. She took her alarm clock from the stand—she had set it.

"I heard your alarm go off, but you didn't get up."

"Oh, damn... I had a nightmare, mom." Slipping out of bed, she said, "I need to get ready."

Her mother stood with her arms crossed. "Yes, you do. The snow out there is getting bad, and you drive that rear-wheel slide-machine."

Emily groaned—her mother loved to point out that rear wheel drive was a nightmare in the snow. "I'll be fine, mom. Ash is picking me up—the Monster XR has all-time four-wheel drive."

Her mother only snorted softly, and shook her head. "Hurry up. You can't be late you know. Tardy students do poorly and end up in the slum."

"I know, I know!"

It might well have been one of her faster performances in getting ready for school, except for the fact that her brain wasn't even on the tasks at hand. She was burning up about that dream. In mid-shower, neither eyes nor mind were on the task of making it a world record for fast showering.

I must be going crazy. These dreams are getting more and more frequent. And they've stopped being sex dreams so much as romance dreams. I'm messed-up in the head.

Lost in reverie, Emily berated herself mentally. She *was* a heterosexual female—right? Yes! Of course she was, she told herself. Hadn't she lost her virginity at the age of fifteen (*And she'd hated it; and was it fifteen, or was it thirteen now? Ugh—best not think about that.*)? She had gone dating before (*once, with a boy who was trying to sort out his own sexuality, and the kiss had felt hollow—nothing*). Hadn't she spent her adolescence fantasizing and lusting over a male teen-model (*who turned out to be gay*)?

“Shut up!” Emily silenced that nagging, nay-saying part of her mind with a great deal of finality by hurling the bar of soap at the forward wall of the shower. Then she blushed hotly, realizing just how tossed-for-a-loop she was that she felt the need to lash out.

Ugh... damn it Ash. Why can't I get you out of my head? You're my best friend, not my lover!

Emily sighed bent over to pick up the two broken halves of the soap, and put the bar's pieces back in the holder. Then her mother's shouting voice interrupted her again. “*Emily!* It's seven *twenty!* What are you doing?”

She gulped. 7:20—she'd been in the shower a full forty minutes. She turned around and around, rinsed off, and darted out of the shower. This time she probably did set a world record for fastest dry-off, while her mother nagged her about her poor sleeping habits. Ten minutes later, her mother told her through the bedroom door that she was leaving, and that if Emily were late for school, she wouldn't hear the end of it.

Just what I need in my life—another guilt trip. Thanks, mom.

With teeth set, Emily accepted that her hair would just have to be a bit damp, as she collected her things and ran downstairs, taking her dryer, so that she could continue blow-drying her hair until Ash arrived.

Upton Residence, 8:04 AM

“Yeah! Who's the master? Who's the master? Woot!” Rumisiel leapt from the couch, spiking the controller and doing a happy-dance jig around the couch, while Ash glared at him with the fury of a thousand Hells. Rumi had not only just beaten her at NFS: Underground 2; he *demolished* her so hard at the start that she came in fifth, a full fifteen seconds after his first-place victory.

“You cheated!”

It was only natural—the idea of Rumisiel beating Ash at any kind of racing? That was almost a blasphemy in and of itself, but Rumisiel shook his head. “Did not. Nyaaaaah! You just got owned.”

Ash contemplated heaving a heavy glass coaster (actually an ashtray, but as nobody in the house smoked it had been bought as a coaster) at Rumisiel's head. “Bullshit! You took me out at the start! Okay, maybe that's possible, but there's no way in hell you could've placed first!”

The angel stuck his tongue out. “Did so. I'm just good, Ash.”

Raising a fist and growling softly, Ash considered clouting the cheating stoner, but the phone rang. Reaching over, Ash picked it up. “Hello?” She sank back into the couch, as her father's voice came over the other end.

“Ash? My flight's been grounded. Weather reports are calling for the storm to get worse. You'll be okay, right?”

“Yeah, I will be. The snow's getting worse, but we're well-stocked, dad.”

“Good. And remember, if the heat goes out, alcohol will *not* make you warmer, it'll make you lose heat faster.”

“Right. Wish me luck convincing Rumisiel, but I'll remember, dad.”

“Good luck, and remind him he's not allowed in my liquor cabinet in any event. Love you, Ash.”

“Uh, yeah... Goodbye, Dad.”

It was still weird, Ash thought, that her father was a lot more loving towards her than he was when she was a boy. Ash was still somewhat uncomfortable with that, but she let it slide, and picked up the

controller Rumisiel had thrown at the ground, putting it back. Rumi was still dancing his victory jig behind her.

The phone rang again. “Who now?” she wondered aloud, as she picked up the phone. “Hello?”

“**Where the hell are you?**” Emily’s voice was quite angry—perhaps a bit manic. “You were supposed to be here like, fifteen minutes ago!”

“Uhhh, Em? Have you looked out the window? It’s murder out there. They’ve got to have canceled school. I haven’t seen any buses, and anyway, Rumi said it was canceled.”

“Uh, I said I *wished* it was canceled. I didn’t check.”

Ash blanched. “Uh...” She gulped. “I’ll be right there!” Dropping the phone back on the receiver, Ash leapt from the couch at a dead heat, grabbing Rumisiel with one hand and her backpack with the other, making a beeline for the garage. She hit the garage door opener and yanked open her car door, fumbling with the keys as she slid into the racing drivers-side seat. “Get in the back, Rumisiel! She’ll need to jump straight in.”

Rumisiel had barely gotten in and closed the door before Ash had put the Monster in gear and backed it out of the garage, turning around in the driveway and putting the car in forward gear. The snow was coming down thick and crazy, and the ground was icy—a traction nightmare.

“*I can’t believe they didn’t cancel today!*” Ash growled, Rumisiel letting out a “Whoa!” as she performed the kind of crazy move that could only be done on ice pack by throwing the car into gear, cutting the wheel hard, and gunning the engine. Rear wheels gripped the drive, front wheels slipped, and the car spun hard, aligning with the road. Ash pressed the remote garage door closer and stepped on the gas.

McArthur Residence, 8:14 AM

Ash was in a hurry. Emily could tell when Ash was pushing the Monster for performance, and the sounds coming from the engine were definitely those of performance, not careful second-gear driving. That meant that Ash was both scared and determined. Which was why Emily didn’t walk to the curb, because she had a good idea exactly what Ash was going to do.

Right about... now!

Emily had the timing right in her head, as she saw Ash turn hard and gun the engine. The Monster spun out, its wheels transitioning from the frozen blacktop to the merely snow-covered concrete of Emily’s driveway, getting grip, and coming to a stop a full 440 degrees from the original direction of travel. Emily was already dashing across the snow with her backpack in her arms. Ash leaned over, shoving open the passenger-side door, as Emily leapt in, closing the door behind her.

“Go, go, go!” the tardiness-panicked Emily shouted, and her daredevil tuner best-friend responded—as did the monstrous V8 engine under the hood. Rumisiel, in the back, was making sounds indicative of being queasy, as Emily buckled up, and the car launched off the pad, skidding back to the ice-phalt and putting its all-time four-wheel-drive to work, digging in where lesser vehicles would have spun out or failed to go at all.

This is so cool.

Emily didn’t really want to think about it. She was terrified of being late, after all. Even so, it was exciting; her faith in Ash’s driving skill was nigh-absolute. She felt no fear, even though she saw Ash shift up into fourth gear, even on the ice-roads, and there was no traffic in sight. Ash didn’t speed, but she didn’t drive a mile *under* the limit, either. It was actually kind of exciting. They were definitely in trouble, but Ash had rode to her rescue, astride a growling V8-powered steed... Emily looked to the window, blushing softly as she squashed that train of thought.

“You know we’re dead, right? We’re going to be at least a half-hour late.”

“We’re not dead, we’ll just be slightly living-impaired. We should be there in time to run into our first period classes and get our homework.”

Emily looked back to the road, putting her arm out to rest it on the dash—ahhh, the heat from the heater was blowing up her sleeve—and her leg out, as far forward as it could go to brace it on the contour of the passenger foot-space. She had to admit, this really was exciting as the Monster barreled through the streets, straining for grip on the ice but making it. She smiled—so, she'd be late. She could always plead the snow as the reason, after all. A single late arrival wasn't going to torpedo Harvard any more than a single B- test was going to.

Approaching Tempest High, 8:38 AM

"Okay, I'll let you two out on the curb and park down the next street. Take down the homework, Rumi. Got it?" Ash gunned the gas as the light turned green, the Monster XR spinning wheels before it got grip. Any car was going to spin in this weather, unless they were crawling along at half a mile per hour, but Ash needed more speed than that. Fortunately, the Monster XR was more than up to the task. They were still quite a ways away, but they could make it.

Rumisiel broke the silence, nervously asking, "Hey, isn't that Kate's car?"

Ash turned her head to look—a jet-black Jaguar XKR was roaring down the opposite side of the road. "It can't be. What's she doing in town?" A bit of a cold fear gripped Ash's guts—there was no way anyone would want to race in *this* weather, not even the Kamikaze! Then Ash breathed a sigh of relief when she saw who was driving. The windows were down (crazy fools), and Kate was in the passenger seat, her head out the window (causing her long hair to flow behind the car in the wind), while Harry barreled the powerful car down the road. Emily waved next to her and Ash held up a hand, as did Harry. Then the snowball splattered over the hood.

"Bitch!" Ash laughed, breaking the tension as Kate waved at her while they sped past one another. Emily joined in with a giggle, and Rumisiel let out a relieved sigh.

"Ooh, we're gonna have to get them back for that, Ash."

"We will. After school?"

Emily giggled softly. "Yeah."

"He's fixing it for free if she dented the hood."

"Seems only fair. That, or we get to take a hammer and bang a dent into her Jag."

Ash couldn't help it—the thought of Emily banging a dent into the hood of Kate's expensive sports car was *funny*. She let out a giggle, and didn't even notice until a second afterwards, whereupon she tried to turn it into a cough.

"Okay. Aaaanyway, there's the school." Ash guided the Monster XR up the school's driveway. "Something's... wrong?" There was nobody, and no lights in the classroom windows. The school's asphalt drive was ice, so Ash had to carefully slow the car down.

"Ash, wait here. I think I see a sign in the door." Once the car slid to a stop, Emily got out and carefully walked to the door.

Snow and wind blowing in, Rumisiel laughed. "I think we're home free, Ash. Looks like it's closed."

Ash grinned. She'd love nothing more than to spend the day driving with Emily—and she owed Kate a snowball to the hood, anyway. Her smile widened when Emily walked back to the car, and settled into the passenger side with a huff and a relieved smile. "It *is* closed."

"See? I was right."

"You also didn't check!" Ash turned back to glare at him. "You just mumbled something about school being canceled, and let me believe it was!"

"H-Hey, look. It's almost a certified blizzard out here. It was almost a guarantee they were gonna cancel, so why did we hurry?"

Ash rolled her eyes, and settled back into the seat, while Emily let out a sigh of relief. "Oh well. At least now we have the day, right?"

“Yeah, I suppose. We were just going to play Need for Speed Underground, but he’s such a sore loser he’s gotta cheat.”

Rumisiel’s protests of not-cheatitude went unheard, as the car rolled (much more safely) back towards the residential area, and Emily wracked her brain.

Think, Emily. How can you keep her to yourself today? Ugh, why do I even care? But I do.

“Ash, I want to drive the Monster.”

It came out suddenly, genuinely, and Ash looked at her in surprise. “Wha? You want to drive... this one? On this ice?”

“Yeah! Teach me how. I don’t have a four-wheel-drive, but you do, and I’d like to try it. And I want to learn to drive on ice...”

Ash blinked, and looked down at the dash in contemplation.

Oh no—was that the wrong thing to ask her? Will she get mad I want to drive the Monster?

“Yeah... Yeah! Let’s just drop Rumisiel off at home, first.”

“Drop me off?” Rumisiel questioned, but Ash looked back with a quick and fierce glare that convinced him to keep his trap shut. Then he brightened—with Ash gone, he could drive with the whole TV to himself, and get better. Then he could really whoop her again. “Okay.”

Outside The Upton Residence, 9:09 AM

Emily glanced at her watch, twice. “Nine-ten AM. In heavy ice and snow, you got to my home, to the school, and back to your home, in an hour. Not bad, Ash. Not bad at all.” She got out, pulling the seat forward so Rumisiel could clamber out. He did, and stretched, walking up to the door.

Ash shouted at him, “No liquor, and absolutely **nothing** else!”

The scruffy-chinned Angel shook his head, turning around. “I already said I won’t, okay? Just go on, have fun.” The door popped open as he approached, and closed when he walked back inside, leaving Emily climbing back into the car and tossing her backpack in the back.

“Okay, where do we start?” she asked with a smile.

“Might as well start here, I guess. Hey, I’ve got a question.” She pointed at Emily’s wrist. “You’ve been wearing that digital for a couple of months now. Like, a little after that time Rumisiel came down sick. Why?”

Blink. A second blink. “Because I want to be able to tell the time?”

“Yeah, but it’s a digital. And you’ve set it for twenty-four hour. Girls don’t usually wear digitals, or use military time. And I’ve noticed that you have a weird habit of looking at it for a second, looking away for a bit, and looking back at it again. What’s up with that? It’s weird.”

May as well. She doesn’t know anyway.

“Actually, I’ve started not even taking it off. See, I’ve been having a lot of lucid dreams recently, and especially false awakenings. But because I always wear it, it’s kind of, you know, ‘part of’ me, so I’m wearing it when I wake up in a dream. It’s how I know I’m dreaming—the dreaming brain can’t handle numbers at all, let alone consistent numbers. So if you look at it, remember what time it says, and look back and it says something ridiculous—like jumping from, say, oh-seven-fifty-nine to twenty-two hundred, you know you’re in a dream. You also definitely know you’re dreaming if you see a symbol that’s not even a number—I saw an ampersand and three scientific symbols once.”

“Oh really? That’s cool.”

“Yeah. Your dreaming brain is much better at spatial stuff, so it doesn’t work with an analog clock or watch, because the position of the arms will be consistent.”

The pair got out and made a Chinese fire drill, with Emily strapping into the unfamiliar racing seat, and Ash settling in the equally unfamiliar passenger seat. “Okay, Em. Take it careful; don’t go above second gear. And remember, you’re driving a four-wheel-drive car, so it’s going to feel different.”

Emily put the car in reverse gear, slowly backing it out of the drive. She turned, and the car responded much quicker than she anticipated, cornering much more tightly. The blue-haired girl gave a grin to Ash. “Oh, this could be *fun!*”

“Isn’t it just? Okay, take it slow. Let’s just cruise for awhile.”

Emily replied with a smile as she shifted the Monster into first, and carefully pushed the accelerator, guiding the pair and car on a tour of Tempest’s suburbia.

Tempest, 11:14 AM

“Why did you want to do this, again?” Ash asked, as Emily and she sat in the parking lot of a burger joint, watching an intersection. The snowplows and sand trucks were out in force, and traffic was starting to return to some semblance of normal. The radio station was playing some oldies song about ‘Young hearts be free tonight’.

“I dunno, it just seemed like fun. And is it so wrong to want to spend time with your best friend?” She grinned, glancing twice at her watch. “It’s eleven fifteen. Hungry?”

“Not yet. You picked this up easily enough. It’ll be a lot harder in your car, though.”

“I know—rear wheel drive slips. My mother has only mentioned it an average of twice a day since winter started.” She rolled her eyes melodramatically, and Ash smiled. The radio announcer dramatically said something about “if the cops can’t catch you” in reference to the suggestive name of the station, and Emily snickered. “Hey Ash, have you ever run from the cops?”

“No way. I don’t want to lose my cars! Or my license.” She shook her head. “It’s all but impossible these days. Even if you outrun or dodge the cop on your tail, he’s got a radio, and he can put out an all-points, or just flag your car. Then next time they see you...” She drew a flat hand across her throat, and Emily giggled.

“Okay, okay. Shall we go?”

“Where?”

“I dunno. Let’s... follow them.” She pointed—a familiar black Jaguar had pulled up to the light, which had just turned red, and Ash grinned.

“Right. Lemme grab a handful of snow.”

Emily started the engine while Ash opened the passenger door, leaned out, and snagged a good handful of snow from the ledge, rolling it into a ball with her gloves. She shut the door just as Emily was pulling out of the parking spot, and they pulled onto the road; with the sand down, the Monster XR’s handling increased dramatically, as did its pick-up. Still not something to race in, but you could show some guts in it without being a white-knuckle stone-cold racer like Ash or Kate.

The light was turning green when Emily pulled into the traffic, and Ash rolled her window down. “Okay, let—Harry’s driving, I can see a man in the driver’s seat. Let them get ahead a bit, then go to the right hand lane and gun it. I’m gonna splatter this straight across the hood.”

“Right. I can do that, so long as we don’t spin.”

“On this much sand? You’d have to floor it to spin it. Just don’t floor it.”

With a gleeful grin, Emily pulled her hair back from her face and pressed the accelerator as she shifted up. The engine roared and the car bucked forward as she changed lanes, seemingly to pass. Then Ash leaned out as they pulled alongside. She let fly as Emily glanced to the side. The snowball gracefully splattered on the hood, and Emily grinned, as a very startled Kate turned her head to look, and laughed as the Monster XR accelerated on past. She turned to Harry and said something Emily couldn’t hear—and the Jaguar’s engine roared.

“They want to play. Ash?”

“Go for it, but only if you think you can do it safely. Don’t speed, and don’t get too close if we’re in the same lane.”

It was fun, simply put, chasing Kate's Jag, though in a decidedly different kind of race. Harry seemed to know what he was doing, as he expertly piloted the Jaguar through the town of Tempest into parking lots and down side streets.

"Rallying... that's what we're doing." Ash grinned as she figured it out. "We're hitting landmarks and not exceeding the speed limit. Ice-road rallying!" She laughed, and Emily grinned, as the two cars pulled into the parking lot of the 24-hour diner. Instead of driving a full loop and pulling out again, the Jaguar parked. "Let's have a chat."

"You're not going to throw more snowballs, are you?" Emily giggled as she slid the Monster XR in neatly beside the Jaguar.

"No promises, but I won't throw the first one."

Harry and Ash were the first ones out of the car, followed by Kate, and lastly Emily.

"'Ello, Ash! 'Ow are you two, then?" Harry, loud and boisterous, spoke first, letting Ash laugh.

"Good, Harry. Better than in a long time!" Kate leaned on the side of her car as Emily closed her driver's side door, watching the exchange between Harry and Ash.

"Good to 'ere! So, did they close th' prisons and leh' ye beasties out early, or are yeh skivin' off?"

Ash chuckled, walking around the front of the XR and shaking her head. "She'd never let me skip." She nodded at Emily and grinned—then squeaked as Kate launched at her, wrapping Ash in a bear hug.

"Hello, little sister! Letting your friend drive your good car?" Kate laughed, and Ash grinned back, shaking her head and (surprisingly, to Emily) returning the hug.

"Yeah. She asked me to teach her to drive on ice."

"An' she goh' into it fas' enough to catch Kate's cat? Bloody quick learnin', Emily. Good run."

That made Emily beam. "What are you two doing out, though? In weather like this, I'd think you'd be at the garage waiting to do business?"

"I've love teh' be at me shop, beh' those morons wi' the plows plowed me bloody shop in las' night. Couldnae' even geh me own car out—s'why we're toolin' around in the Jag."

"He's been saying that it's revenge from that inferior life-form at Auto ModerZ for being such a better mechanic."

"Ahhh, noh, thas' not fair, Kate. Callin' 'im an inferior life-form is an insult to life-forms."

"Colin, right? The slime-ball that hits on anything with breasts?" Ash asked.

Kate rolled her eyes. "God, yes. That's the one. I can't enter Auto ModerZ anymore."

"Why's that, Kate?"

"I punched him the last time he tried to hit on me."

"I thought about doing that. He's a slime."

"I'm sure we could kill an hour calling Colin names, and then refuting that name-calling by saying that it's an insult to the insult to lump him with them, but why did we stop?" Emily asked Harry.

"Ah, thas' easy. It's breakfas' time."

Emily looked over at Ash, who had finally extricated herself from Kate's hug. "Now are you hungry?"

"Sure."

Diner, 11:37 AM

The duo of duos walked into the 24-hour Diner, Harry leading. The waitress spotted them, asking, "All together?"

Ash spoke up first. "Yep! Table for four."

Emily raised an eyebrow.

Wow. She's in a really good mood today. I've never seen her this... well, girly. Or maybe just plain happy?

"All righ', then. Table for four, luv," Harry said.

The radio station on seemed to be the same as the one that Ash had spun the dial to, as the singer was crooning about being as free as a bird, while the waitress led them to their table and put menus in front of them. “Coffee? Should I bring a pot?” Harry nodded, and she skipped out, leaving Emily and Ash next to one another in a booth table, facing Harry and Kate, respectively.

“So, yeh’ jus’ drivin’ around?”

“Yeah. She really gets the ice-driving stuff fast. And you used to be scared of that little 240SX of yours.”

“Well, someone taught me well.”

The pot of coffee came then, with four mugs and a stack of creamers. Emily didn’t pour any, though Ash, Harry, and Kate all filled their mugs.

“So, what are you two doing out?” Emily asked.

“Well, with no way to open the shop, short of hiring a bulldozer, I said we ought to get out of the house and just do something. Then he suggested he drive.”

“Aye, an’ why nah? She usually drives, afteh all.”

Ash chuckled softly. “Yeah. And what was up with that snowball you threw at my car?”

“Well, I scooped a hunk off the side of a semi-truck that was pulled up beside us at the light, and I figured we’d cruise around until it melted or I found someone who wouldn’t be too mad.”

Ash laughed, and stuck her tongue out. “Not mad, but if you left a dent, you’re fixing it.”

“Only if you fix the dent you may have left in my car.” Ash smirked, and crossed her arms, to which Kate chuckled, “Uh-huh. Thought so, little sister.”

“Ah, the waitress is comin’ back. Hope yeh know wha’ yeh want.”

Emily nodded as the waitress arrived. They ordered, and continued the banter and small talk, until Ash excused herself to go to the bathroom. Emily waited a minute, and then followed, slipping in and looking around. Fortunately it was a large diner, and had a room of stalls, and not a single locking room. Ash was washing her hands when Emily slipped in and looked around.

“Are you okay, Ash?”

“Uh, yeah... I’m in a good mood, why do you ask?”

“It’s just...” Emily slipped up to the long row of sinks, sliding in next to Ash. “You’re awful cheerful today, and I’m not complaining, it’s just... It’s so unlike you to be so chipper. And hugging Kate? Where does that come from?”

“Well, I’m not going to get her to drop her little sister thing, and she only has one other person in the world. And if it makes her feel better, you know, why not? She’s still weird and all, but she’s a lot nicer now. And Harry bought her that ring, even if it is crazy, so he thinks there’s good in her...”

“Why, Ash... that is so...”

Girly.

“Nice of you.”

“Well... huh. Maybe it is? Why do you keep looking at your watch? You afraid you’re sleeping again?”

Emily blushed softly, and shook her head, looking down. “No, it’s just... It’s getting to be a habit, you know? This way I *know* when I’m having a weird dream, because my watch is going crazy. Kind of silly, I know. Still, it is kind of weird—but nice!” she hurriedly added, “to see you and Kate, well, getting along.”

Ash looked down at the sink as she washed her hands. “You know I nearly killed her.”

“K-killed her?”

“That first race. I did so badly, she got so far ahead she stopped. She was standing in the road, and I was so... shaken, you know? I was so shaken, I barely stopped in time. If I hadn’t, I would’ve just... plowed through her.” She closed her eyes, as Emily put her hand on Ash’s shoulder. “I’ve always wondered... what would’ve happened if I did? I’ve had a few nightmares about that night...”

What a strange confession... at a strange time. Still, that’s you, Ash.

“Well, don’t worry about it—you *didn’t*, right? And now she’s your friend.” Her words elicited a smile, and Ash nodded.

“Yeah. Thanks.” She closed the tap and dried her hands, and the two moved back towards the door, before Ash paused all of a sudden, with an exclamation of “holy shit” that made Emily turn to look.

“Ash?”

Ash looked somewhat spooked, somewhat freaked. “We just did that... that thing.”

“What thing?”

“That thing where two girls go into the restroom together and don’t come out for awhile...” She shook her head, letting out a buzzing, nasal groan, and her reaction made Emily laugh.

With a wide grin, Emily threw her arms around Ash, squeezing. “Yeaaaah, we did. Now we’re obligated to go bra shopping later on...”

The look of abject horror on Ash’s face was priceless, and Emily vowed she would always treasure it, as she giggled. “Gotcha! Now cool down, we just had a talk, no reason to be freaked out.” Emily let go, and shook her head, grinning. “Come on.”

Outside The Diner, 12:03 PM

The bills for breakfast settled, the duo of duos stood outside the diner in the falling snow, with Kate leaning into Harry and grinning. “So then, what are yeh two doin’ now,” asked Harry, wrapping an arm around Kate’s shoulders.

“No clue, Harry. It’s... wow, only noon?”

“We’ll find something. Thanks for the drive!”

“Any time, lass. Any time...” The older pair turned and retreated to Kate’s Jaguar—which, Emily noted with a slight pang of jealousy, was already running.

“It’s actually beautiful, isn’t it? Awfully cold, but... Hey. Let’s go somewhere.”

“Okay. Where?”

“Mmmm. I dunno, let’s go somewhere else, Ash.”

Think, Emily, think... Ah!

“Ash, take me shopping.”

“B’uh?” Ash took a step backwards, into the railing of the stairs up to the Diner’s main door.

“Shopping? Why?”

“Yes, shopping. In Albany! And don’t worry, I promise not to spend more than a half-hour in a clothing store, okay?”

“A-Albany? That’s an hour away in good weather and light traffic.”

“Yeah, I know—though the way you drive, it’s probably still an hour. The highways will be cleared by now, and there’ll be enough traffic to prevent a serious build-up. And we haven’t done something like a road-trip since, well, Cape Cod.”

“But, why? I mean...”

“Why not, Ash? Tomorrow is Saturday, we have a fast car, and a clear day ahead of us. Let’s have some *fun*, let’s do something a bit crazy.” She stuck her tongue out at her friend. “Isn’t that the kind of crazy thing that best friends are supposed to do?”

“Uhm.” Ash looked completely taken aback—and she was. On the one hand, in this weather, or even any weather, a sudden ‘take me to Albany!’ was the last thing she expected from Emily. On the other hand, it was Emily, asking to do something seriously awesome, if ill advised. It was unlike her, but it was very much agreeable. “Uh... yeah, okay. Let me call Rumisiel and tell him, then.”

Emily grinned wide—she had Ash all to herself for the whole day, and she knew it. “Yeah, let me hit the pay phone when you’re done.” They went to the pay phones, and Emily listened as Ash told Rumisiel (in no uncertain terms) that they were going to be away for the day, and that if he even so

much as harbored a lustful thought about her father's liquor cabinet, his fingers would resemble a pancake when she was done. Emily smiled. "Okay. Go get the car warmed up, I've got a call to make."

Ash nodded and walked to the car. She sank into the driver's seat with a sigh, turning the car on. Yelping softly at the cool blast of air, she turned down the blowers and watched Emily on the phone. It looked like she was taking her time. Ash leaned on the steering wheel, sighing softly. "Man, what's gotten into her? She was all angry this morning, but it's been like she's been trying to keep us in the car all day..." Still, she *liked* driving her car, and she liked being around Emily. That was worth it, even if it did mean she'd probably be obliged to go into a lingerie store at least once. Checks and balances—yin and yang. A few minutes of time in a place she'd really rather never step in, for a whole day with her best friend?

"When the hell did I start thinking about things in terms of trade-offs?" Ash shook her head. Emily gave a little jump, and talked rapidly into the phone. "Probably asking her mom for permission. It looks like she got it."

Emily then hung up the phone and walked down the stairs, getting into the passenger seat with a grin. "All set!"

"You sure? You got your money?" Emily nodded, and Ash chuckled. "Okay then... Why not? Let's go." She threw the Monster XR into reverse, four-wheeling out and onto the road. "Next stop—Albany, New York!"

"Yeah! Let's go and have some fun."

On The Highway Approaching Albany, 12:51 PM

This... is a cool day.

Emily laughed softly, the radio station still tuned to that oldies station it was on when she got in. She and Ash had been joking and laughing and sometimes singing along to the radio. More than anything, Emily was *at ease*. "Isn't this a good day, Ash?"

She looked over at her friend, who nodded, even as the Monster XR barreled through the snow with the careful grace of a fast car in bad weather whose driver knew how to handle it. "Yeah... it, well... It feels like the summer, in Cape Cod, except you can't possibly get sunburned."

"Yeeaaaaah, that was the most painful day ever. Still, you were there to make sure I got water. And drown pygmies for me."

"Yeah... Just you, me, a fast car, and a bright day ahead. No angels, no ghosts of dead racers, no worries."

And absolutely none of that Missi Fuller.

Emily laughed softly at that thought, as the radio's DJ came on. "And here's one that's going out for a pair of young lovebirds inbound to Albany for a day of fun in the city from Massachusetts. I don't know how anybody can have any fun in this East Coast weather. I miss California, so I'm going to play the songs that remind me of it. Here's 'Two Tickets To Paradise'. I've got two tickets to paradise—in my pants."

Emily smiled as the song came on, then she noticed Ash looking at her. "What?"

"Two lovebirds inbound to Albany?"

"Don't look at me." She did a good job of playing innocent, and Ash shrugged, then laughed, as the singer crooned about having two tickets to paradise, and extorted whomever he was singing about to pack their bags and leave tonight. It wasn't long before the two were singing along to the song as the Monster XR ate up the snowy highway.

"Emily, what do you want to do once we get to Albany?"

"Well, we can go shopping... How about we find a nice, big arcade while we're there? Play some of those big booth racing games?"

"Maybe I'll get a fair game, then. You're on."

“So, shopping first?”

“Mmmm... okay.”

“Okay? You hate shopping.”

“I don’t *hate*-hate shopping, I just don’t like it. Besides, I still owe you for standing you up on that back-to-school shopping, don’t I?”

“You really don’t, but sure, let’s go with that.”

They laughed as the car rumbled onto the large bridge over the river.

Upscale Clothing Store, Inside A Mall, Albany, 1:10 PM

Ash held her arms crossed in front of her as she and Emily strolled through the store. Emily was quite happily entrenched in Hog Heaven. She probably could’ve killed all day in the store, but Ash was clearly a bit put-off by the sheer amount of sheer garments on display.

“What do you think?” Emily said suddenly, causing Ash to look up from her thoughts.

“Hmmm? About?”

Emily held her hands up—she was holding up a sheer, lacy, somewhat see-through matching bra and panties in one hand, and a bright red winter jacket (with a faux fur collar and hood) in the other.

“Um... they’re nice, I guess.” Ash did her best to *not* think about Emily wearing the outfit.

“Oh, sorry... It’s just...”

“I know, I know. It’s okay, I’m just not comfortable in these places.”

“We won’t be here much longer, just hang in there. Then we can do something appropriately adrenaline-pumping, like find an arcade, or maybe shoot a small, defenseless animal.”

Ash rolled her eyes, which got another giggle from Emily. “An arcade, anyway.”

Emily laughed, throwing more stuff from the racks into her arms as she moved towards the fitting rooms. Shopping on a time crunch was a new and exciting experience, although it robbed her of the chance to consider each item thoroughly before she bought. Still, she figured if she kept it small, she could handle it inside the half-hour she promised Ash. Finding a fitting room, she dumped her pile on the bench and began to try her potential purchases out.

“Hmmm... The red looks good, but wouldn’t it make my hair look silly?”

Ash looked up as she heard the question from inside. “I don’t care what you wear, as long as you’re happy,” Ash said too quietly for Emily to hear. Then Ash spoke up, saying, “It would be weird, but unique. You’d have a style all your own.”

“Weird—that’s bad.”

Ash shook her head, and blinked twice as her eyes fell across a brown leather bomber. “Uh... not necessarily, Em. Besides, our lives have been weird for months and months. If you can’t beat ’em...” Ash drifted off, picking up the jacket. She looked at the price tag—and winced. Then again, this was no cheap faux leather imitation—it was lined with fabric, but the leather was heavy and genuine, and the collar and cuffs were appropriately fur-lined. It was also covered with pockets. She tried it on.

“Wow. This fits really, really nice.” Ash zipped it up, and turned around a few times, flexing her arms, making a few imitation turns of the wheel and shifting with her right hand. Then she grinned and slid back to the dressing room. “I’ll be right back, Em. You okay?”

Emily let out a quiet cough from inside. “Uh, yeah... I just looked up and realized there’s a poster of your mom pasted to the *ceiling*...”

“Enjoy!”

With Emily’s protestations behind her, Ash took the jacket to the counter, and quickly exchanged money. The lady on the register looked torn between relief at getting rid of the decidedly boyish jacket, and disdain for the orange-haired tomboy who would wear it. Still, she took money. Ash walked back, clipping the tags off the jacket, and zipping up in it, holding the one she wore in under her arm.

The dressing room curtain was pulled back just as she got back, and Emily was standing inside, wearing an outfit made of the pieces she'd tossed together: red synthetic jacket, white shirt with a red logo across her right breast, and white pants. "How do I... What the heck did you buy?"

"See, that's the difference between girls and boys buying clothes. A girl searches for ages, tries on five outfits, and can't make a decision without independent verification that she looks damn good in it. A boy sees something they want, he tries it on, makes sure it fits and he can pay for it, he buys it."

Emily blushed softly. "I... I look 'damn good'?"

"Um... You look *amazing*, Em. Really, it looks great on you. All you need is white sneakers to complete the look." Ash thought she must be losing her mind for saying such a thing.

Emily blushed, and sat down on the bench, holding up a pair that she had grabbed from the shoe aisle. "Like these?" Ash nodded, and Emily smiled. "Okay!"

Ash shifted uncomfortably, as Emily tugged the curtain back again and clothes rustled.

"I can't believe I encouraged her. Then again, she is my best friend, and it's what she wants. Ugh, I feel so damn girly. I need to do something about this," Ash murmured quietly.

Emily emerged with what she was wearing when they walked in, and two bundles in her arms—one of them was the red and white outfit (which included those lacy red things, Ash noted with a blush) and the rest in the other arm. She re-hung the discards, and paid for the new stuff, while Ash followed, her mind churning.

When Emily had her bag of clothes, Ash dropped her old jacket in, and took the bag, carrying it for her. "So, arcade, right? I saw one in the mall directory."

"All right. You want to hit the food court before we go?"

"Nah, not yet. Maybe when we're done."

"Okay. Let's go." As Ash walked beside her, Emily giggled softly.

"Something funny?"

"No, not at all. It's actually kinda sweet—you just took my bag like that." Her chuckle was accompanied by a light blush on Ash's part.

The Action Vault Arcade, 1:32 PM

The first thing one noticed about the Action Vault was that it was *loud* inside. Not just the game machines; the place was rigged with a sound system from which the unmistakable voice of the Prince of Darkness himself was rocking hard about being a Hellraiser.

"This looks more your speed! Let's have some fun." She led the way in, while Ash laughed and smiled, looking around. The place was *jumping*, even with the relatively low number of shoppers out and about. It looked to be a popular hangout for the locals in their age group.

To their immediate left was the person manning the desk—not just a clerk, he seemed to also be controlling the sound system, judging by the number of monitors in front of him, the sound board on the desk, and the fact that he was wearing a microphone headset and a pair of wraparound, Windex-blue sunglasses and throwing the horns with his left hand as he worked the register with the other. A carrot-top wearing a black metal-band T-shirt and leather pants with an overabundance of chains. When he spoke, his voice seemed to boom low from speakers behind him. He couldn't have been much older than twenty. "Welcome to the Action Vault, ladies. We exist to let you kick ass and chew bubblegum—but we're all out of gum. Tokens are one for a quarter, and purchases of merchandise over ten dollars get a free ten percent back in tokens." There was indeed a wall of merchandise behind him—not only branded stuff like coffee mugs and T-shirts, but console and PC versions of some of the popular games in the arcade, as well as some miscellaneous adrenaline-head stuff, like obviously-fake nun-chucks and swords.

Emily and Ash each gave him ten dollars, receiving in return a paper cup full of tokens each. As they walked away, the DJ/clerk's voice boomed across the arcade.

“Remember, Action Fans, it’s Metal Friday here at the Action Vault. If you have a good request, I might just play it.

Ash grinned at Emily. “Got any requests?”

“No clue. I’ve never really listened to this kind of stuff at length before.”

“That’s okay. Sounds like a good learning experience. Oooh, there’s the racing games. They have a huge wall of them!”

As they walked to the racing games, they found most of the seats taken. It was a monolithic wall of the same game booth—the good kind, with adjustable seats and realistic controls. The whole wall was networked together, and two seats on the end were empty.

“Ash, shall we kick some ass?”

Ash grinned at Emily and sat in the booth to the left. Looking down, she said, “No clutch. It’s a semi-auto.”

“Be glad it has a shifter at all.”

The DJ spoke again. “We’ve just got a request for some Black Sabbath—I’m going to play ‘Paranoid’. Remember folks, we don’t censor jack squat here at the Action Vault, so if you’re easily burned by harsh language, you might just want to get the hell out of the kitchen.”

Ash grinned as the music started to blare, and they dialed in their cars. “Meh. No Merkur...” She settled on a Ford Mustang GT, while Emily selected a Nissan 350Z.

“Humph. This ain’t a girl’s game, ladies.”

Ash looked to her left—she was sitting next to a late-teen/early-twenty-something boy with dark black glasses and wearing all black with red gloves. “Did you just say I can’t race?”

“That’s what I said, little girl. Why don’t you two estrogen factories go home and make way for someone with some experience in stick control?”

Ash clenched her fists—as did Emily. “You’re gonna eat those words, buddy. You on the scoreboard?”

He laughed, and rudely grabbed his crotch—suddenly he reminded Ash an awful lot of Tom, and that just made her madder. “I am Numero Uno! And it says so.”

Ash grit her teeth. “That’s nice. I’m Ash. She’s Emily. Welcome to third place, asshole.” Emily’s eyebrows rose as the race’s lights blinked down to the green. Emily and Ash’s hands fell to their shifters.

“That’s it. I was toying with these clowns, but you two are toast. Time for my A game!”

“All right folks, we’ve had a request for a song that’s near and dear to my heart. Here’s some Maiden, and the time is now ‘Two Minutes To Midnight’!” The metal strains of Iron Maiden broke out as the starting light went green. Tires squealed. Electronic cars made a dash out of the starting line.

Ash and Emily proved to race well as a team. While most of the arcade-goers were just casuals, a few of them seemed to know what they were doing and put up a good challenge. In the first race, Ash and Em placed third and fifth respectively—but they were getting used to the game’s quirks, the quirks of their simulated cars, and how the game’s mechanics worked. By the third race they were consistently finishing together as the top two, while the local punk was getting more and more agitated. He was a good racer, but Emily and Ash had quickly figured out how to perform a PIT maneuver; he soon came to spend more time glancing at their screens to be sure they weren’t about to send him into a wipe-out than he did watching his own screen. The races went on and on, until (as their tokens were close to running out) they raced a nigh-perfect game, while the local punched his console in frustration.

It was deeply satisfying to Ash to see the names ‘XR4Ti Ash’ and ‘240SX Emily’ (Ash’s idea for their names) burning at the top of the leader board, right above ‘Numero Uno’, who was now demoted to third. Ash grinned, noting that his record had been set months ago, and he wasn’t likely to beat it any time soon. The punk scowled, stomping out of the arcade. Ash and Emily stood up and stretched—and shared a high-five.

Then the arcade clerk's voice came over the speakers, as the music abruptly stopped and the lights came up. "Yo, Actioneers. I hate to say it, but those idiots, the *retards* who wear suits and run the mall and think they know jack squat, are closing the mall in twenty. National Weather Service is saying the whole of New England is in for a metric kilo-fuck-ton of the white stuff. If you're not local, you might want to think about heading home in a hurry. The games you're playing now will finish, but the machines won't accept any more tokens—and yes, we're giving full refunds."

Ash and Em gulped and looked to one another. Ash picked up the bag, and Emily smiled. "At least we won."

They moved to leave, but the clerk pointed at them. "Hold on, you two. Come here a minute." The refund-receivers moved away as Ash and Emily approached the counter. "You two are..." he glanced at his computer screen, "'XR4Ti Ash' and '240SX Emily', right?" Ash nodded, and the clerk smiled, taking down a pair of branded Action Vault T-shirts. "That punk bet me a cool Benjamin that nobody was going to unseat his ass from the pole position before the end of the New Year. He's a good customer but an asshole, so from the Action Vault to you two, thanks. And come back whenever you feel like it."

Outside The Mall In Albany, 3:45 PM

"The weather looks like it's going to get bad, doesn't it?" The snow was coming down much harder than it was before, and Ash nodded as they picked their way carefully to the Monster XR.

"Uh, yeah. It does."

"Don't worry, Ash. I'm sure we'll be fine. I have *complete* confidence in you." Emily smiled, pushing on Ash's upper arm with both of hers, and Ash laughed.

"Okay, okay. I'll get us home, Em."

They settled into the Monster XR's seats, and Ash turned the key as Emily stowed their bags in the back. The engine rumbled to life and Ash pulled the car out. She turned the radio far down, and Emily looked quizzically at her. "In this weather, getting as bad as it is, I'm going to need to hear the road and the car."

Emily nodded, and settled back into her seat. "Okay, Ash. Thank you."

"For taking you on a trip?"

"For everything. But yeah, thanks for taking me shopping, and for helping me kick that loudmouth's name down."

"You're welcome, Em."

Emily closed her eyes, listening to the sound of Ash breathing, the car's engine, and the sound of the ground under the tires, as they drove back out of the city.

This... Wow, this feels like a date. A really, really strange date, but then, we're both really, really strange people. We did some things we love doing, and had a lot of fun together.

Emily's thoughts were interrupted by the radio—the song cut off, the DJ's voice coming over again. "This isn't a weather station, but heads-up. The National Weather Service has issued a severe winter storm warning for most of New England. This is the real deal out there, kiddos—this ain't no pansy advisory or heads-up, this means the white crap's hitting the fan as we speak. If you got someplace to be, my advice is that you get there now. And if you don't, head west and hope you can outrun it."

"Oh no. Maybe we shouldn't have gone?"

"No way. It was fun! It was totally worth it. We'll make it home, don't worry."

Emily nodded, and smiled, as the car trundled onto the interstate again, and they chugged back towards Massachusetts in relative quiet. They were a half-hour out, though only a third of the way home (as even Ash had slowed down due to the snow) when the radio station announcer broke in again.

"I ought to be paid extra for the weather-man duty. I'm holding a brand-new copy of the current weather alert, and it ain't good. We're having a Blizzard Warning for basically all of New England.

We're talking Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, New York State, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and even parts of Pennsylvania and 'Jersey. This is officially the big time ladies and gentlemen, so get yourself somewhere warm and park your cars. I wouldn't drive in this, and I'm a maniac."

The roads were definitely getting awful, cars were throwing up tails of snow behind them, and snowplows and salt trucks became at least a once-in-ten-minute sighting. Emily hunkered down in the car's seat as the wind rattled the Monster, and Ash turned the heat up to fight off the chill.

"Damn. It's getting bad out here, Ash."

"Yeah. Yeah, it is... Exciting, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Actually, it is." She made a weak smile. "It's just scary."

"It's almost like going down the Mountain. I'm afraid that any moment now, some idiot may lose control and carom in front of us. The only way to handle the fear is to take it head on, and know I can handle it."

Even so, a glance at the speedometer told Emily that they were barely pushing forty—even the fearless Ash was slowing down well below main highway speeds, and wasn't attempting any passing. A strong blast of wind rattled and shook every vehicle on the road, and Ash grit her teeth and clenched her fists to hold onto the wheel.

This is scary. I kind of wish we had Rumisiel. I don't think even Ash would mind if he used his angelic powers to keep us alive and the car intact. Still... only Ash could do this. My mom would probably have found a hotel for the night—mom!

Emily gasped, causing Ash to look sharply her way. "You okay?"

"Yeah, but my mom's out in this weather."

"She have four-wheel-drive?" Emily shook her head. "Please don't tell me she drives a rear wheel drive."

"Front wheel drive for her. It's cheaper."

"She'll be okay, if she takes it long and slow."

Emily nodded glumly. "Yeah. Thank you, Ash."

McArthur Residence, 5:49 PM

Ash guided the Monster XR up to the curb outside Emily's home, and looked at the drive. "No tracks. It looks like your mom's not home yet."

Emily nodded as she took her bag and backpack from the back of the car, and left Ash's jacket in the car seat. "Call me when you get home safely, okay?"

"I will, don't worry. And thanks for asking me to take you to Albany. This was a great day."

"All right. It's cold so, good night, Ash." She closed the car door and picked her way to her house. She fumbled her keys as she unlocked the door and opened it. Seeing Emily had the door open, Ash accelerated slowly away.

"Mom?" Emily called out when she went inside, just in case her mother had arrived long enough ago for the tracks to be covered up, but she heard nothing. Shrugging, Emily tossed her jacket over the coat tree and carried her things to her bedroom, putting her new purchases away.

What a day.

Emily smiled, closed her eyes, and lay on the bed. It had been an *incredible* day—just her and Ash, the way things ought to be. It was *so* good, having just taken some time off, spent a fun day away from everything with her best friend.

The bed shifted, and her eyes opened. They were staring into familiar, large green eyes. Emily smiled as Ash leaned down, kissing her lips. Emily arched into the embrace, reaching up. Fingers laced with fingers, and she squeezed. The kiss parted, and Emily grinned. "What are you doing here?"

“How could I stay away?” Emily rolled her shoulders at the soft reply, as Ash pushed on her shoulders, pushing her into the bed. Her shirt slid off, and she smiled. She reached up to cup Ash’s head with one hand as they met and kissed again. Hands on her torso, stroking her, squeezing her in places that make her tremble, Emily let out a long, deep moan. She wrapped her arms around Ash’s back, pulling Ash onto her body—the tuner girl with hair the color of a fresh orange sunk her teeth gently into the nape of Emily’s neck.

It was *too* good! Emily let out a cry of pleasure, her head sliding beside Ash’s. She caught sight of her watch. Given that it was reading $\Sigma 7:\Delta\Psi$, she had a fairly good idea that she was dreaming. She let out a moan. “This is a dream,” she groaned, though it sounded more despondent this time.

It didn’t end, though. They usually ended when she said that. “You don’t want it to be,” the not-Ash pointed out, pushing her down harder into the bed, staring into her eyes. Emily blushed hotter.

“You... you’re not Ash.”

Emily gasped softly as not-Ash’s lips fell to her throat, kissing. Not-Ash’s hands reached behind Emily, undoing her bra and pulling it off. Emily offered no resistance.

“You want me to be,” the dreamscape not-Ash murmured, as her lips trailed down.

Emily gasped, tremblingly raising a hand, clenching Ash’s hair. “N-No... Stop,” she plaintively whispered, and the not-Ash’s lips popped off of her.

“You can stop me. You just have to want this to end.”

“But I *do* want this to end,” Emily protested, then was silenced by another kiss—one she arched her back into.

Burning with heat, Emily realized that not-Ash was naked, or more naked than she had been, for that was unmistakably flesh pressing into her body. She groaned as not-Ash groped her back, squeezing, kissing her neck, her earlobes, her shoulders, sinking her teeth gently in. “S-S-Stop it!” Emily whined, leaning up. She thought she intended to push not-Ash off, but she found herself returning the groping and squeezing with more force than she knew she’d like on herself. But the figment of her imagination didn’t mind; it pushed back, biting the nape of her neck, arching over her. Then not-Ash’s hand slid into her pants.

Emily groaned, trembling with the touch. Then she bared her teeth, rolling not-Ash hard onto the bed. She didn’t escape, though—she arched down, kissing not-Ash just as hard as she herself had been kissed, sliding her own hand down into not-Ash’s panties. She was panting, trembling. The things that the dreamscape representation of her friend was doing to her were incredible. She was lost in the bliss, in the trance, in the heat and the passion of the moment...

McArthur Residence, 6:11 PM

Emily awoke with a cry of epic proportions, finding herself entirely helpless in the middle of a mountain-moving, house-shaking orgasm. She had half-rolled off the bed, her knees on the floor, hands gripping her bed’s mattress as her body quivered like a leaf in a hurricane. It ended soon enough, leaving her panting, collapsed on the floor, an over-heated wreck.

Then the house shook again, and she weakly looked up to the window—the sky outside was truly ferocious, the snow blowing horizontally. Slowly she stood up, and shivered. “I’ve... Mmmmf. They’ve always ended before then...” She glanced down at her waterproof digital watch, and bit her lip. “I *knew* it was a dream... I said, ‘this is a dream...’”

But you didn’t want to end it, stupid...

“Urrgh!” Emily punched her pillow. “Damn it, Ash! Why do you have to be so... so... Nnngh!”

Perfect?

That nagging voice in her head—her voice. Emily let out a soft sob, and fell to her knees, laying her head on the pillow. Slowly she recovered, her mind a blitz of nothing, and she stood up, discarding her clothes in her hamper, and weakly moving to get another shower.

“Damn it, Emily, why do you keep... Nnnh. Thinking about her?” Emily simply leaned on the back wall of her shower, her head braced on one forearm, letting the hot water wash over her.

Because you want her. Because you can't stand the thought of her doing things like that with Missi. Because you want Ash, here, now, with you, holding you, keeping you company. Touching you.

She shook her head, groaning. “No, I don't... I want Ash, but I'm a girl—a heterosexual girl! I want a boy!”

No you don't. You never did. Ryan made you feel cold, hollow, and filthy when he was inside you. Casper was a perfect gentleman, a real prize, but you didn't feel a damn thing when you kissed him. And when you thought of her on that date, you thought of her, not Ash the boy.

Emily realized that some of the wetness on her face wasn't from the showerhead, and that made her snifle, crouching down to her knees, holding her head in both hands. “Why am I such a wreck?”

Because you flat-out love her. Your lives have been entwined ever since Misfile Day, and your life has become a roller coaster. And no matter how wild it gets, Ash is there for you. You always come back to one another, no matter how much you fight. You love her emotionally. She's always there for you, in ways even Molly isn't. You and she can share the most secret things. You love her romantically. When you spend time with her, it feels like a date, even if you're not doing date-things like watching romantic comedies. And you love her sexually. You just had a world-shaking orgasm while dreaming about her pouncing you—or was that you pouncing her?

Emily rolled over, sitting flat in the back of the tub, her back against the wall, gulping for breath, trying to tell the nagging voice inside her to shut up, but it wouldn't. Finally she sobbed and closed her eyes. “No, I'm straight.”

Why does it bother me? Why does it bother you so? Emily, ugh... I'm mixing my person tense, and even thinking in the third person... Why does it bother me? Why am I so attracted to her?

“Why?” Emily shook her head. “Why?”

Why not? You can't change the fact that just seeing her lifts your spirits, even when she's running late and you want to kill her for making you late. Seeing her smile is the best thing in the world to see, and she's so easy to tease, but so easy to forgive. And you keep dreaming about kissing her.

“Ugh. Only the crazy talk to themselves...” Emily shook her head. “Yeah. Okay... I love Ash. Is that what you want to hear?”

It's not what you want to hear that matters—it's what you want to say to her.

“I love her... I do, but... I can't say it. I can't tell her, she... She's still a boy in a girl's body. I can't just tell her something like ‘if you were a boy, I'd love you.’” She sighed.

But I did. And that was the time she kissed you. I got so angry, because I was emotionally contorted; I was so angry, so vulnerable... But she wasn't trying to take advantage of you. Ash is not Ryan! She was... She was trying to comfort me. She thought I was trying to tell her something... But you were, Emily. You were, and when she reacted, you got mad at her. What kind of a friend does that? What kind of a lover does that?

Emily let out a sigh of depression. “Damn it.”

She really did think it was what I wanted. She wasn't trying to ‘sneak one in’; she was trying to be for me what she thought I wanted... Ugh. I'm such a wreck.

She stood up, trembling softly, glad for the heat of the shower, even though it didn't help her from feeling chilled to the core.

And then Missi showed up. I told her I was happy for her—I wasn't. I hate it!

“I hate that little tramp!” Emily thought it and said it at the same time, with a terrifying intensity.

She just shows up, being about as easy as Molly, and Ash just laps it up, and that makes me so jealous. I had my chance, and I told her I wasn't interested, so she found someone who was... But I just can't accept it.

Emily shook her head in disgust. “Which is it, Em? Are you going to make a move on her, or let her go?” She hung her head.

If I move in on her, that means I'm saying I'm...

Gay? What's so wrong with that? Kay Wheeler turned out to be. She grimaced at that particular pillar of her adolescence, ripped out from under her. Then again, what did you think would happen? Did you really think that in your wildest dreams you'd ever get Kay? Hell, you met him and ogled his car; that's more than most girls ever got... She sighed. Hell, I was almost as interested in his Miata as I was in him, after I got to talk to him for a while. Would it even have been so good? Even if he was straight? Sure, you were a gooey pile when you were looking at pictures of him, but when you met the real deal?

Emily shook her head. "Okay, probably not. But..." She sighed. "But I DID go gooey over him! I'm not gay!"

Then you might be bi, but strong indications are to the other way. The only person you've actually kissed twice is Ash, after all. She's the only person you groped, and...

"I didn't... Okay, maybe I did enjoy that. And maybe I overreacted and screamed at her..."

She groaned, sitting back, afraid if her head shook any more she might shake it off. "Emily McArthur, you are so fucked-up."

I need someone to talk to. But who? Molly? She'll just tease me and call me names. Ash? Is the problem. Vashiel? She smiled—the straight-laced, honest Angel of Vengeance could certainly give her a good, frank, honest answer. But he'll blab at a moment's notice. And he's gone. That left... Oh crap. Rumisiel? She grimaced, wracking her brains for anyone else she could try to tap for support. Harry or Kate? I don't know them very well—that might be a plus. Harry's known Ash a long time, but he's mostly known Ash from before the Misfile. Kate? She thinks of Ash as her little sister, but I dunno if she could really help me... Mom?

Emily hummed softly to herself at that prospect. But wait—where *was* her mother, anyway? Emily sighed and turned off the water. Getting out, she pulled towels around herself, drying and wrapping a towel around her hair. She went to the stairs and called out, but her mother failed to answer. Slowly she walked down the stairs, looking around—she found her clue on the kitchen table.

It was a note.

Emily, your aunt is in the hospital. You weren't home when I got home, so I'm presuming school was not canceled. The weather forecast is absolutely awful, so I may be snowed in upstate. Stay home! Stay safe. I'll call you when I can.

Emily sighed. "The only time I actually *want* to talk to you, and you're gone. That figures." She went back upstairs, finished drying off, and lay back on her bed, staring at her ceiling.

To hell with it. I need to talk to someone. Someone I know can damn well keep their trap shut.

She rolled to her feet, pulling on something to wear, and sat back on her bed, picking up the telephone. She dialed and raised the phone to her ear. And blinked, as a three-tone note played, then a voice came on, "We're sorry; the number you have dialed can not be reached. This is a recording." She blinked and hung up the receiver, then tried again; she damn well knew the number for Ash's house, but got the error message again.

Are the phones down?

Emily sighed, placed the receiver back, and looked at her desk. She could probably do with some studying, but found that she had absolutely no interest or energy for hitting the books.

"I hope everything's okay..." She jumped slightly as the wind rattled the window. Placing her palms against it, Emily winced at how cold the panes of glass felt, and she looked down. Her watch was burning 19:51.

Seven fifty... How long was I in that shower?

She let out a soft sigh, and walked downstairs, to the living room, settling in a chair. "Where are you now, Ash? Your phones are down; I can't reach you. Are you playing a video game? Laughing with

Rumisiel?” Her stomach grumbled slightly, but she ignored it; she wasn’t in the mood to eat. The wind outside howled, and the house shook, but she ignored it. In fact, she almost missed the knocking, except that it was rhythmic.

Emily jumped to her feet when she finally recognized what it was, after the second set of knocks, and ran over to the door. She undid the locks, pulled the door open, and was all but bowled backwards by the gust of terrifyingly cold air rushing into the house along with snow and icy particles—and a very cold-looking Ash Upton, followed by a shivering Rumisiel, who shut the door behind them. Both of them looked frozen almost solid, and Emily blinked twice, before reaching over and turning the thermostat up to 80°. “What happened?”

Ash shivered strongly. “S-Snow. Brought down lines. We l-lost everything, power, phone, h-h-heat...” She shrugged, or did her best to shrug while clutching her arms and shivering and stuttering. “W-We came to ch-check on you when we r-r-realized the phones were out.”

“Okay. Both of you get in here.” She tugged them towards the middle of the house. “Geeze, Ash, you feel frozen solid!”

“I as-assure you, I feel m-much worse to me th-than I do to you.”

The levity made Emily laugh. “Okay. Get yourself upstairs and into my shower. Run it hot, and just let it warm you up. Rumisiel, take my mother’s shower. Toss me your clothes, I’ll go put them in the dryer.”

It was chaotic, disorderly even, having Ash and Rumisiel show up all of a sudden, half-frozen. But it was a lot better, she mused, than being alone, as she ushered both of them into hot showers (thankful her house had a very high-capacity double-water-heater that could keep the hot water pumping indefinitely), and took Ash and Rumisiel’s clothes, throwing them in the dryer.

Emily smiled, putting water on to boil. She gathered the makings, and stirred up three large mugs of tea, carrying them upstairs with a tray. One mug she left in her mother’s room, the other two she carried into her bedroom, setting them on the desk. Though the wind’s howl shook and rattled the house, the sound of the shower made her feel better for some silly reason.

“Emily, you are some kind of messed up, feeling better just because Ash is in your shower.” She shook her head, smiling at herself, but Ash apparently heard—or heard something.

“Em? Is that you out there?”

“Yeah, it is. Just talking to myself,” she called out, louder, walking to the door of the bathroom—her shower curtain was opaque, of course. “Is everything all right?”

“Y-Yeah. I’m just still cold—on the inside, you know?”

“Still? How long has the heat been out at your house, Ash?” Emily walked into the bathroom as she asked it.

“I-I dunno. An hour or two? I-It took us awhile to figure out what t-to do.”

“An hour or two? With no light and no heat? What are you, crazy? Why didn’t you come right away?” she huffed, and Ash sounded a bit sheepish inside.

“B-Because I didn’t want to bug you. I-I was just going to roll up in a blanket and go to sl-sleep.”

“Why? How could you think about doing something so stupid, Ash? You’d have frozen! You didn’t want to bug me? Don’t you think it would’ve done a bit more than *bug* me if I found out you’d frozen to death?”

Ash was silent, and Emily could well picture her face—chagrined, maybe a bit guilty-looking. She could have pressed the issue, but didn’t. “So, why’d you come over finally?”

Ash sighed from inside, the sound mixing with the hot sound of the water droplets hitting her and the floor. “Because Rumisiel pointed out that *you* might not have heat.”

That’s my Ash. Running to the rescue, as always.

“Give me your hand, Ash.”

“Uh, what? My hand?”

“Yes, Ash. Give me your hand.”

A confused sound followed her instruction from Ash, shortly followed by her hand, snaked out from the back of the shower curtain. Emily clasped it in both of her hands; although the skin was superficially warm, she could tell it was still cool inside.

Her hand... Heh... Emily smiled softly, squeezing—not tightly, but warmly. It fully hit her how silly, yet romantic, the pose must have looked—holding her friend’s hand tightly, mere inches from her heart. She smiled at the thought.

“Sit down,” she said. “It’ll help you warm up.”

“Sit down? In the shower?”

“Mmm-hmm. In the back, let the tub scoop around you.”

Ash complied, and Emily sat as well, nestled in against the wall and the outside edge of the bathtub. Her lips formed a smile, as she slowly stroked Ash’s hand, her eyes closed.

This would be the perfect time to tell her if you’re going to tell her, Emily. Or to make your move. She could well imagine it—Ash would be sitting in the back of the tub, water running over her. She’d probably have one or both legs bent at the knee to make herself feel more secure, and hug that knee against her with her right arm. Emily smiled, stroking Ash’s hand gently in hers, running her thumbs over Ash’s palm, as she imagined the move she could make—creep her hands up Ash’s arm, inside, stroke her shoulders, her neck. Then pull the curtain aside, and slide in atop her, leaning into Ash, letting her hot breath trace over her cold friend’s neck and shoulders, following up the unspoken promise with a kiss...

“Um, Em? Are you okay? You’re trembling...”

Emily looked down at her hands—they were shaking, clasping Ash’s hand as they were. She realized that it wasn’t even fear—it was the feeling of excited anticipation that Ash had spoken of, before her second race with Kate. She licked her lips, suddenly dry.

Can I tell her? Should I?

“Em? You okay?” Ash’s voice was more urgent, a little worried.

“Yes, Ash. I’m fine, I’m just... relieved you’re okay. You gave me a scare.” She said it even as her inner voice was groaning at her for losing her nerve. “I’m going to go check on Rumisiel, okay? You stay in that shower until you’re so done I can stick a fork in you, you understand? I don’t want you getting sick!”

Emily stood up and exited the bathroom, cursing herself mentally for not doing *something*. She stalked through the house to her mother’s bedroom, where Rumisiel was just drying off with a large towel. “Get dried off,” she said, disappearing down the stairs, returning in a few minutes with Rumisiel’s clothes, which she tossed into the bedroom at him.

“Uh... is everything okay? You’re not like, gonna throw me out, are you?”

“No. Just... get dressed.” She turned away, standing against the wall, waiting for Rumisiel to dress. When he poked his head out, asking, “What’s up?” she waved for him to follow.

“Follow me.” Curiously, the angel followed the blue-haired girl.

She sat him down in a seat in the living room, leaving Rumisiel bewildered. Then she reached out, pushing him by the shoulders back into the chair’s back. “Now listen to me, and listen to me carefully, Rumisiel. If you breathe a word of what I’m about to say to you to anyone, to Ash, to Doctor Upton, to yourself while alone on a mountaintop, or so help me to your brother, or to anyone else, I... I will... Well, I’ll think of something, and you *won’t* like it. Understand? Nod your head, Rumisiel.”

Rumisiel blinked. What could he do? He nodded.

“Good,” Emily said, and then she fell to her knees beside the chair, burying her head in the cushioned arm. “I think I’m losing my mind, Rumisiel.” She sniffled.

The on-leave Angel blinked, looking down at Emily. She’d gone from aggressive to falling apart in about two seconds. Was she having mood swings? He didn’t know, but he hoped she didn’t decide to follow through on her infamous spork threat. “Emily? What’s wrong?”

The blue-haired girl sniffled, trembling. “I... I think I’m going crazy, Rumisiel. It’s Ash...”

“You mean all the shopping and fun you did and had today?”

She shook her head, then changed her mind and nodded. “Maybe. Partly. I... Ugh, I can’t get her out of my head!” Emily looked up, her eyes a bit misty. “Did she tell you why I wear this watch?” She held up her right arm, and its waterproof digital watch.

“Yeah. She said you’d been having trouble sleeping, and needed it to tell dreams from reality?”

“Yeah... I... Rumisiel, do you remember a few months ago, you fell sick and had a really long, crazy dream about what would happen if you fixed the Misfile?”

“How could I forget? That was like, the scariest nightmare ever!”

“Well, when you put us to bed, I was awake, and I... Well, you just put us in Ash’s bed, and I liked it. And ever since then, I’ve been dreaming. About Ash...”

Rumisiel’s eyes got wide as saucers. “You mean like, uh... sexy dreams?” He cringed as soon as he said it—he really ought to work on that ‘brain-mouth filter’ thing, almost certain he was about to receive some abuse. Instead, Emily just put her head in her arms, looking down.

“Yes, Rumisiel. Sex dreams. And... romance dreams... and just... being with her dreams...” Emily heaved, as Rumisiel listened, a bit dumbfounded. “I can’t keep her out of my head... I don’t want to... I...” She sighed. “I’ve had so many false awakenings and lucid dreams about being with her, it’s scary. Tonight, though... I fell asleep after she dropped me off. I had a very, very real sex dream about her. It scared me. It was so strong. So very, very strong. Even though I knew it was a dream as it was happening... I... I didn’t stop it.”

By now Rumisiel was worried. He had engaged his sight Beyond. It would certainly be nice if the easy solution presented itself—an outside spirit’s influence, an ass to kick, and a return to normal. But there was nothing in the room but himself and a very confused young girl. He gulped; this one was going to be the hard way.

“Look, Em... Maybe you’re so confused because Ash is a boy’s soul in a girl’s body? You’re picking up on what made the old, male Ash, and it’s attracting you, but you’re all weird because he’s in a she’s body?”

“I’ve thought of that, Rumisiel. I’ve thought it was just that, and then wished it were just that, for so long. But it’s not... I...” She looked up. “I’m going to re-iterate my policy of ‘breathe a word of this to anyone, and I will find something so horrible to do to you that you’ll wish you could just die’. Are you clear on that?”

“Um... crystal?”

“Good.” Emily sighed. “I... I’m afraid I’m gay,” she said, sounding very, *very* small as she did. Rumisiel opened his mouth, but Emily shushed him. “Just... let me finish, okay? I’m... not a virgin, all right? When I was fifteen—well, I guess thirteen now, although that’s *really* creepy to think about, thank-you-very-much—Molly was dating this boy from another town, from another high school. I was the only one in our clique who didn’t, you know, have stories like that... of sex... to share.”

Emily took a breath, deep and ragged. “She had him bring a friend to this party. His name was Ryan—he was two years older than me the first time... I guess four, now. Everyone basically expected us to get together, and, well... we did. Alcohol was passed around, I got a bit buzzed... we ended up in Molly’s bedroom...”

Emily looked up, to find a look of horror and anger on Rumisiel’s face. “Son of a bitch! He raped you? Oh, Emily, no wonder you’re -mmmmf.” She silenced him with a palm over his mouth, and then giggled, softly.

“That makes two of you who’ve leaped to that conclusion. No, he didn’t rape me. I didn’t say no. That makes it... consent, I guess.” She slid her hand off Rumisiel’s face, and sighed, slumping to the floor, sitting next to the recliner, against its side. “But I didn’t want it to happen. I just lay there, hoping, wishing he’d pick up on that, and stop. But he didn’t.” She closed her eyes. “We did... you know, the deed, and the party broke up. I never saw him or heard from him again.”

Emily looked up, or rather elevated her face. Her eyes were closed—thinking about that made her cry again. It always did.

“It was... awful. Hot, painful... empty of emotion, devoid of pleasure or enjoyment or fulfillment... And if you make a single ‘fill’ joke, you *will* regret it.”

Rumisiel gulped, thinking that it was quite a good thing she had cut that joke off at the ankles. “Go on,” he said.

“And then there was Cape Cod. You remember that racer, Brent? His friend, Casper?”

“Vaguely. Bookish kid, real polite, right?”

“That’s him. Anyway, he asked me on a date the night you and Vashiel and James showed up. He was perfect—really, perfect. A girl couldn’t ask for a better boy: polite, knowledgeable, he’d read all my favorite books, and we got along so very well.

“When we first got onto the date, I... I hallucinated *Ash* in his place when I asked what was good at the restaurant. Ash as I know her, not what I can barely, if at all, picture Ash as, as a boy.” She sighed. “The date just... fell apart. I tried... I wanted it to work, Rumisiel. I even asked him to kiss me, even though he thought I wouldn’t want him to.

“Technically, it was perfect. He wrapped his arms around me, held me close, put his lips against mine. But it was *empty*. I felt absolutely nothing... well, emotionally or physically as far as arousal went. I could tell it was a perfect kiss. He put so much effort into making sure it was the kind of kiss they film twenty times for the movies to get it right. But I didn’t feel anything in it besides the touch.”

She sighed softly, putting a hand over her lower face, supporting herself while giving Rumisiel time to digest it. He huffed softly, “Huh...”

“Yeah. Let’s say that while technically impressive, Casper failed to precisely move mountains for me. But Ash? I *felt* something. It made me angry when she first kissed me, but... there was something there. Maybe it scared me. It still scares me, but I just can’t ignore the feeling when I think about kissing her.

“I don’t even know why I’m telling you this, I just... I need to talk to *someone*, okay? And I can’t talk to Ash, because... Well, I know she has feelings for me. I’m afraid of what’ll happen if I tell her... I can’t get hold of my mother, and I might as well paint ‘lesbian’ on my car if I tried talking to Molly.”

She sighed and stood up. “I’m sorry, Rumisiel. I... really shouldn’t have unloaded this all on you.”

She turned to leave, but Rumisiel said, “Hold on, Emily.”

“No. I appreciate you listening, but I don’t really want advice from anyone, least of all you.”

“Hold it!”

Turning around, Emily looked into Rumisiel’s face. He wasn’t exactly angry, but highly annoyed-looking. “You just unloaded all your baggage on me, under pain of fate-worse-than-death if I uttered a word to anyone else. I think I’m entitled to some feedback at this point, Em.” Rumisiel was standing, shaking his head, and she looked down, feeling guilty. He was right, at that. She *had* just unloaded on him, as if seeking advice.

“Now look, I know I’ve made a lot of jokes about how it’d be hot and all if you two kissed and stuff, but I didn’t know there was, you know, something there.” Rumisiel walked to the wall, leaning against it. “And if I had known... I probably wouldn’t have hooked her up with Missi.”

Emily’s eye twitched. “*You* did that? I’ve been tearing my hair out going crazy-jealous of that little tramp muscling in on my best friend!”

“Cry me a river, Em; you’d hardly be the first girl to snooze and lose. She’s ‘your’ Ash now? What’ve you done to make it so? I’m sorry I hooked her up with Missi, but it could have happened anyway. It’s not like Missi’s the only bi or lesbian girl in Tempest High, you know.”

Emily formed her hands into fists, staring at the angel. How... how *dare* he be so flippant.

“Look, Em. You can get angry with me all you want. Yeah, I’m an asshole at times. God knows you’ve more than enough reason to be angry with me, what with the Misfile and all, but this is your own mess. I didn’t make it. Though I may have made it slightly worse.

“Look. The only thing that really matters is—do you love her? Do you even just want to lust over her?” He pinned Emily with a look. “Which is it? I don’t care either way. It’s not like I, you know, *haven’t* totally perved out more than my fair share of times.”

“I love her. It feels so weird to say it, and it scares the hell out of me, but it’s true. I want to hold her tight, I want to kiss her, stroke her hair... More of those dreams are romantic than outright sexual.”

“Okay. For what it’s worth, I’m pretty sure she loves you, too. Where’s the hold-up here? Okay, yeah, all this time you thought you got all hot for boys, and now you’re confused because Ash is a girl, but you need to face up to it. You’re doing her an awful lot of hurt by stringing her along like this, and if she and Missi go, you know, the distance, you’re gonna feel cheated out.

“So. What are you going to do about it? Have you told her how you feel? Have you hugged her lately, kissed her, or just told her straight how you care for her?”

Emily looked down, and didn’t answer, which gave Rumisiel all the info he needed. “Thought so. Look, it’s on you. I ain’t gonna out you to Ash, or to your mom or anyone. I ain’t gonna snitch. But this is your mess, Em; it’s your life, and your heart. If you *don’t* tell Ash, and she goes on to find a lot of fun and comfort in Missi... Well, where does that leave you?”

“... Alone.”

“Right! Alone. And frankly, I think you’re a better match for Ash anyway.”

“Um... you do?”

“I do. Missi doesn’t, you know, know about the whole ‘used to be a boy’ thing. You do. You’re right for her; the two of you get along wonderfully. I’m not saying you don’t fight—a couple that doesn’t fight is boring. But you two bounce back so quickly. You easily fit together, is all I’m saying. Anyway, I’m hungry. Mind if I cook? Also, where am I gonna sleep?”

“Um, yeah. Go ahead and cook. I, um... I don’t have a couch, and my mom will *kill* me if I let you sleep on her bed. I’ve got a sleeping bag.”

“That’s fine.” He swept into the kitchen, as Emily sighed, looking down at her hands.

I... I have to tell her... To do something... She deserves to know...

Emily closed her eyes, sank into the chair Rumisiel abandoned, and shivered softly. Taking a deep breath, Emily calmed herself—tea. Of course, she had left that cup of tea in her bedroom. That would help settle her.

Rising from the chair, Emily crept silently up the stairs. She walked into her bedroom to find Ash was standing next to the bed, wrapping a towel around herself. Her first instinct was to turn away, but she fought that one down, smiling as Ash blushed.

“Uh, Em, sorry...” she began, but Emily walked over.

“Ash?” Ash blinked, as Emily hugged her from the side, around the shoulders.

How do I tell her? I need to tell her...

Emily began to lock up, gears in her head seizing, and her cheeks blushing as she opened her mouth.

“Promise me you won’t ever do something so stupid as freezing yourself half to death again, okay?”

Damn it, damn it! Tell her!

Emily couldn’t—she froze again, but covered well, as Ash smiled softly. “Uh, yeah. I promise, Em.”

Emily released her and walked to the desk, picking up the mugs. “Here. They’re kind of cool now, but that just makes them easier to drink. Tea’s okay with you, right? No coffee, and no hot chocolate, I’m sorry.”

Ash chuckled behind her, her voice bright. “Yeah, that’s fine. Thanks, Em.” Emily picked up hers, taking a long, deep gulp as she turned around to hand Ash her own. The orange-haired tuner was holding her towel with one arm, reaching out to grab the cup with the other. “Thanks, Em.”

“All right. Rumisiel’s cooking dinner, it shouldn’t be too long.” She turned to leave, but Ash’s voice from behind made her turn again.

“Hey, Em,” Ash began, as Emily turned to face her. “Thanks. Thank you for being my friend. Thanks for getting me to take you to Albany today.”

Emily smiled back, even as a feeling of tightness rose in her throat. “You’re welcome, Ash.” She turned, and walked out, quickly, so her misty eyes wouldn’t be noticeable to Ash.

I need to tell her... I want to tell her... How can I tell her?

McArthur Residence, 10:41 PM

Dinner turned out to be about the only thing Rumisiel could reliably make—Ramen—and they finished the night casting about for something to do. Eventually the trio decided to take the DVD of some modern submarine movie as acceptable. It was a good movie, though Emily didn’t really pay attention to it; she was more concerned with sitting next to Ash on the loveseat—the closest to a couch they had. She was warm; when she turned the thermostat back down, they found it became chilly, so she got a blanket and put it over herself and Ash. It was almost romantic, even though they were watching a movie about the tenseness of nuclear war and submarine warfare.

Actually, this is romantic, she decided, leaning over with a yawn, leaning against Ash, snuggling into her side. It was perhaps a gamble, but the orange-haired tuner didn’t complain, simply leaning back into the chair, supporting Emily’s head with her shoulder. She smiled sleepily, curling her arm around Ash’s stomach, under the covers. It was warm, and perfect. Ash hardly objected—then again, she was somewhat stiff.

When bedtime came (namely, the movie ended with a naval court-martial of all officers involved finding that they were both right and both wrong) Emily made a makeshift bed for Rumisiel consisting of her thick, comfortable sleepingbag atop the seat cushions from the love seat and a pillow. She and Ash walked upstairs, slowly, as Ash popped the question she’d been waiting for.

“Where am I going to sleep?”

“Where do you think? My bed, of course. You’re my guest, after all.”

“I thought you only had one sleeping bag?”

“I do.”

Ash paused as they got to the top of the stairs. “Hold on, you’re not sleeping on the floor! Especially not as cold as it is tonight!”

“No, I’m not.” She opened the door to her bedroom and walked in, while Ash followed, a bit bewildered.

“You’re sleeping in your mom’s room?”

“She’d kill me. No, I’m sleeping in my bed.” Ash’s bewildered face quickly turned to surprise, and Emily smiled. “We’ve known each other *how long*? Is it really so creepy?”

Ash looked away, blushing. “You know, after that night with Rumisiel, when I woke up and found we were in my bed...”

Emily rolled her eyes, and smirked. “Come on. Besides, we’re just best friends, right? You have a girlfriend now, don’t you?”

“Uh...” Ash blushed beet red.

“Unless you’re going to suggest that one of us sleeps on the floor. And before you say it, I *will not* have you sleeping on my floor, Ash.”

Emily grinned triumphantly as Ash sighed. “Come on, Ash. Are you really afraid of sleeping with me?” Ash looked down, and Emily rolled her eyes. “Come on. It’s,” she checked her watch, and blanched, “too damn late.”

She walked to her closet and started taking out clothes—the same pair of capri pants and matching top Ash had worn last time, and a nightie for herself. Steeling herself, she simply disrobed—albeit with her back to Ash—and slipped into it. Turning around, she found Ash had turned around at some point, and had the pants on and was slipping into the top.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it?” Emily smiled as she said it, sliding under the covers and pulling one pillow under her head, leaving the other for Ash. It wasn’t a terribly large bed, so they wound up with

their arms touching. Ash looked highly uncomfortable with the situation, so Emily took Ash's hand, squeezing it.

"Ash, is something wrong?"

Ash shook her head, and blushed. "Em, I... Um..."

"Not this again. Yes, Ash, I know you're a boy inside. I don't mind." She squeezed, tighter. "You're still my best girlfriend, even if you don't like to admit it." She smiled as Ash looked at her rather upset-looking. "Missi must be lucky to have you. As far as she knows, you're a girl, but that doesn't stop you two. So why should it stop you from being my best friend?"

Ash grumbled softly, and Emily squeezed her hand again. "Come on. We went *clothes* shopping today. You even gave me advice. I know, you don't get a wonderful estrogen rush from doing that sort of thing, but you did it, and it made me feel very happy."

Ash sighed, softly. "I'm not going to win this, am I? I could take you yelling at me, but you're being so... *nice*."

Emily let out a soft, muted giggle, squeezing tightly again. "Mmmmnoppe. Best just get used to me, 'cause I'm here to stay."

"Good night, Ash. Sleep well. At least one of us might."

She closed her eyes, smiling as Ash replied, "Good night, Em," and squeezed her hand in return, before letting go...

McArthur Residence, 4:13 AM

Emily awoke not to buzzing alarm clock, nor to voice, nor even the taste of lips upon her own, but to ringing—the immutable sound of the telephone. Emily sat up, groaning and looking for it, as Ash stirred. She slid to the side of the bed, hesitant to get out of the warm pocket generated by the proximity of Ash, but she reached out, snagging the phone. "Hello?" she asked curiously, expecting her mother.

"Am I speaking with Miss Emily McArthur?" The voice was deep, male, and businesslike.

A nameless, cold dread gripped Emily's guts. "This is she," she replied, sitting up.

Emily listened to the phone call, though it started to seem like a buzzing drone in her ear. She replied mutely, trembling, as Ash sat up to look at her. When the phone call was over, she dropped the receiver; didn't hang it up, just dropped it. Her eyes were wide.

"Em? What was that?"

Emily shivered. She gulped. "It... it was North Adams Regional Hospital." She turned to face Ash, pale as a ghost. "My mother was in a wreck trying to leave Greylock. They said that I should hurry if I could. That she wasn't expected to live."

Emily was trembling, the world was a buzzing faraway, as Ash's eyes went wide as saucers. Then she threw the covers off. Emily watched, a bit dazedly, as Ash bolted from the bed, stripping out of her sleepwear and pulling her clothes back on.

"What are you..."

"You said we should hurry. Let's go."

"Ash, we can't, it's—"

"We can make it, Em. I'm not going to not try and get you to her."

Emily sat, coldly for a few seconds, and she gulped, then darted from the bed herself, moving with a terrified speed as she threw her nightie off and pulled on her clothes again. They dashed down the stairs, and Ash yelled ahead of them. When they got there, Rumisiel was staring, bleary-eyed, from the sleeping bag. "What's going on?"

Ash was in full take-control mode. "Emily's mother's in Greylock in a hospital, and they don't think she'll survive very long. We have to go."

Rumisiel gulped softly, and groaned. "Ash... I can't heal her."

"What, is that some kind of stupid fucking rule?"

Rumisiel held his hands up. “Whoa, no! First off, it’s not, second off, you know me and rules. I said I *can’t*, not that I wouldn’t! I don’t know a damn thing about keeping people alive.”

“You... you can’t do anything?”

“I can’t, Em. I’m not that kind of Angel; I don’t have that kind of power.”

Emily looked down, and Ash pulled her close. “Em... Look, she might be okay. People have survived some amazing things. But either way, we need to get you to Greylock, now. Let’s go. Rumisiel, get your stuff on, let’s go.”

Rumisiel got out of the sleeping bag and pulled his clothes on as Ash and Emily walked to the front door. Ash pulled her keys out and opened the door. They made a run for the Monster XR as Rumisiel made a dash after them. The wind howled and tore at them, but Emily hardly paid attention to it. She was numb... Her mother, dying... Ash put the keys in. Turned them.

Rrrrrr-rrrr-rrrr! Rrrrrrr-rrrrrr-rrrrrr-rrr-rrrrrr! “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me!” Ash smacked the console, trying the keys again. The engine turned over, but didn’t start. She tried it again and again, until cursing. “Damn it. There’s no way to tell what it is, and we can’t fix it in this weather anyway!” She tugged her jacket close, shivering. “Fuck... Come on.”

Emily stared as Ash got out, walking towards the house. “We’re just *giving up*?” She was incredulous, horrified.

“Like hell we’re giving up! We’re calling for reinforcements!”

Although she didn’t understand what Ash was referring to, Emily made a dash for the house as well, with Rumisiel in hot pursuit. She unlocked the door, and Ash went in, walking to the phones. “Oh man, this is crazy. Absolutely crazy, but it’s the only chance we’ve got.”

Ash picked up the phone. Dialed. Waited as the phone rang. And rang. Eventually it was picked up. “Do yeh know woh’ the bloody time it is?” The voice on the end of the phone was unmistakably a very sleepy Harry.

Ash licked her dry lips, steeling herself for the monumental favor she was about to ask for. “Yes, Harry, I know what time it is. I wouldn’t call if it weren’t an emergency. I need a four wheel drive car.”

“Woh? Ye go daft on me or somethin’, luv? You’ve *goh* my bloody project car!”

“It won’t start. Frozen, and I need to go *now*. Harry, it’s Em’s mom. She’s in the hospital in Greylock. And she’s dying, Harry. I need to get Em to Greylock, now.”

Emily’s eyes went wide, listening to the conversation, then she closed them. Hearing the word ‘dying’ made it all so much worse, so very *real*. It was like a gut-punch.

“Em’s mum? Bloody hell, Ash... Oh, *goh*’ save us, the garage is still snowed in, and I drive a rear-wheeler. Wai’ a mo, hol’ the phone.” Harry’s voice disappeared from the phone for several seconds, with a whispered conversation on the other end. “We’re on our way. Wha’s’ the address?”

Ash provided the address, and hung up the phone. She looked at Em, and gulped. “Best we can do... I don’t know what they’re up to, if the garage is snowed in...”

As it turned out, it wasn’t long until they found out—maybe twenty minutes. The arrival of their rescue was heralded by an all-too-familiar roaring engine, and one Emily didn’t recognize. She ran to the window and stared—Kate’s Jaguar and a cherry-apple red XR4Ti were chugging up the road. Mutely she noted that Harry must have been a very, very good driver, to manage a rear-wheel beast like an XR4Ti on ice and snow, even at slow speeds. The cars parked, and Emily and Ash ran out. Rumisiel simply stayed behind, with a sigh—he had a feeling he knew what was going on.

Kate was already standing outside the Jaguar when Ash ran up. She tossed the keys high—Ash caught them with deftness, just as deftly as Kate caught her in a strong hug. The wind had picked up, catching her yellow hair and making it billow straight into the sky. “Be *careful*, little sister! She’s got more horses than anything you’ve ever driven before.”

Ash nodded, staring up at Kate’s face, her eyes slightly teary. Emily could see, with a twinge, just how affected she was; it must have been a strong feeling, she mused, that she could perceive it even with her mother on her mind.

"I will be, Kate. Thank you... big sister," Ash murmured, extremely quiet, and slipped from the embrace, settling into the driver's seat as Emily got into the passenger seat. She buckled in as Ash pulled the door shut, and Kate walked back to the waiting XR4Ti.

"Ash..." Emily looked up, and Ash nodded, putting the keys in.

"Her Jag. I can hardly believe it." She turned the keys—the engine *ROARED* to life with a sound that shook Emily's guts. Emily managed a weak smile, settling back into the seat, stroking the console softly.

Ash threw the car into first gear and tested the gas, lightly. The Jag spun a little as it lurched forward, the powerful engine pushing it into the street. They were underway, but the grimness of their mission meant that neither could enjoy the new and unique sensation of driving Kate's legendary Jag.

"This thing's hard to control," Ash noted, as they nosed onto the highway. "It puts out so many horses... And paradoxically, it gets stronger in the cold."

"How is that?"

"This monster's supercharged, not turbocharged. A turbo kicks in over a certain RPM; the supercharger is manually driven from the engine. It's just like a turbo, but always on, so you get a lot steeper power curve. And you know how an intercooler works, right?"

"Colder air is denser air, and there's more molecules to combust... Oh! Having an intercooler on a night like tonight is feeding drastically subzero air into the engine, giving it a lot more oxygen to burn."

"Yeah... She's a beast, all right." Even so, it was a struggle—in Kate's Jag, the struggle was to stay at a 'safe' velocity (for certain values of safe, given the conditions), while still keeping traction. Going at full highway speed was absolutely out of the question, and Emily held tightly onto the dash, staring ahead. The banter kind of failed to materialize—the comment about the Jag being a monster had started a short conversation, but the silence was pervasive, deafening.

Emily wished she could enjoy it—driving with Ash in the fastest (and by far the most expensive and luxurious) car she knew of—but the icy chill gripping her guts was too much. She waited in silence, watching, waiting. Then disaster.

"The road's closed?" Emily groaned, as Ash nosed the car up to barriers, and cursed. Emily closed her eyes, then licked her lips. "Route 8 goes up the windward side of Greylock. The roads will be a mess of snow. But Highway 7..."

"The other side of the mountain—the wind is blowing from the ocean. It'll be caught on Greylock. We can go east at Williamstown." The orange-haired tuner girl put the pedal down again, though much less thoroughly than she would have if the weather were clear. They made good time, given the prevailing weather conditions, though Emily worried.

It's been over an hour... Please, let her be okay... Please, let me see her...

Emily wanted to cry, but didn't have the energy. Finally she looked up, as they passed to the north of the mountain; they were so close, but the visibility was so damn awful. They started onto a causeway over a frozen river.

The big rig came out of nowhere. The visibility was so poor, it wasn't honking its air horn until it was far too late. Ash threw the wheel, hard. Air brakes screeched. Mass impacted mass, and airbags deployed, as Emily thudded into them.

No... I don't want to die an ironic death, she thought, as the car spun. Something heavy crunched, and she realized the car had broken partly through the bridge's sidewall. The front was a mess in front of them.

"Ash?" Emily let out a moan, and looked. She undid her belt, trying to see Ash through the darkness. The orange-haired tuner was in worse shape—she was half-trapped, trying to free herself. Emily yanked airbag from her face, and Ash gasped.

"Ugh! Kate's gonna fucking kill me."

"At least you're alive for now. Gods, we've got to get out of here. I think the front's over the edge." That galvanized Ash. Emily opened her door and got out. She went to the other side, and gasped as she

saw what was wrong—the driver’s side door was flush with the broken segment of wall. Ash was trapped. She saw Ash struggle to open the window, which through some miracle still worked, and reached in. But Ash was still going to have to crawl over the railing to get out, if she could get out from under the wheel. “Ash? Gods, Ash... Come on, we’re so close. We can walk the rest of the way.” The rig wasn’t in sight, so Emily just turned her attention double to Ash.

It was fiddly, scary work, pulling Ash half out of the car. Slowly Ash worked out from under the steering wheel, gripping the railing hard. Emily held her tightly as she crawled onto the railing. Then the wind hit.

It was like the wash of a jet engine. It *picked up* Ash, hurling her off the bridge, into the air. Holding onto the bridge’s railing and Emily’s hand for dear life, Ash screamed Emily’s name. Ash hit the bridge’s side with a sickening thud, legs dangling—that was a long way down. Her green eyes shimmered as she stared into Emily’s eyes, scrabbling for a purchase to climb up, while Emily held tightly. But the wind was too strong.

The next gust broke Emily’s hold on Ash as she was ripped away from the railing. Her green eyes went wide, it was surreal. First her mother, now Ash? Emily vaguely, mutedly perceived the world even as she reached out towards the falling figure, screaming out Ash’s name as the wind howled around her, then died, just in time for her to hear the flat, sickening crunch as Ash hit the ice below.

“No, no, no!” Emily ran for the embankment, leapt over the railing, and slid down the side to the frozen riverbed on her back, scrabbling over ice and frozen ground. She hit the icy riverbed and ran towards Ash. Miraculously she didn’t slip and fall, skidding to a stop on her knees next to Ash. Reaching out, she took Ash’s shoulders.

Ash stared back at her—conscious, though trembling. “E-Em? I c-can’t feel anything...”

Emily closed her eyes—she knew that could only mean a broken spinal cord. “Ash... God, Ash... I’m here...” she cried, staring down into the green-eyed tuner’s face, horrified.

“I’m... I’m going to die,” Ash murmured, with a sort of horrified finality.

“No, no you’re not! You’re going to be fine, Ash...” She knew it was stupid, it was futile, but on her knees, next to the girl she loved, she couldn’t say anything else. “Ash... Ash, I love you. You’ve got to be fine...” She wrapped one hand under Ash’s head, as Ash stared into her eyes, trembling.

Then the creak came, over the howl of the wind. Emily ignored it, but the shriek got her attention. She looked up, watching the Jaguar above, poking out over the bridge’s edge.

“Em... go,” Ash whispered, even as the car pitched over the edge.

Emily leaned down, pressing her lips to Ash’s as the sound of an object falling rapidly hit her ears.

McArthur Residence, 4:33 AM

Emily awoke with a sob, the lurching feeling in her guts wracking her body, the sound of the shrieking metal mountain falling towards her fresh in her ears, though she couldn't remember it. She was trembling from the core of herself, eyes open, gasping Ash's name.

"I'm here, Em."

Emily's eyes focused, realizing her hand was clenched tightly by Ash, whose green eyes were staring into her own magenta ones.

"Nightmare?"

Emily's eyes were filled with tears. The horror of it had been so real, so soul-wrenching. She could hardly believe her eyes, feeling Ash's hand reassuringly pat her shoulder.

"You okay, Em? You were saying some—mmm!"

Emily cut Ash off by pressing into her, hard, pushing Ash down to the bed. She minced no words, she didn't hesitate. The kiss was hot and strong, born of a deep, desperate need to assure herself that her friend—her love—was safe. Then one kiss turned into a long, long kiss, with her hand sliding under Ash's head, fist clenching her hair. Ash didn't resist—she let Emily kiss her, her eyes wide.

They popped away with a hard gasp on Emily's teary-eyed part, and she wailed Ash's name, quietly. "I thought you were... I thought we... Oh, God, Ash..." she whimpered, as Ash wrapped her arms around her.

"Shhh, Em. Don't talk about it... I'm here, Emily, I'm here," she murmured, as Emily trembled at the close, warm contact, pressing herself into Ash's soft curves, wrapping her legs around one of the tuner's, burning with a need to be one with her, to be as close as possible.

"Ash... Ash, I... I love you, Ash... I... God, I said it. I mean it..." She trembled, as Ash's eyes went wide. "Please... Don't leave me," she whispered, pressing back into Ash's body, burying her head atop the curve of one of Ash's breasts, nestled in under her cheek.

"Em... I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere..." Ash's hand held Emily's head tightly to her, and she swung her leg out, catching Emily between her legs, pulling her atop herself. They met again in a deep kiss, Emily's body trembling, burning with the distinct feeling of a lurch. It felt like the kiss with Ash was capable of moving mountains, and she flattened herself into it, her mind foggy with the twin hazes of terror (from the dream) and abject pleasure coming from the intense kiss.

Ash slid her hands up Emily's back, squeezing her, softly. As the kiss broke, she smiled. "I'm not going anywhere, Emily. You love me?"

Emily nodded, and let out another snuffle. "I'm sorry I've been stringing you along, Ash. I... I couldn't come to grips with it... But that dream, it was so real... It convinced me you were dead... I... Oh, Ash!"

They kissed again, and Emily sobbed, nuzzling into Ash—the orange-haired tuner perceptively squeezed Emily against herself, gently rocking. "I... I love you, Em..."

Emily looked up into Ash's green eyes, and smiled, beautifully, as she closed her eyes, murmuring Ash's name in Ash's ear, relaxing finally. She just wanted to be held like that... by her tuner Ash. And Ash held her, as long as she wanted, pressing her lips to Emily's ear. The soft three words she whispered made Emily sigh, and she smiled. "I love you too, Ash. Please... Don't let go of me."

She didn't.

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