

After The Dream

A Misfile fanfiction by ShadowDragon8685

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McArthur Residence, 6:00 AM

The wind shook the house again, windowpanes clattering as the glass inside struggled against it, threatening to burst free and admit frigid, blisteringly cold air into the house. Yet, she didn't worry.

She was warm, content. Her eyes glanced at her watch, she noted the time, and looked away, then looked back. The digital read-out remained consistent, and Emily smiled. The warm body below hers shifted, a hand clasp stronger against her shoulder, another hand's fingers laced with her own, squeezing, as she stared out at the cloudy, gray sky. Her head was lying on a shoulder, and her legs wrapped around a third, her feet gently caressing her bedmate's.

"*Ash.*" She still quivered when she thought the name. She knew she was blushing, but beside all of her fright and neuroses, a new emotion blossomed and took root—determination. Determination not to slip back into denial. She raised her head, placing her lips on the tuner's cheek. She kissed, softly, slowly, yielding, gentle, Ash's cheek giving way under her touch.

"Ngh... E-Em?"

The blue-haired girl smiled as Ash stirred, batting her eyes open. "*She's so pretty, even when she's not trying.*" Emily leaned over and up a bit, shifting from Ash's side to slightly atop her, their breasts pressing together. Although an alien sensation, awkward and slightly unnerving (at least in the context of 'I love this girl' as opposed to 'hugging my best friend'), it was a good feeling.

"Em... was it a dream?"

"No, Ash. It wasn't a dream. I kissed you." She hugged Ash, tightly; Ash automatically returned the tightening of arms, holding Emily to her.

"Em?" Ash said, quietly, as the blue-haired, studious girl laid her head on Ash's collarbone, stretching out against her.

"Yes?" Emily looked up, as Ash looked down—their eyes met.

"Did you really say..." She trailed off, blushing softly.

Emily nodded, stretching one hand under the orange-haired tuner's body to cup the back of her head. "Yes, Ash. I *do* love you..." She closed her eyes, trembling once as emotions, confusing and conflicting, welled up inside of her. "I can't... I just can't pretend I don't anymore, Ash. I can't continue to be bitterly jealous of Missi, and not even tell you why." Her hand squeezed Ash's, their fingers still laced; she looked at their joined hands, smiling at the interlacing of her light-blue fingernails and Ash's unpainted ones.

"Jealous? O-Of Missi?"

"Yes, Ash. Jealous of her. It made me feel so bad, and I told myself everything I could think of to ignore the fact that... that I saw her as a rival. I know what I told you, but..." Emily let out a soft, pitiful sigh. "I'm sorry, it's still weird to talk about this, especially with you. But I need to tell you. You deserve to know." She looked up into Ash's expressive green eyes, filled with a tense, nervous look. Emily imagined she looked just the same, as she pulled herself slightly up, laying her head against Ash's cheek. Ash's hand slid up her back, over her neck, sinking into her hair. Emily arched into it, bringing her lips to Ash's; they met, softly, hesitantly. Warmth curled out from the sensation of Ash's lips on hers, and she trembled, her eyes tearing slightly.

"Em? Are you okay," Ash asked, eyes focused on the tears.

"I am, Ash. I just... It's so... I feel torn. All my life, I've thought I was a normal, heterosexual girl. And then you come along, and I feel so different around you... I'm sorry, this has got to be ripping you up in—mmmf?" Emily blinked, realizing that Ash had silenced her with a finger over her lips.

“Emily, those are your feelings. Do *not* apologize for them.”

Emily blinked. Then she burst into tears, even as she smiled, tugging Ash’s hand from her lips. She leaned in, and they met. It was sweet, and *warm*. Slow, too; neither she nor Ash ended it before letting the kiss end itself, as all things must. She smiled. “You remembered...”

Ash’s hands linked behind her back, in the small, and Emily leaned in, this time sliding her head next to Ash’s.

“Ash... I...” She sucked in breath, slowly letting it out. “I’m not sure I can... you know...”

“Sex?”

“Yeah. I don’t know if I can go there... yet... I just...” Emily let her lips find Ash’s earlobe, which caused Ash to let a soft, pleased sound out.

“I know, Em... I don’t think I can, either. But...” Ash’s hands unlinked, one of them laying flat against the small of Emily’s back, the other moving up, hugging her around the shoulders.

“You can’t?” Emily blinked. “But you and Missi...”

“Never went... Never went *there*, Em. Not that far...” Ash huffed softly in her ear, and Emily raised her head, realizing that Ash was as uncomfortable as she was. “We... well, we made out some, you know... but, ah... I just kind of... froze, when she wanted to go further.” Ash blushed, and Emily responded by sliding her hand under Ash’s head, gently supporting her again.

“Go on, Ash,” Emily softly murmured.

“It’s... Em, I’m still a boy. You remember that, right?”

“Yes, Ash. I know...” She reached up with her other hand, stroking the side of Ash’s head.

“For the last ten months, I’ve been focused on trying to get back... But now?”

Ash closed her eyes, tilting her head away. “I... The only girlfriends I’ve ever had have only known me as a girl. I never knew my mother before, but now we have a more-or-less standing invitation to drive to Cape Cod to visit her. Harry’s getting married to a girl we exorcised of the specter of her sister... And it’s all thanks to the Misfile.” She let out another sigh, rubbing her lips on Emily’s wrist; the blue-haired girl declined to interrupt.

“And now I wind up doing... Well, ‘girly’ things with you. Like that thing in the restroom at the diner, or going clothes shopping... And...”

Emily smiled, kissing Ash’s cheek. “You’re afraid you’re losing yourself, aren’t you? Ash, you’ve *always* been you.” She gently rubbed her nose, her lips, on Ash’s cheek. “Honestly, has anything really changed? You’re still a hell-raising, death-defying racecar driver. You’re still a wizard mechanic, you still do everything you used to, don’t you?”

Ash looked up, and their eyes met. “Well... almost everything,” she said, looking to the side.

“Almost?” Emily watched Ash blush.

“Well... Y’know, uhm... I haven’t... since...”

“Haven’t what?”

“Y’know... To girly pictures... I mean, I look at them, but... I...”

Emily blinked, confused. “Oh? *Oh!* Oh, oh... Oh, Ash...” She smiled softly in return.

“I tried. I just...”

“Does it still make you *feel* the same way, even if you haven’t been able to masturbate?”

The blush on Ash’s face spread, creeping down her neck. “Uhm...”

“Well?” Emily pressed Ash’s shoulders. “Do you still get aroused for girls?”

“You know I do!” Ash blushed furiously now, staring into Emily’s eyes.

“Then the problem is your body?”

“I don’t know anymore, Em... I mean, I *know* I’m different. It’s just... I’ve been a girl so long...”

Emily leaned in, and pressed her lips to Ash’s cheek. “You just feel, well, ‘like you’, right?”

“It scares me, Emily. I’m afraid I’m losing myself, and I know it’s stupid, but...”

“It’s not stupid, Ash.” Emily squeezed her hand again. “It’s how you feel. Don’t apologize for that, right?”

“What do you think, Emily? Really?”

She took a breath, thinking, before responding. “Well... I can’t tell you what to think, Ash.” Emily laid her head down, again, on Ash’s collarbone. “I’ve never known you as a boy. I honestly... I honestly can’t form a mental image of you as a boy. I’ve tried,” she added, as Ash went quiet. “I just can’t. You just feel... well, ‘this is Ash’, when you’re near me. I guess I kind of see you as the arch-tomboy, but not as a boy in a girl’s body. Maybe if you’d started as a girl and been switched to your old body, I’d have a hard time seeing you as a girl in a boy’s body, but as an effeminate boy. Not that you’re effeminate,” she added, hurriedly. “You’re not. Sometimes a bit of ‘girly’ pokes out, and I like that, but most of the time, you’re, well... just *you*. I’m not making any sense, am I? I’m sorry, I’m making things worse...”

“No, Em, you’re not. You’re just...” Ash sighed, over her ear—causing a shiver of thrill to run down Emily’s spine. “I just feel... very lost, Em. Part of me feels like something’s missing, but more and more of me doesn’t... And I feel a lot like some of that ‘missing’ was filled in when you, well, curled against me last night.”

“Do you think everything would feel right if you got your old body back, Ash?” Ash’s silence was telling. “You don’t, do you? You can’t say for sure, and that makes you worry.”

“Yeah... It’s scary, Em.” Ash curled her arms around Emily, hugging her tightly—Emily returned the gesture of comfort.

“Well... have you thought about... you know... just trying?”

“Trying to turn myself male? I’m not an Angel or anything...”

“No, I mean... just trying to forget about trying to undo the Misfile, even if just for a bit...”

Ash was silent again, and Emily kissed her throat, softly. “No matter what happens, our lives have been irrevocably altered by the Misfile, changed in ways we didn’t expect or desire. You more so than me, but...” Emily closed her eyes. “I was changed, too. I was *almost* out of here, away from my mother, I could *taste* freedom on the wind... And then it was snatched away from me, Ash. Like snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. It crushed me, a bit. But then we started to become best friends...”

Emily looked up into Ash’s eyes. “And then more... And you started teaching me about cars, and... Ash, I’ve had more fun, more enjoyment, more excitement and happiness and laughter in my life in the time since the Misfile than in all the years before then.”

Emily laced her fingers with Ash’s again, and Ash nodded, slowly leaning up, kissing Emily’s forehead.

“I would’ve been dead, Ash. I really do believe that, now. But even if not... what did I have? Just more... confusion? A life of living my mother’s dream that was interrupted because she had me? Marrying a man I might or might not have loved, wondering why I never felt happy, physically or emotionally?”

Emily buried her head in Ash’s pajama shirt, sniffing softly. “But the Misfile made me face a lot of things I didn’t want to face. Two more years of high school... Two more years of being under the yoke... Whether or not I was... whether or not I was gay.”

She sighed. “I still don’t have any answers, Ash. I can’t just say ‘I’m straight’, or ‘I’m gay’, or even ‘I’m bi’, because I don’t know. I still feel miserable about being here, with my mother being demanding and overbearing. But I feel good when you’re with me. I feel good when you’re holding me, or talking to me, or we’re playing a video game, or driving fast... I feel good being around you, Ash. And when I think about... about...”

Again, Ash supplied it for her, “About sex? W-With me?”

Emily felt her cheeks flush red, but she nodded. “Yes... It confuses me, Ash, twists my guts up. But I still like the thought. It’s two feelings at once, one half of me saying, ‘you’re not strange, you’re normal, you’re not gay’, the other half saying, ‘it’s Ash, she’s pretty and tough and you *want* her... you...’ Ugh, I’m rambling.”

Ash laughed softly, and squeezed her hand in return. "That's okay. You needed to... I guess I did, too, and I needed to ramble, too." She kissed Emily, softly, on the lips; Emily responded warmly, pressing into it.

"So, what you're saying, Em... Is that we don't know how things are going to turn out... But we shouldn't wait for them to sort themselves out? We should look for answers ourselves?"

"Y-yes... exactly. It's not going to be easy, Ash..."

"It never is, Em. To be honest, I'm terrified, but excited, too... I... I want to try."

Ash sat up, pulling Emily into her lap; Emily wrapped her legs around Ash's waist, and tilted the orange-haired tuner's head against her collarbone. Ash leaned in without resistance, kissing Emily above the hem of her nightie, on the collarbone itself.

"We're going to have to take this slow, Em."

"I know, Ash. I won't push you too far."

Ash nodded, rubbing her head into Emily, taking in a deep, slow breath, and letting it out even slower. "I trust you," she said, finally, and Emily lowered her hands, taking each of Ash's.

Their eyes met, and for what felt like a short eternity, they stared into one another, moving together, connecting. Emily raised her hand to the back of Ash's head, holding the orange-haired tuner's head against hers as their lips met, parted, sinking into the warm embrace, both sets of eyes open.

They were disturbed by Emily's alarm clock coming on—the radio, in specific. Both heads turned as the clock clicked over to 6:15, the soothing strains of a soft, slow-rock song coming on, the singer crooning, "Thank youuuuu, for loving meeeee..." and continuing on to sing about the person he was referring to picking him up when he fell down.

"Do you believe in omens, Ash?"

Ash chuckled softly. "Sure, why not. I mean, I believe in angels and spirits, don't I?"

Emily tugged at Ash's shoulder, hugging her quickly and warmly, as a prelude to standing up, which she did, followed by Ash.

Wordlessly, Emily crossed to her window, staring up at the gray, cloudy, but more-or-less calm skies, as she felt Ash slide in behind her, an arm around her back.

"It's Saturday, and we've got no parents in the whole town..."

"Mmm, that's right..." Emily smiled warmly. "We have all of today, and probably all of tomorrow, to ourselves. If this storm keeps up and kills school on Monday, well... that's it for the year!"

"That'd be nice." Ash's hand slid up her back, squeezing Emily's shoulder, and the blue-haired girl leaned into her friend.

"We should get showered, I suppose."

"Yeah. It's your house—you go first. I'll go get breakfast made."

Emily smiled, tittering softly, turning within Ash's embrace and reaching up, sliding one finger along Ash's lips.

"Did I say anything about taking turns?"

The blush that spread across Ash's face, and the uncomfortable turning of her head made Em's guts twist in a knot.

"T-Too fast?"

"A... a bit." Ash closed her eyes. "It's not that I don't like the idea, I-I..."

Emily gently hugged her, pressing her head into Ash's shoulder. "Do you want to try?" She almost held her breath, as she felt Ash's head nodding against hers.

"Y-Yeah. I'll give it a try, Em..."

Emily bit her lip. "Are you okay with it?" Her hands slid down, taking Ash's.

"I'm... Ugh, I feel like a wimp, but I'm so nervous..."

Emily responded by looking down as well. "I'm terrified, Ash. I'm afraid I'll panic, or I'll make you feel awful, or I'll do something stupid, or—" she blinked, being cut off by Ash's finger, followed by the slightly-larger girl's arms wrapping around her shoulders.

"You're afraid, but you suggested it?" Emily nodded, and Ash gently kissed her cheek. "That's..." She smiled, shook her head, and squeezed Emily (who felt like she was going to melt into Ash's grip). "I'll... well, if you want to try..."

Ash still sounded nervous—then again, Emily *knew* she herself was nervous. She nodded, and took Ash's hand, walking into her bathroom, with Ash following. She could feel Ash's hand trembling, and Emily realized she was, too. She turned around to face Ash. "Um..." They paused, each unsure of what to do. Hesitantly, Ash reached for the hem of her pajamas top, slowly pulling it up, looking decidedly uncomfortable.

"... I'll turn around, Ash." She reached out, stroking, caressing the back of Ash's hand with her fingertips, and turned around, with an audible sigh of relief from Ash. "Are you okay with this, Ash?"

Her reply was uncertain at best. "I don't know... But I do know I want to try, Em." The blue-hair nodded, and pulled her nightie off, revealing her bare back to Ash. She reached into the tub, turning the water on to a nice, hot twist, and stepped in, in the middle, facing the spigot. "I won't turn around until you ask me to. If you ask me to."

A soft sigh came from behind her—she heard Ash's breath go in, holding for a moment. "... Thank you, Emily." Ash stepped into the tub, and pulled the shower curtain closed, shrouding the shower in near-total darkness. Emily pulled the plug that redirected water to the showerhead.

Both yelped, more-or-less at the same time, as they were hit by the blast of cold water, which had been sitting in the pipe, evacuating itself ahead of the hot water from the heater hitting them. Emily felt goose bumps rise all along her body. "Whew... T-that was cold," Ash muttered, behind her. "Glad I don't have to do this at home, with the heaters all down..."

"I thought you were an expert at taking cold showers," Emily retorted, making Ash chuckle quietly.

"Ah... Maybe a little."

It brought a grin to Emily's face, and she sighed happily. "This is weird... but then, we're weird people, aren't we?" She slid her hand back, felt Ash's take it.

"Yeah..."

Smiling at the hand clasping hers, Emily gently ran her thumb over Ash's palm. "You holding up? Tell me if you feel overwhelmed... And don't feel like admitting it would be sissy, because it's not."

Ash squeezed her hand, quick and firm. "No. It's... I'm okay, Em. How about you?"

Her eyes looked down at the floor of the tub. "I'm terrified, Ash. I keep thinking, 'am I going to do something wrong, or make her angry, or freak?' But I'll be okay..."

Ash's hand tightened around her own, and Emily smiled softly at the feeling. She reached back, finding Ash's other hand, drawing it around her body, pressing her friend's hand against her stomach, holding it there. Ash leaned in, instinctively—Emily's eyes closed, smiling happily at the feeling of her friend's warm, wet flesh pressing into her back. Ash trembled, but didn't pull away.

Ash's intake of breath whispered over Emily's ear. "W-What should I do, Em?"

The blue-haired girl leaned back, just enough to register the pressure on Ash. "Only what you're comfortable doing, Ash." Lips brushed her neck, but didn't kiss—the hands on her stomach moved up, pressing into her sternum, but failed to travel all the way up to her breasts.

She waited, but Ash didn't move further. "Are you okay?" Emily quietly asked, reaching up and laying a hand gently over Ash's; Ash's hands trembled.

"I... don't know. I want to... to squeeze you, but I... Mmm."

Emily chuckled softly. "You have me right where you wanted me, and now you're having a hard time? I understand, Ash."

"You do?"

"You're working up the nerve, right?"

"Yeah, how'd you... Oh, right."

"Why don't you do something else for a bit... relax..."

"Something like...?"

“As cheesy as it may sound...” She pulled forward, reaching down and plucking her bottle of shampoo from the corner of the tub. “Hmm?”

It got a chuckle from Ash. “Yeah. That I can do. Bend down.” Emily handed the bottle back, closed her eyes, and got on one knee; she smiled at the feeling of the slick, cool liquid falling into her hair, then Ash’s hands digging in, fingers lathering it into her long, blue hair.

Behind her, Ash remarked, “This seems cheesy... But it feels nice.”

“Your fingers feel very good on my head. Keep doing that...”

Emily fell into almost a trance, with Ash’s fingers working through her hair—it felt so good, so intimate. Ash tilted her head into the spray, moving her head back and forth, side to side, until she was rinsed clean. “That was weird... but... you liked it?”

Ash answered with a soft ‘mm-hmm’, and leaned in, hugging Emily from behind, tugging her warmly into her own body; Emily leaned back without resistance, her hands sliding down, around Ash’s back, without looking at all.

“Want me to do yours?”

“... Uh... Okay, Em.”

Ash gently let go, and Emily did likewise. She slid around Ash without looking, taking the bottle from her friend’s hand. Once behind Ash, she opened her eyes, blinking water from her eyelashes. She reached out with one hand, placing it between Ash’s shoulder blades, with a soft tremble. “Ash... mm, thank you,” Emily murmured, hugging Ash from behind, her arms around Ash’s shoulders, pressing her cheek into her friend’s.

“For what?”

Ash’s cheeks were burning hotter, and Emily could feel it even though they were in the hot shower. It made her smile. “Being here. For trying... For staying...” She kissed Ash’s cheek, softly. “For bearing with me through all the crazy times I’ve put you through...”

Ash slowly turned in her arms, and Emily gasped as she found herself face-to-face with Ash, her breasts being pressed against Ash’s. She *knew* her face was red, and could see Ash’s had flushed just as red; but wordlessly, Ash wrapped her arms around her. Emily leaned up, arching her back, trembling; their lips met, softly. She closed her eyes to focus on the conflicting emotions coiling within her: affection, camaraderie, and love teamed up against self-revulsion, while naked lust coiled comfortably around her guts, its tendrils reaching throughout her body, setting her hips, her chest, her head aflame. It was heady; it was perfect. It was awkward, her hands reaching up Ash’s back, her blue fingernails digging into her friend’s flesh as her lips opened into the kiss.

It hit her with the suddenness of an oncoming freight train, as she realized Ash’s nails were sinking into her own back, the orange-haired tuner was arching, pushing her breasts into Emily’s, and her tongue slid between their joined lips, seeking into Emily’s mouth; she was standing nude, in her shower, *making out* with another girl—her best friend. Her love.

She tasted Ash’s tongue on hers. It sent a shock through her body; pleasure, naked and raw, pulsed through her body and seared through her mind, tugging at her in ways that made the word ‘lust’ seem inadequate to the description. Emily cried out, pulling out of the kiss, falling back, eyes closed. She was breathing hard as she half-fell, catching herself on the back corner of the tub; her eyes opened as she looked up, in time to see Ash’s face flush from ‘pleasure’ to ‘horror’, watching Emily recoil. She looked terrified.

“T-Too fast?” Ash’s voice was laced with trepidation.

“T-Too intense,” Emily replied, reaching up, trembling hands squeezing around one of Ash’s. “I-I wasn’t ready for... for how intense it was.” She realized that the shaking hands weren’t just hers—Ash was trembling. She settled down from her half-crouch, sitting into the back of the tub, reaching up for Ash. “D-Don’t apologize, Ash... You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Ash nervously leaned in, braced on the sides of the tub; Emily scooted forward. They met, Ash’s weight settling onto her thighs, the trembling, blushing tuner’s eyes closed. “Em?”

Her arms wrapped around Ash again, Emily replied, “Yes, Ash?”

“Are you... okay?”

“Y-Yes... I’m *fine*, Ash. Just... fine...” She laid her head on Ash’s shoulder, and Ash did likewise so that they pressed their necks together. “I’m just... Okay, I loved it, Ash. That scares me, but I can’t ignore it.” Her hand stroked Ash’s back, tracing over the indentations her fingernails left.

“I know what you mean, Em.”

“You do?”

“Yeah... I...” She hesitated, and laid her head into Emily’s hair. “It... It’s very... very scary, being this close to you, a-as a girl... It’s very scary, but I can’t ignore how I feel, h-how you... How you make me feel, Emily.” She let out a ragged, soft sigh, and Emily stroked her back, softly, supportingly.

“Like that time you had that dream, at your mother’s...”

Ash nodded, and Emily softly kissed her cheek. “It was... God, I feel so weird saying it, but it was *good*... intense... And when I’m not actually thinking, it feels... well...”

She trailed off, and Emily supplied the finisher, saying, “It feels right, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah...”

Emily leaned back slightly and reached out to hold Ash’s head. They stared into each other’s eyes. They leaned in, but instead of kissing, pressed their foreheads together, nose-tips touching. Ash’s eyes closed, followed by hers, and Emily focused on the soft sound of their breathing, the muted rattle of the house as the morning sun kicked up the wind, and the sound of the hot water beating on Ash’s back.

Finally she opened her eyes again. “Ready to get out?”

“Yeah... and... thank you, Em.”

They kissed softly, gently, as Ash stood up first, helping Emily to her feet. She turned around and shut off the water as Emily pulled the curtain back, and they stepped out of the tub. Emily snagged towels—four of them—from her cabinet, wrapping one around herself and one around her hair. Ash wrapped one around herself, then looked back up at Em.

“Er... how do you do that?”

Emily laughed softly, taking the towel and wrapping it around Ash’s hair, describing what she was doing as she did it. “Think you’ve got it now?”

“Uh... yeah, I’ll manage.”

The sunlight sparkled through the clouds as Emily led the way back to her bedroom, and she smiled widely. “Wow. It looks like it might be a nice day after all.”

“Yeah... Yeah, it does!”

“You’re in a good mood. I like it.”

Emily sat on the bed, and smiled at Ash, who lay back next to her, staring at the ceiling. There was a certain, positive ‘glow’ about Ash, and Emily said, “You look happy, too. That makes me feel a lot better about everything.”

“Yeah... seeing you in a good mood makes me feel better, too.”

She reached into her nightstand, taking out a bottle of nail polish by feel, and peered at the color—a light, powdery blue (the same color, more or less, as the XR4Ti). “Hmmm,” she murmured.

“What’s up?”

Emily held up the bottle, getting an, ‘Oh’ from Ash, as she opened it. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“I’m in no hurry...”

“Hmm, no, I don’t think so. Not today.” She put the bottle back and took out another, this one bright, bright red, and began delicately applying the pigment to her fingernails. Ash, strangely enough, watched with mild interest, which eventually made Emily look over. “I thought you didn’t like this kind of thing?”

“I don’t!” Ash was quick to exclaim, blushing. “It’s just... kinda weird. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you not with painted nails.”

“Heh. Taking an interest in it, then?” She grinned, and Ash blushed, squirming slightly.

“No... And by no I mean, ‘god I hope not, but maybe sorta yes’.”

“Uh... why are you staring at me?” Ash’s cheeks started to flush again. “I find this very amusing, but I’m trying very hard not to laugh.”

“That’s not nice, Em.”

“I know; that’s why I’m not laughing.” Emily leaned down next to Ash’s head, staring at her cheek.

“Uh...”

“Nothing.” Emily straightened up, and smiled, continuing her delicate work. “Hey, didn’t you have fingernail polish on that night in Cape Cod? The one where you wore that dress and watched Cassiel get into a fist-fight and got the money to pay back Harry?”

“Yeah, I did. They were red.” She shook her head. “That was scary. I just looked away while they were doing that.”

“What, you mean like getting blood drawn?”

“Yeah... Only it was longer.”

“And how did you get rid of it?”

“Alcohol. I soaked my hands in rubbing alcohol that night... You know, I had a race the next day, I didn’t want to be seen with fingers that were cherry red.”

“Mmmmmmm. I wish I’d seen you in that dress...” Emily sighed softly.

“Uh... You can, sort-of, maybe. I got a package from my mom in the mail yesterday. I forgot about it as I was freezing to death, but it has pictures in it again. It might have some of that night.”

“Ooooh, that sounds like fun! We’ll have to go and rescue those pictures from your house today.” She grinned, and sat up cross-legged, beginning to apply the polish to her toes, as Ash watched again. Ash blushed when Emily glanced at her. “If you keep on staring, I may have to teach you to do this yourself.”

Ash’s blush deepened. “That’s mean.”

“Yeah. *Now* who’s giving who a hard time?” Emily laughed, reaching out and stroking Ash’s cheek with her finger’s pads. “I think I know what your problem is, Ash. You want to be attractive to me, don’t you?” Ash blushed even deeper, and Emily laughed softly. “Oh, I’m right! This is great.”

“Okay... Um, maybe,” Ash muttered, noncommittally, “but... what, then?”

“Well, I’d suggest you let me try painting *your* nails, but that might be too much yet...” Emily reached into her dresser, taking out a small bag branded with the logo of the Albany mall. She dumped what looked like a cube of some sort out of it, about the size of a six-sided die. “I got this at the mall when you stopped to use the restroom. There was a stand in the hall, and the girl there showed it to me. It’s a cube of hard silk. Basically it buffs and shines nails.”

“What, like chalking a pool cue?”

“*Exactly.*” Ash picked up the cube. “I’d show you, but my polish is still wet, and I’d get it on you.”

Ash curiously looked at the cube, and shrugged, deciding it couldn’t hurt, as Emily put her fingernails under the electric dryer. She watched Ash awkwardly rub the cube across her toenails first, to test, and then shrugged and went on to do the same with her fingernails.

“I feel like a sissy-boy,” Ash murmured when she was done.

Emily took one of Ash’s hands, considering the nails carefully. “You look good, though. I expect this’ll last right up until the time we have to pop a hood open.”

“Eh, I dunno... I’ve *seen* my hands covered in grease, and they’re still all girly.” She smiled, eliciting a return smile and a kiss on the cheek from Emily.

“Fair enough. Anyway, you bought that big brown, macho fighter-pilot jacket yesterday, didn’t you? That’s got to more than balance out ten shiny fingernails.”

“Oh yeah... good point.”

Emily glanced at her watch—it read 7:40 now. She instinctively double-checked—and it was still 7:40. “We’ve been awake for an hour and a half.”

“Oh... is this why girls take so long to get in gear?”

“Well, most days there’s no *make-out* session in the shower...” Ash blushed, but grinned. “Then again, I’ve been a bit basket-casey in the shower recently, what with the dreaming problem, so... it balances out.” She turned around, sitting back into Ash’s side.

“You know, Em... thank you.” Ash’s arm wrapped around Emily’s shoulder.

Emily tilted her head, curiously. “Mmm?”

“I could never have done stuff like this with Missi.” Emily blinked, and Ash squeezed her, tightly. “I mean... We tried to make out, and yeah... maybe it was, you know...”

“Lustful?” Emily’s voice was just a *bit* hard.

“Well, if you want to put it the way Vashiel would, yeah, lustful. But this is different... I mean, not that I didn’t get all... err...”

“Aroused?” Emily smiled at how easily the word made Ash blush.

“Yeah... But even now, with arousal gone, I still feel...”

“Like you’re in a slow, simmering heat, warm from my presence and safe and happy?”

“Yeah, exactly! How did you—oh. You feel the same way?”

“Mmm-hmm.” Emily grinned, and leaned her head back into Ash’s. “So, you ready to get dressed and go tearing around?”

“Yeah... Yeah.”

“Good.” Emily pulled the towel from around her hair, walking to the door. “Rumisiel! Rumisiel!” she yelled. “Put breakfast on!” She turned back and grinned at Ash. “If he’s going to be occupying my space and time, I’m going to put him to work.”

Ash laughed. “Now, why didn’t I think of that?”

Emily tugged the towel from around Ash’s hair. “Now, we just need to deal with our hair, and get dressed...”

“And plan a bank robbery, and learn to fly...”

Emily rolled her eyes. “It’s not that bad, is it?”

“Okay, granted, it’s not.” Ash shook her head as Emily handed her a spare comb.

Once done with their hair (Emily’s taking much longer than Ash’s), the pair sought clothes. Emily unpacked the clothes she’d bought at the Albany mall yesterday: white sneakers, shirt, and pants, and the glossy red jacket. After a moment’s consideration, she also added the lacy red bra and panties to the pile, and put them on.

Ash reclaimed her clothes from the dryer, and walked back into the bedroom in time to see Emily finish pulling the panties up.

“Uh...”

“You like it?” She turned around to face Ash, one hand on her hip, the other hanging straight down.

Ash gulped and blushed brightly. “Y-yeah...”

Emily couldn’t help but laugh. “You can be strange at times, Ash... I guess that’s what I see in you.” Emily tugged on her new clothes, and walked up behind Ash, hugging her from behind, quickly and tightly. “I mean, you just saw me naked. Why does the lingerie change it?”

“Uh... it just *does*, okay, Em?”

Emily kissed her cheek. “Okay, okay. Anyway, let’s go. I’m hungry.”

“Yeah, about that... I didn’t exactly look for him, since I was still wearing your clothes, but I didn’t hear Rumisiel downstairs, or smell breakfast.”

Emily humphed softly. “Hope he didn’t do something stupid.”

The pair descended the stairs, looking around and calling out for Rumisiel, but he didn’t answer. Emily ventured into the living room, and found the sleeping bag she’d loaned him: on the floor, empty, with the TV on but muted. “Here’s the sleeping bag.” She looked around, as Ash leaned out of the kitchen door with a note in her hand.

“That crazy Angel... He wrote a note.” She started reading.

“I saw Cassiel poking around the streets last night. She had to have seen the car, since she practically stumbled into it last night. Going to head her off and chase her away. Don’t know how long this will take... 4 AM.”

Emily ran to the front door, looked around. Saw nothing. “No tracks in the snow...”

“He’s got wings, remember? And anyway, it was still snowing when you woke up from that nightmare at 4:30.”

Emily groaned. “Should we go looking for him?”

“No.”

“No?”

“I’m hungry. It’s breakfast time. Besides, if he’s really heading Cassiel off, the last thing he needs is for us to blunder by and make her life a little more fun. And if he’s not, then...” She punched her palm.

Emily laughed. “Okay, okay.” She listened to her own stomach grumble, and agreed—it was breakfast time.

Outside The McArthur Residence, 8:33 AM

Emily shoved with her squeegee, pushing a huge line of snow off the Monster XR’s roof, as Ash busily worked to scrape the ice from the windshield. The car was idling, burning gasoline to heat the interior. Emily grinned, despite the air making her cheeks freeze. “So, what should we do today, Ash?”

“I dunno. The streets have probably been plowed by now. We’ll probably be able to get by.”

“It *is* Saturday... wanna go to the Old Road?”

“In this weather? Nobody’s going to be out there, and racing in this weather would be suicide.”

“I didn’t suggest we *race*... just... y’know, put some snow on the roof.”

Ash laughed, and shook her head. “She’s not set up for that, Em. We’d slide all over, and not in the controllable way, either.”

“Yeah... I figured it was a long shot. So, what *should* we do?”

“I dunno. We’re free of parents, devoid of Angels for the time being...”

“Just like summer, eh?”

“Hah! Almost... Hmmmmmmmmmm...” They both met each other’s eyes at the same time. “It’s crazy; stupid, even. In this weather? All the way to the Cape?”

“I think we should go with the bizarre and risky. It’s worked for us so far this weekend.”

Ash stroked her chin. “It has, hasn’t it? We should probably call our parents first, though. Dad’ll want to know where I am anyway, and your mom...”

“Right. And we’ll need to pull a rescue mission in your house, get the stuff we’ll need if we wind up caught and the storm gets worse while we’re down there. And the pictures.”

“Yeah... *Yeah*, why not? It’s not like we’ve got anything else to do.”

“Mmm-hmm! I’ll go put a quick pack together, okay? You call your dad.”

They went back inside, and Emily ran upstairs, looking around. She threw a small pack together: enough clothes for four changes (just in case), plus what she was wearing, and a week’s worth of supplies. Fortunately it didn’t take long, and Ash was hanging up the phone as she came downstairs.

“My dad’s not happy, but he only told me to be careful.”

“All right. Here, give me the phone.”

Ash handed over the phone and took Emily’s bag, walking it out to the car. She stowed the bag in the car, and sighed softly, smiling to herself as she walked to the rear of the Monster XR, pushing snow off the back and working on the ice there. Emily came out in short order, and began working away at the ice on the windshield where Ash had left off.

“What’d she say?”

“I have no idea. I got my aunt’s answering machine, told her where we were going, and hung up.”

Emily grinned as Ash stared at her. “Well, I *know* she’d probably get mad, or tell me not to go, but I have no intention of letting this wonderful weekend with you go to waste, Ash. I’m all studied up, more or less, and for a change, I intend to enjoy myself.”

“Sounds like a plan. Should we leave a note for Rumisiel?”

“I already did. I know he doesn’t need keys to get in, so I just locked the door. I told him he could stay here if he got back from his lunatic mission, and not to make a mess.”

“Sounds like we’re good to go, then. We just need to grab my clothes, and that envelope. Mmm, may as well grab my Playstation, too. If nothing else, it’ll piss off Rumisiel if he tries to retrieve it himself.”

They finished getting the car cleaned off, then piled into the nice, warm interior, and Ash put the car in gear.

“Let’s go.”

Emily smiled, leaning on Ash briefly, before she turned up the radio. The DJ was the same from yesterday.

“You’re listening to the Dust. And since the producers are all in Hawaii soaking up sun while I’m stuck here in this miserable blizzard, I’m going to play what I want. Here’s something we all love—here’s some Skynyrd, Freebird. There’s a record you don’t hear every day anymore. Oh wait, yes you do.”

“Mmmm. I actually like this song, once it takes off. What about you, Ash?”

“It’s actually not bad. Not my speed for most of it, but it’s a nice, slow, love-sorta song.”

“Mmm-hmm.” Emily nestled back in her seat, watching the four-wheel-driven Monster XR negotiate its way through the snow-and-ice streets, carefully taking the suburban roads, until they wound up at Ash’s home. Emily tugged her gloves back on and got out, walking up and opening the garage door, waving Ash in.

Ash parked the car, leaving it idling with the powerful V8 rumbling, and the pair ventured into her familiar house. It was gloomy, without lights—Ash tried the lightswitch as soon as they opened the door, but it didn’t work. “Figures. Okay, you want to get the game system while I pack?”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll need a flashlight and a bag or something, though.”

“There’s a canvas bag under Rumisiel’s couch. Flashlights are in the kitchen—here.” She retrieved a pair of flashlights, and gave one to Emily. They turned the lights on, then grinned, clanking the metal-hafted lights together. “Feels like we’re cat-burglars, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, it does.”

Emily walked to the entertainment center, reaching behind and disconnecting Ash’s Playstation 2, as Ash disappeared up the stairs. Emily bagged Ash’s game system and her stack of games, and tried the phone as Ash came down. It took her some time to realize it was dead.

“Who’re you trying to call?”

Emily turned around, seeing Ash on the bottom stair. “Oh, you’re done? The radio station. I was trying to put in a request.” She smiled, hanging the dead handset on the cradle, and walking back to the garage door.

On The Road Heading East, 11:27 AM

“And here’s some Green Day. Not like we’re going to see that for a while—all I see is white. Still, we can wish.”

The radio started playing the slow but upbeat, warm music of Green Day, as Emily and Ash drove along the interstate highway. It had been tricky going, but once on the freeway, given the relatively light traffic, Ash managed to get the Monster XR safely up to full highway speed.

“You sure that just dropping in on your mom like this is a good idea?”

“Yeah, she said we were always welcome. What better time than now?”

“All right, that’s fair enough.” Then Emily recognized the song, and began to sing along with it, casting her eyes onto Ash as she sang, “It’s something unpredictable, but in the end is right, I hope you have the time of your life...”

“Yeah, Em... I am.” She reached over with one hand, taking Emily’s. They squeezed each other’s hands as they passed under the huge green sign welcoming them to Cape Cod.

“It’s getting windier, isn’t it?” Emily curiously asked as a gust shook the car.

“Yeah, for three reasons, a triple-whammy of controllability nightmare. First, it’s getting later in the day—more direct sunlight is heating the air, causing it to move more. Second, we’re getting out of mountain country and we’re actually on the peninsula now, so there’s not much in the way of terrain to act as a windbreak, just buildings and stuff. And third, the storm looks like it’s going to pick up again in a few hours.”

“Yeah. Still, we’re going to make it before the storm really picks up. We’ll probably be trapped tonight, and maybe into Monday, but... I can think of worse things to be doing. Angel-wrangling, or homework, or studying.”

“I thought you liked studying?”

“I do. But I’m all studied up already. I brought some of my books, so if I’ve got *nothing* else to do for an hour or so I’ll bone up, but I’ve got the feeling I’ll be fine.”

“All right, all right. Who knows, we drop in on my mom, maybe get dinner at the Ale House if nobody feels like cooking out...”

“Was it a good place to eat?”

“Yeah. The food was actually really good. I should’ve suggested you drop by last summer.”

They rumbled down the road, as the DJ came back on. “You know, I’ve been told that what with it being the holidays time and all, I should play some Christmas music. To that I say, you want Christmas music, listen to the oldies station. I’m here to rock, so all your pansy Christmas-music singers best make way for Jimi!” The electric strains of Hendrix’ wailing-phrased version of the Star Spangled Banner began to ring through the car.

“Is this your kind of music, Em?”

“Why not? May as well let it play and see.”

Ash grinned, as the Monster XR rumbled strong through the salted freeway, towards the coast, and the song segued into the ever-classic Purple Haze.

Outside The Upton Residence, Cape Cod, 2:54 PM

Snow crunched under tire treads as Ash pulled the Monster XR into the driveway of her mother’s large beach house, parking the growling car.

Emily surveyed the drive. “Um, Ash? I don’t see your mom’s car.”

“It could be in the garage. Let’s go.”

The pair disembarked the vehicle and walked towards the front door, carefully making their ways up the steps, which were covered in snow more than ankle-deep.

“Feels like it hasn’t been walked on today, doesn’t it?”

Ash nodded to her, and stepped up, ringing the bell, while Emily gazed out at the ocean, noting it was iced over near the shore. They waited, but no answer came, and Ash rang again. “Huh...”

“It’s Saturday. Would she have gone anywhere?”

“I dunno... She did tell me where the... Oh.” Emily was already stepping down from the steps and sweeping snow from the planters at the side of the steps. “She showed you where it was, too?”

Emily nodded as she fished the spare key, in its plastic bag, out from under the barren mulch.

“Mmm-hmmm. Said I might need it if I accidentally got locked out during the summer.” Emily handed the key to Ash, who opened the bag and unlocked the door as Emily walked around the rail and back up the stairs.

The door opened, and Ash yelled out, “Mom? Mom, it’s me!”

The house, however, was eerily silent and dark.

“Mrs. Upton?” Emily called out.

“Mom?!”

But there was no answer.

“I have a bad feeling about this. Do you think she’s out of town?”

“I dunno. But yeah, I have that feeling, too.”

They proceeded inwards, and Ash jumped when the phone rang. Looking at one another, the pair nodded, and approached the phone. Ash picked it up, carefully answering, “Upton residence.”

“Ash?” Emily leaned in to listen—it was Dr. Upton’s voice. Ash put it on the speakerphone.

“Dad! Yeah, we just got here.”

Dr. Upton let out a relieved sigh. “I haven’t been able to reach your mother. How did you get in?”

“Emergency key.”

“Okay... I’m watching the weather reports; it’s looking too dangerous. I don’t know when I’ll be able to fly back. I may have to try and find a train, or drive.”

“Dad, you’re in Detroit.”

“I know, Ash. But I need to get back. Is there any sign of your mother?”

“No, there isn’t. It’s kind of weird. I don’t see any sign of her. She’s not out of town, is she?”

“I don’t know, Ash. I’ve been trying to reach her... Mmmh. This is bad, and it gets worse. The roads are going to be impossible in a few hours. I don’t think you have enough time to get home.”

“We can’t really go, anyway. The heat and power’s out at the house.”

“It is? Damn. I’ll call the utility companies. You take care. I don’t think your mom will mind if you stay at her house. Just be careful.”

“We will. Talk to you later, Dad.”

Ash hung up, then walked into the kitchen where Emily was investigating. “Found anything?”

“It’s all cool. I don’t think it’s been used in a day or two, if not longer.”

“Great... We need to find her, Em. I have a bad feeling about this.” Ash looked away, sheepishly.

“Yeah, I feel that way, too.”

Ash looked up at Emily’s confirmation. “Really?”

“Yes, so let’s find her!”

“Okay. I’ll get our stuff and take it into the room we stayed in over the summer. Um...”

“I actually spent a bit more time with her than you did. I’ll start looking for any notes or clues or anything in her room.”

Emily tossed her coat over the coat tree, and ventured upstairs to Mrs. Upton’s room. She felt like an intruder, grinning as she opened the door, flicking the light on. She looked around, but couldn’t find Mrs. Upton’s purse, or her PDA. Scowling, she flicked on the computer and started to look around for anything whereupon she might have written a clue to her whereabouts. She found no post-it notes of interest, no notebooks. Checking for a diary, Emily started canvassing the drawers of the nightstand.

She blushed bright red, shutting one drawer quickly, as she heard Ash behind her.

“Nothing downstairs. Anything up here?” Emily turned to face her. “Err... Why are you blushing?”

Emily could feel herself stammering, and took a deep breath. “Don’t open your mother’s bottom drawer, okay?”

“Why, what’s... Oooh.” She herself blushed, even redder than Emily. “Right, purging *that* line of thought from consideration. Any luck?”

Emily shook her head, walking over to the computer. “Nothing so far... Hey, a Rolodex file.” She opened the document on the desktop, bringing up a large list of numbers. “Maybe we should start asking people she knows? Huh... Hey, Kay’s on here!”

Emily grinned, and Ash rolled her eyes. “I better call him; I spent more time with him, he’ll remember me better.”

Emily rolled her eyes in return, then sighed. “Yeah, I suppose you’re right.” She tore a page out of an empty notebook, wrote down the number, handed it to Ash. “You call him from the other line downstairs. I’m going to try her office.”

Ash nodded and went downstairs as Emily picked the phone up. Her first attempt (dialing Mrs. Upton’s own office extension) only reached her voice-mail, but she got more luck dialing the secretary.

The secretary sounded quite tense. “Marie, is that you? Where are you?”

“I’m looking for Mrs. Upton. I... take it she’s not in?”

“Whuh? Who is this,” the secretary queried.

“I’m a friend of Mrs. Upton’s daughter. We dropped by town to find her, but she’s not at home. I’m calling from her house.”

The secretary huffed. “She’s not here right now, which is odd, because she should’ve been here hours ago.”

“When did you last see her?”

The secretary—Emily could almost *hear* the scowl—replied, annoyed, “Last night, on her way out. She had some dinner to go to, she was on her way home to change. If you hear from her, tell her to call the office, okay?”

“Yeah... okay...” Emily hung up, and sighed. She stood up and walked to the stairs as Ash came to the bottom of them. “You first, Ash.”

“Kay says she stood him and his boyfriend up for a dinner she owed him for doing an event. It was supposed to be last night.”

“During the storm?”

“Yeah. That’s why he didn’t actually call looking for her—he figured the storm had grounded her. He’s making calls too, now.”

“All right, all right. Yeah, that fits. Her secretary said she tore out of the office yesterday, saying she had a dinner to get to... That would’ve been the dinner with Kay. Okay, so... I didn’t see any stuff laid out, her clothes looked organized. So I think she *didn’t* get home last night. So she went missing somewhere between her work and here, and not between here and the dinner with Kay.”

“Okay, good, good... Let’s—” She was cut off by the phone in her hand ringing. She pressed the speakerphone, as Emily walked down the stairs. “Hello?”

The voice on the other end was clipped, formal, and female. “This is Sergeant Ortezt of the Provincetown Police Department. Am I speaking with Mrs. Marie Upton?”

Emily gulped softly, looking at Ash, who answered, nervously, “This is her daughter, Ash Upton... What are you calling about?”

“I’m calling about a red, 2002 Porsche 996 registered to Mrs. Upton. Is she at home?”

Ash looked at Emily, her face ashen. “My mother’s not at home, Sergeant. She hasn’t been home since yesterday morning.”

The officer was silent for a moment. “If she returns within another day, tell her that her car’s in the impound lot. It was towed, after being found on the streets abandoned.”

“Um, can I come and pick up the car?”

“Unfortunately, no. The impound and towing fees will have to be paid, and we can only release the car to the owner or a repossession agent... And it can’t be driven in any event. It was found stripped. It’s not drivable.”

Ash blanched. “Where exactly was it found abandoned?” Emily snatched the pen and paper from the desk, writing it against the wall as the officer rattled off its location. “Can I at least come and look at the car? My mother’s missing, and I’d like to try and find her.”

The officer sighed. “Girl, I’m sorry to tell you this, but the car is almost bare bones. We had to run the VIN to find the owner. There’s nothing inside it.”

Ash sighed, deflating. “Thank you anyway.”

The officer hung up, and Emily blanched. “We should start calling the hospitals in the area.”

“Right.”

They both ran upstairs, Emily swinging into the computer chair, running a search on hospitals’ phone numbers.

Upton Residence, Cape Cod, 4:41 PM

“We’ve called every hospital in Cape Cod.”

“Your mother hasn’t checked into any of them. Ditto for any hotels, motels, inns, or police stations.” She laid the pad down on the desk, leaning forward and groaning softly. “Maybe we should start checking chop shops for parts from your mom’s Porsche?”

“Yeah, that’s... Wait, maybe... Brent!” She snapped her fingers. “His phone number’s still on that map. Um... It’s in Tempest. Damn!”

“Do you remember his last name?” Ash shook her head, and Emily sighed. Then it hit her. “Ah! I *do* have my black book with me, in my stuff. Casper’s number’s in there.”

Emily tore off downstairs, found her bag, and dug out her black book. She heard the phone upstairs ring, and Ash answered it. She walked to the phone in the bedroom she and Ash had shared and sat down. “Let’s see... Casper, Casper—here we go. Listed under ‘Cas’.” She picked up the telephone, dialed. It rang. It rang some more. It rang and just as she was about to give up, the voice she vaguely remembered answered.

“Hello?”

“Casper? This is Emily. Emily MacArthur? Do you remember me?”

“How could I forget, Emily? What’s up?”

“This is going to sound really weird, um... I need to find parts for a red Porsche 996.” She could easily visualize the pause, the blank stare.

“A Porsche 996? You got one of those—and *wrecked* it?” He sounded... scandalized.

“No, Cas. It’s Ash’s mom’s car. She’s... she’s gone missing, Casper, and the impound lot just called her house. The car was stripped somewhere in the city, and we’re trying to find her. Any clues could help...”

Casper’s breath sucked in on the other end of the line. “Okay, give me some time. Brent knows a guy who might know a guy who might know a guy who can try and hook us up with the source of the parts, *if* they’ve hit the market. I’ll make some calls.”

“Thank you, Cas.”

“No problem. You’re friends, right? An’ if someone’s missing in this weather, that’s serious shit.”

He hung up, and Emily went back upstairs to share news. “Who was that?” she asked as she walked in the door—Ash was sitting at her mother’s desk, hanging up the telephone as she walked in.

“Kay. He’s been making calls around Mom’s circuit of people. So far he hasn’t found anyone who’s seen her since she left her office last night. Oh, and he gave us the address of the office.” She had the address pinpointed on MapQuest; it was quite a ways away, down the freeway. “Huh... We would’ve seen her car if it was on the freeway when we came down here... We need to get the report of when they towed her car. But the address...”

Emily leaned over Ash, entering the address where the police said they’d towed the car, and it pinpointed a downtown location.

“That’s off the freeway...” Ash hummed. “Okay. I can get us there before the weather gets *too* bad... I think.” She and Emily looked at one another. They nodded, and together departed to grab their coats. Ash put the spare key to her mother’s home on her key ring, and they ran out to the car. The snow was starting to fall, but it was (so far) only flurries. “We can do this.”

The Monster XR roared to life with a distinct air of determination, and the car growled as Ash backed it up, swung around to face the road, and eased it onto the street, angling into the town.

Finding the address made Ash frown—the road became less well maintained, the buildings looked run down. “This is a bad part of town.”

Emily nervously kept her eyes out, and nodded hesitantly. “Yeah... Hm...” Her eyes locked on an older, dark man in a big, heavy, ratty jacket, sitting on a stoop. He was holding a bottle in a brown paper bag, and a large red crowbar.

“Ech... This place looks like the kind of place Rumisiel would wind up freebasing in.” Ash muttered, as they parked on the side of the road.

Eyes watched the car, and Emily shivered. “This is the spot your mom abandoned her car on? This is a nightmare.”

“Yeah... Still, maybe someone saw something... It’s our only lead.”

Ash nervously got out of the car, followed by Emily. They shut the doors, looking around.

“Should we try to find someone, Ash?”

Ash nodded towards an approaching figure. “Looks like someone’s found us.”

A man in a tattered gray overcoat, greasy hair but clean-shaven, was approaching them. “Hello, ladies. What are you looking for in a place like this?” he asked.

Emily eyed him warily, but Ash spoke up. “We’re looking for my mother. Her car broke down here yesterday, but the cops didn’t find her when they towed it.”

The clean-shaven man smiled. “Oh, *oh!* You’re hers?” He nodded. “Yeah, she’s okay. Took a tumble down the road, hit her head. Nobody could call an ambulance, but she’s sleepin’ it off in there.”

He pointed to a building, and Ash’s eyes widened. “Take us to her!”

“Yeah. She’s kinda groggy, keeps muttering her name, but it’s hard to make out.”

He started to walk towards the building he had indicated, and Ash followed; Emily nervously followed Ash. Something didn’t feel right, and Ash prompted, “Is she saying Marie? Marie Upton?”

“Yeah! That’s it. It was hard to understand, but that’s what it sounds like. Ms. Marie...”

They climbed into the old, decrepit building, which was quite rickety and creaky, its walls partially falling apart. “Aw, don’t worry. This place has seen better days, but it’s not gonna fall apart. She’s back this way.” He led them up the stairs to the second floor. Emily nervously looked around; Ash fearlessly went forward, following him, her fists clenched, determined. Their guide knocked on a door, and stepped aside. “She’s in here, young lady.”

Ash opened the door and went in; Emily stood in the door and peered over her shoulder. There was a mattress in the ratty room, but no sign of Mrs. Upton.

“Where—Gah!”

Ash and Emily whirled as the now-smiling-disturbingly man shoved them into the room. “She’s not here? Oh, what a shame... Well, this room needs someone in it, maybe a two-for-one...”

Emily gulped, her heart going a mile a minute, as Ash clenched her fists. Emily slid behind Ash, hiding the hand snaking into her purse and feeling for the cylinder of pepper spray. Emily thought a sudden attack from the spray might distract him, and while Ash pummeled him down they could make a run for it...

The man in the overcoat grinned, shut the door behind him, and licked his lips. “Now, there’s no need to be afraid, ladies... I’m sure this won’t hurt me at all...”

Emily set her teeth and flicked her eyes at Ash, while pressing the cylinder into Ash’s back. Ash nodded.

Emily broke left around from behind Ash, while Ash dove right, laying her hands on a pipe that was hanging out of the wall. Emily sprayed, and the man in the overcoat let out an ‘*Arrrrgh*’, as Ash yanked. And yanked... and yanked again, unable to get the pipe out of the wall.

“Crap,” she muttered, and tried to pry off a board, which only came apart in her hands.

The man let out a growl of pain and anger and lurched blindly towards Emily, groping hands in front of him. She ran out of the way, looking for some kind of a weapon, but the only loose object was the mattress.

“You lil’ bitches! I’m gonna make it hurt fer that!” The man lunged at Emily, and she dodged out of the way. He was off balance, and Emily sprayed the cylinder’s last charge into his face. Ash charged him from behind, shoulder-ramming into the back of him. With a cry, he sprawled on the floor.

Emily ran to the door, wrapped her gloved hands around the knob, and *yanked*... But it didn’t budge. The door rattled, but did not open. Emily and Ash both yanked, but the door refused to budge. Then they heard a laugh behind them.

“Looking for something, girls?” The pair whirled. The man held up the key and grinned through bloodshot eyes pouring tears. “You’re gonna hurt for that, girl.”

“Ash?” Emily trembled as he advanced, trying to anticipate the next move; maybe if they hit him together. Ash looked decidedly nervous, though her fists were clenched. Emily nodded to the left; Ash nodded right.

Then the door crunched. They whirled—the wedge-end of the crowbar was poking through the door. With a mighty heave, it crunched, and the door popped its lock and swung open, revealing the dark-skinned, bearded man from earlier.

“Mick!” His voice was like growling gravel, and he leveled his crowbar at the man in the overcoat. “I *know* I told you to keep your wanderin’ hands to yourself and off of little girls, didn’t I?” Emily could see Ash bristling at the label of ‘little girl’, but she kept silent.

“I wasn’t doin’ nothin’ to ’em, Rock.”

Clearly, ‘Rock’ wasn’t buying ‘Mick’s’ story. “I *told* you, boy. You want to warm your hands in my area, you follow my rules. Get your ass out, and best I never see you here again.”

Mick started to whimper, when the dark skinned man turned to Ash and Emily. “And you girls, what the hell’s wrong with two well-off girls like you, parkin’ in a ghetto like this?! You lookin’ to be Mick’s girlfriends or something? You two must be crazy! Get back in that car of yours and git before someone else takes it.”

Ash and Emily probably didn’t need to be told twice, but Ash gulped. “Um... Rock? Did someone else stop here last night? In a red car, about my height, brown hair?”

“Hum... Yeah, someone did. White girl, real high-class honey slidin’ around on those heels of hers. Vultures got her car, what about it?”

“She’s my mother. She’s missing.”

“Missing? Oh, I know what happened. She tried to walk ’round the block the other night, tryin’ to get into the good part of town. She didn’t make it—silly thing, walkin’ on fancy heels like that on a day like yesterday. She took a spill and hit her head. I called nine-one-one from a pay phone and told them where to find her. If she’s ‘missin’, then chances are someone came along and took her stuff before the ambulance got her. Try the hospitals.”

“Yeah... We only asked for her by name, not description.”

“Sounds like a plan. Thank you, Mr. Rock,” Emily said.

“Glad to help. Now get your asses back to your world and out of mine, before you get into more trouble.”

Ash and Emily beat a hasty retreat. A man was starting to poke around the Monster XR when they walked out of the building, but upon seeing Rock with them, beat a retreat. The pair hopped into the car, started it, and Ash laid into the accelerator, coaxing the car into motion and back towards her mother’s house.

Outside The Upton Residence, Cape Cod, 5:34 PM

By the time they made it back to Ash's mother's house, the shaking had more or less stopped for Emily. They had driven in silence, and Emily let out a sigh. "That... has got to be the most scared I've ever been," she said, as the car shut off.

"Ye-yeah... When I couldn't get that pipe out of the wall, I knew we were in trouble..."

Emily let out a short, incredulous laugh. "That's my Ash. You only figured out we were in trouble once you couldn't lay your hands on a weapon?"

"Well, when you put it that way..."

Emily leaned on Ash. "My Lady Galahad." She smiled, more relieved than ever to be with Ash, and Ash squeezed her shoulders, quickly.

"We'd better get to calling hospitals."

Emily nodded and got out of the car, followed by Ash as she crunched through the falling snow to the door. They practically ran up the stairs, where Emily grabbed the list of hospitals.

"Let's get to work." Emily started by calling the nearest hospital. While it was ringing, the phone downstairs rang—Ash went down to answer it.

The first hospital she called had no one matching the right description, but the second one said that they had received a patient last night matching that description. Unfortunately, the storm had had their beds full, and they'd been forced to transfer her. Emily thanked them for the location, and nervously called the third hospital.

Ring. Ring. "Cape Cod Hospital, front desk. How may I direct your call?"

Emily bit her lip. "Excuse me, but I'm looking for someone. I have reason to believe she may have been brought in unconscious, without identification."

"Who are you looking for?"

"My friend's mother. Her name is Marie Upton, about five feet six, long brown hair?"

She heard the sound of keyboard clacking. "We have a Jane Doe matching that description, admitted last night. You're going to need to bring identification for her and yourselves to the front desk if you want to see her."

Emily let out a sigh, and nodded. "Thank you. We'll be there."

She hung up, a sense of relief flooding through her stomach as she jumped from the chair and started digging through Mrs. Upton's room. She found a jackpot in the desk drawer—nothing short of her Passport—and let out a triumphant shout as she ran from the room and down the stairs.

"Ash, I found her!"

"You did? I gotta go, Casper!" Ash hung up, turning around as Emily grabbed her jacket.

"She's in Cape Cod hospital, down in Hyannis."

"Hyannis?!"

"It was the nearest hospital with open beds last night. They brought her in as a Jane Doe."

Ash pulled the door shut behind them as they pelted out of the door for the Monster XR. Emily leaped into the passenger seat as Ash dashed around the front, settling into the front seat and firing the growling, powerful V8 up.

"It's getting ugly, Ash. We'd better hurry."

Ash nodded, and threw the car into reverse. The snow was coming down harder, and the roads were getting worse, but the bad traction let her perform an otherwise impossible move—setting the car into reverse, she cut her wheels and gunned the engine as the rear wheels slipped off the drive, spinning the vehicle around to face the road. She threw the car into gear, and Emily gripped the handle of the door as the wheels spun before gripping and sending the car forward.

On The Highway Approaching Hyannis, 6:21 PM

There had been simply no question of speed—even with the storm blowing in worse, Ash had quickly gotten the Monster XR up to highway speed. With the combination of light traffic and broad highway, she had even managed to push the car up to 80 once or twice, even as the sun set and she hit the lights. Emily watched on, devoid of fear, even as the car swerved to avoid a big rig that made a sudden lane change. Her confidence in Ash's driving was nigh absolute.

"We're making good time," Emily commented, double-checking her watch.

"My mother's trapped in some hospital as a 'Jane Doe'. Damn right we're making good time."

Emily smiled softly. "You really do love her, don't you?"

"She's... well, she's my mom. I haven't known her that long, but..."

"I understand, Ash." She stroked Ash's shoulder, softly. "I think the exit we need is coming up."

"I see it, Em. Thanks."

Ash slowed the car, angling for the off-ramp. She hit it at a fairly high clip of speed, slowing down gradually and controllably, until they got to the road heading to Hyannis and the hospital. Emily looked out the window, taking a deep breath as the monstrous engine growled again, spiking the car quickly back up to precisely the speed limit. They drove on in silence, although Emily took note of the airport on the right as they passed.

The ride to the hospital from there was short and not terribly difficult—less so than finding a parking spot, which they still managed in short order. Ash was out of the car almost faster than Emily, and they nearly sprinted up the concrete to the emergency room entrance.

Emily dug Mrs. Upton's passport out of her purse as the pair went up to the reception desk, and Emily handed the passport over. Ash did the talking, saying, "We're looking for my mother, Mrs. Marie Upton. Is she here?"

The receptionist looked down at the passport, opening it to the picture. "You're her daughter? I need to see I.D." Ash produced her driver's license, and the receptionist nodded. "Okay. And you?" He looked at Emily, who gulped—they didn't let non-kin in, did they?

But Ash had her covered. "This is my sister, Emily. Can we *please* see her now?"

Emily turned to look at Ash, as the receptionist sighed. "Fine, fine. I'll have an orderly take you to her, she's in Recovery." He buzzed them through, and rolled back on his chair to the desk behind the main wall, addressing an orderly in a green smock. "Jack? These two belong to the Jane Doe we got last night, the brunette. Her name's been established." He put the passport and driver's license on the counter, and Emily took both, handing the license to Ash.

"Right this way, young ladies." The orderly led them through the hospital's labyrinthine maze of the hospital's corridors, and up a floor to the recovery ward. They went down halls of identical doors, but when they heard Mrs. Upton's voice in a room up ahead, Ash broke into a sprint, followed right on her heels by Emily, with the orderly coming in third.

"For the last time, my name is Marie Upton, I live in Provincetown. I ran out of gas and..." She was in a hospital gown on a bed with a doctor in a white lab coat beside her, blinking as she saw the pair appear in the door. "Ash!? Emily?" Her head tilted to the side as the two teens ran to her side, Ash throwing a fast and hard hug around her.

"Mom! Oh, thank god, we found you."

Mrs. Upton's arms reflexively snapped around her daughter, and she hugged her back just as tightly. "Wh-What are you two doing here? Found me? Don't tell me Edward put you up to this..."

"No, we came on our own, mom... We came down to visit and nobody was home. We called around, but nobody's seen you since yesterday." She sighed, and Emily smiled, sitting back in a guest chair, as the doctor quietly excused himself.

"But how did you find me?"

"That's a *long* story, Mom. We started calling around, then the police called to inform you your car was towed. We went to where it was towed from."

“You went down there? Ash, that’s a very dangerous place!”

Ash paled. “Uh, yeah... we figured that out the hard way. We’re fine, we’re fine. We found someone who’d seen you, had called the ambulance for you. Then we just called hospitals with your description until we found you.”

Mrs. Upton sighed, squeezing Ash tightly. “Ash, you shouldn’t have come out here in this weather, and you definitely shouldn’t have gone playing detective. Thank you, both. Um... I don’t suppose either of you have some kind of ID for me? They want to identify me before they let me go, and my purse wasn’t with me when they brought me in.”

“Will a passport do?” Emily held it up.

“Ah, yes. That’s perfect... I take it you’ve been rummaging my room? Oh well, at least I’m not going to have to fight with them now.”

Ash looked up—her eyes were actually tear-stained—and smiled. “I’m so glad we found you, mom... I was getting afraid...”

Her mother smiled, and pulled Ash’s head to her shoulder. “There, just calm down... It’s okay now, Ash, I’m safe.”

Emily smiled softly, watching the reunion. It tugged at her, and she smiled. “*I’m going to have to call my mom again when we get back to Ash’s mom’s house.*” She stood up, putting her hand on Ash’s shoulder. “I’m glad we found you, Mrs. Upton, but we should be going as soon as possible. The storm’s only going to get worse, and it’s a long drive back to your home.”

“Hm? Oh... Yes, we should. Good idea, Emily.”

“I need to find that doctor.” Ash went to the door and waved him in, as Mrs. Upton stood up.

“Careful, Mrs. Upton,” he cautioned. “You’ve suffered a mild concussion and hypothermia.”

She shook him off. “I feel fine. My daughter’s come to collect me, and I’d like to spend the night at home. May I leave now?”

“We can’t stop you, Mrs. Upton. We will need contact information. If you’ll wait, I’ll have a nurse bring in the forms you need to sign, and I’ll print off what you’ll need to know for a swift recovery.”

“That’s fine.”

On The Freeway Back To Provincetown, 7:21 PM

Emily watched from the back seat of the Monster XR as Ash carefully drove back towards Provincetown. Far from the determined speed of previously, she was now driving no more than forty miles an hour, which meant the trip was going to take more than an hour. Fortunately, there was plenty to catch up upon with her mother.

“So, like I said, I didn’t notice I was low on gas when I left the office, driving back home. I ran out of gas just after I got off Six, and I needed to pull over, fast. I was in the bad part of the neighborhood, but I didn’t have a choice. As soon as the engine died, everything died: lights, radio, everything. I tried using my cell phone to call for help, but it was dead, too.” She sighed. “And of course, the car-charger wouldn’t power it, because it wasn’t putting out anything.”

“Huh... talk about a string of bad luck,” Emily started.

“Yeah... out of gas, cell phone dead,” Ash continued.

“Battery dead, and it sounds like the alternator wasn’t working either,” Emily finished.

Mrs. Upton looked at them both. “You two *both* know more about cars than me. I guess that’s what happened?”

“It’s entirely possible. Cold weather is bad on alternators and batteries,” Emily said.

“Yeah, sounds like the cold got to them. How unlucky,” Ash commented.

Mrs. Upton sighed. “Well, then I tried to walk to somewhere I could find a taxi or a police officer. But I slipped.” She winced. “Heels on ice? That was not fun. I hit my head... and I woke up in the hospital, groggy, with a doctor grilling me about my identity.”

“And then we showed up?”

“After a while, yes. Ash, honey, why did you come out here, anyway?”

“Well, see... Dad’s caught in Detroit, and the power and heat’s out at home. So we—me and Rumisiel—went to stay at Emily’s, but her mother was out of town, too. Then Rumisiel had something come up and vanished on us in the middle of the night. So we started thinking of things to do, and we remembered you’d said we could come visit anytime.”

“Yes, I did say that... but... in the middle of a blizzard?”

“Why not? We spent yesterday in Albany at an arcade, deposing the king of the racecar game. School was out, you know—snow. But with the Monster XR, we can pretty much make it anywhere if we take it slow and steady. Besides, it wasn’t like anybody was getting home any time soon. Dad’s thinking he may have to take a train.”

“All right. Well, in a way, I’m glad you’re here; at least I can keep an eye on you.”

Emily laughed at that. “No offense, Mrs. Upton, but it looks like we need to keep our eyes on *you*.”

That elicited a giggle from Ash’s mother. “Okay, okay. I’m glad you’re here so we can keep eyes on each other. Now, what was that about my car being towed?”

“Oh, that... Oh! Good, that reminds me. I’ve got good news, and bad news. Well, actually, good news, bad news, and ugly news. The good news is that your car is in the police impound. The bad news is that it was stripped before the cops towed it. The ugly news is that while the parts might be located, they’re likely in a chop shop and we may have to actually buy them back.”

“A chop shop?” Mrs. Upton shook her head. “Ich. Oh well, we’ll deal with that later... Let’s see, I need to... hmm, call the credit card company, have all my cards voided and new ones sent out; I need to... ugh.” She sighed. “And I’m going to have to figure out dinner.”

“We’ve got enough, Mrs. Upton. Besides, didn’t the sign at the Ale House say they were open?”

“Yeah, it said, ‘Yes, we’re open despite the weather.’”

“Oh, good...” Mrs. Upton grinned. “And there’s no way I’m letting my daughter and my daughter’s best friend buy my dinner after they’ve spent all day searching the whole county for me! Let’s go home, let me get a shower, and I can raid my emergency cash.”

“That’s a plan. Thanks, mom.”

Mrs. Upton ruffled Ash’s hair. “Well, what are moms for, Ash?”

Ash laughed softly, and smiled. Emily smiled as well, settling back in the rear seat, stroking the back of Ash’s racing seat.

“This... this feels right. I like it here, now...”

Then Emily closed her eyes, smiling.

Provincetown, 8:06 PM

“Okay, here’s what we should do,” Emily opined. “I’ll run in, get a broom, and sweep the snow off from the steps. Then you pull the car up to the steps, and let your mom off as close as we can. Ash? Mrs. Upton?”

“Sounds like a plan, Em.”

“Won’t this thing get stuck?”

“Not a chance.”

“Well, okay then. Be careful.”

Emily laughed as Ash pulled the car into the drive. Ash got out, and Emily contorted around the driver’s seat to get out, which took a bit of luck and good-natured cursing. Liberating herself from the car, Emily found that Ash had already taken the house key from her key ring, and gave it to Emily as she stood up. “Thanks.” Emily smiled, giving a thumbs-up on the way inside.

The car rumbled back to life as Emily grabbed the broom from the kitchen, ran back to the front, swept the steps and a good patch in front of them, and waved Ash over. Ash pulled the car back, with

her mother's door facing the house's door, and Mrs. Upton got out, hurrying inside with a "Thank you!" to Emily as she passed.

Emily sighed with contentment, watching as Ash parked the car. She waved, and walked inside with Ash, grinning. "What a day, Ash... What a day." Ash put her arm around Emily's shoulders, and Emily slid her reciprocating arm around Ash's back. Leaning into Ash, with Ash leaning back, left them mutually supporting one another. Emily grinned at the pose, her head slightly below Ash's. "Feels almost like a mini-vacation, doesn't it? No school, no nagging mom... Mom! Crap. Damn it!"

Emily sighed. "I've gotta call my mom, tell her what's going on. She's gonna be *furios*." Ash squeezed her shoulder, and Emily smiled sadly, kissing her cheek before pulling away. Ash blushed very lightly as Emily walked to the kitchen. "I'll just call collect, I suppose."

"Don't bother; mom won't care. And you can just leave like five bucks if you really feel guilty about it."

"Okay." She picked up the kitchen phone, dialed. It rang, and rang, and rang. Then she got the answering machine, her aunt's voice asking her to leave a message. She sighed, spoke. "It's Emily. Mom, if you hear this, I'm fine, I'm at Ash's mom's house, like I said I would be when I called this morning. Everything's fine, but the storm's getting ugly, so we may not be able to come home for a while. Don't worry, I brought my books." She hung up, and walked out, shrugging at Ash. "No answer."

Ash likewise shrugged, as she heard the sound of the shower. "Guess my mom's gonna be a bit."

"In that case..." She took her jacket off, set it on the back of the couch, and flopped down with a sigh of relief, lying back on the couch. Ash sat at her feet, which she wrapped around her waist, and Emily snagged the remote control, flicking through the channels.

"Hey, go back." Emily hit the 'last' button on the remote, dropping to a history of automotive racing. They settled in to watch a fascinating show together, at least until Ash's mother returned.

When Marie came downstairs again, the TV was on, flickering at the couch, the narrator talking about cars. She found Ash lying atop Emily, the former curled in the latter's arms, head nestled on her chest; they looked picturesque together, seemingly asleep. Trying to decide whether to wake them or let them sleep, the decision was taken out of her hands—the loud revving of an engine from the television made Emily's eyes open, and she prodded Ash awake.

"Huhn? Wha?" Ash groaned.

Emily giggled softly. "Wake up, sleeping beauty. Your mom's ready."

Ash blushed, scowling slightly at the moniker, which caused her mother to laugh.

"Oh, you two were perfect. I wish I'd had a camera."

Ash jumped off the couch and rolled to her feet, now wide-awake. "Gah! Just... No."

Emily yawned and grinned at her. "What's wrong? It's not like we're not best friends and all."

The cover worked, and Ash sighed. "... Yeah, okay. Anyway, ready?"

"Yep. I've got everything I'll need."

Emily stood up, hugging Ash from behind. "You're too uptight sometimes, Ash. Let's go."

"Yeah, okay. The Ale House, right? It'd be nice to see Rose again, and maybe Tyler, too... Shall we walk, or drive?"

"*Drive*," both Emily and Mrs. Upton said in unison. Emily grinned as she realized that Ash had baited them into it. "Okay, come on, smart aleck."

It was just a simple, short drive down the street, made complicated by the ice, but Ash's skill and the Monster's four-wheel drive and weight easily conquered that obstacle. They parked in the parking lot, and scrambled out.

"I'm starved," Ash griped good-naturedly as they walked to the door. "Actually, I don't think we've eaten since breakfast."

"Yeah, now that you mention it, we haven't."

“That won’t do at all. Let’s eat!” Marie opened the door, Ash and Emily following behind. The Ale House was mostly empty, with a few patrons left.

Ash took point. “Table for three,” she said.

The girl manning the door wasn’t Rose, and she shook her head. “Sorry. We’re closing once the current patrons are gone. The storm’s getting too bad.”

Ash, Emily, and Mrs. Upton looked at one another. Mrs. Upton shrugged, and they turned to leave, when a voice behind them called out, “Like hell! Let ’em in, Katie, they’re friends!”

“Rose!” Ash spun, grinning at the sight of her former co-worker waving her in.

“You picked a strange time for a visit! C’mon.” She led them to a high table and set out menus.

“The kitchen’s still hot, so decide what you want while I run back and tell Tyler not to kill the kitchen.”

Emily’s stomach growled. “What’s fast and filling, Ash?”

“Um... best is the bacon cheeseburger, it cooks fast and is pretty big.”

“Okay, that sounds good.”

Rose returned shortly with her older brother in tow; Tyler laughed as he walked to the table. “Hell of a time for a visit, Ash. Back in town?”

“For a day or two, at least.”

“Ah, good, good. Well, we’ve got the kitchen still warm, so just tell Rose what you want and I’ll cook it up personally.” He waved, and returned to the kitchen, as Rose sidled up to the table.

“Figured out what you want yet, girls?”

“Yeah. I’ll have the bacon cheeseburger.”

“Same, hold the tomato,” Emily said.

“I’ll have one too,” Marie added.

“Three bacon cheeseburgers, no tomato on one. Gotcha! And for drinks?”

Ash, Emily, and Mrs. Upton all looked at one another, and in unison pronounced the verdict—
“Coffee.”

Rose laughed. “Cold, huh? Hot chocolate’s better for that, but I’ll get you the last pot o’ coffee right away.” Rose bounced away to get the pot, and returned quickly, while Ash was sighing.

“Hell of a day.”

Emily nodded, reaching to Ash under the table; she gently slid her hand over Ash’s, squeezing. Ash squeezed back and smiled.

The other customers filtered out shortly after Rose returned with their burgers, and the trio continued making small talk. Soon enough, Tyler shut down the kitchen, and Rose slumped into the other seat on the table.

“How’ve you been, anyway?”

Ash washed down her last bite of the burger, then answered, “Good. Been good, actually. Things have been going... quite well.”

“Good! You coming back here this summer? Tyler says you’ve always got a job opening here.”

Ash hummed. “Huh... You know... maybe.” She shrugged. “I don’t know, really. But maybe...”

“All right. Well, come on back if you want to. And it’s good to see you again.”

Ash smiled in return. “Yeah. I missed this place.”

Upton Residence, Cape Cod, 9:48 PM

Mrs. Upton had bid them good night once they had returned to the house, slinking upstairs to sleep off the effects of the day. Emily and Ash had likewise realized they were beaten, and were lying under the covers of the bed in the guest room. Emily's head was laying comfortably on Ash's breasts, laying against her at a shallow angle, with Ash's arms over her. It was, she mused, the *epitome* of warmth and comfort.

"Ash?" Emily murmured softly.

The orange-haired tuner under her replied quietly, "Yes, Em?"

"Thank you." Emily squeezed Ash's hand, and Ash held her whole body against her own in return.

Emily rolled over, and Ash rolled at the same time, leaving them on their sides, arms wrapped around one another.

"I love you, Em. I... Mmm, you're warm."

Emily leaned in as Ash kissed her, slid a hand up under Ash's T-shirt's back, and squeezed her warmly.

Ash's hands slid behind her, fumbling, grasping. She said nothing as they found the hem of her pajamas top, pulling. Indeed, she raised her arms, rolling to her back as Ash exposed her, blushing and smiling. "Em?" Ash looked up, into her eyes. "Are you..."

Emily smiled and squeezed Ash's hand. "I can handle it... if you can." Emily grinned as the tables turned and Ash blushed, while she slowly removed Ash's tee. Ash was trembling.

"Are you okay, Ash?" Emily asked, quietly.

Ash bit her lip. "I'm just..."

"You're afraid, aren't you?"

Ash nodded, squeezing her hand. "Please, don't... go any further."

Emily slid into Ash's side, hugging her. "I won't. Not until you're ready, Ash." A sigh escaped Ash's lips in response, as Emily laid her head on Ash's shoulder. Her eyes closed, she softly kissed Ash's cheek.

"Emily?"

Emily murmured softly, and Ash continued, "I love you... I... I want to be everything you want me to be, but I'm afraid... I'm afraid I'm not..."

Emily silenced her with another finger on the lips. "Ash? You're *perfect*. Stop doubting yourself."

Then Emily opened her eyes and leaned up to look into Ash's expressive green orbs. "You're confident, but not so confident you won't listen. You're strong, but not so strong you scare me. And you're *warm*, and *soft*..." She smiled and leaned back into Ash. Sliding a soft, gentle caress over Ash's side, over her curving figure, and down her hip, Ash blushed hotly. "I *enjoy* this, Ash. You're wonderful, really."

Ash closed her eyes, lacing her fingers with Emily's. She was silent for a long while, but as Emily was almost asleep, she spoke up. "Em? Do you really get... aroused for me?"

Emily rolled her eyes, smiling. "Ash? After you dropped me off at home yesterday, I fell asleep on my bed, and I dreamed you came to my bed and started tearing my clothes off. It was the most intense, strongest sex dream I've ever had." She smirked, opening her eyes to see Ash's blush, about as hot as the sun. "Good-night, Ash. Please, *do* sleep."

Ash closed her eyes, as did Emily. The blue-haired, studious girl nestled tightly into Ash's side, their curves matching wonderfully, and Emily slid one leg across Ash's legs, nestling into her. One of each of their hands was interlaced on top of Ash's stomach, and the other was around the other, holding her tightly. By the time they fell asleep, they were breathing in unison, their dreams, as their waking bodies, locked around the other.

Notes:

Emily's misinterpretation of the [lyrics](#) to [Green Day](#)'s song, '[Good Riddance \(Time Of Your Life\)](#)', is [very common](#).

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