

Shoreline Phoenix

The call came at ten o'clock on a Tuesday evening between rounds of Rocket League. There was no polite greeting, only a blitz of words tripping over each other until Cole cut his little brother off. "Lucas, what's going on?"

"You need to come home."

Twelve minutes later, Cole swerved onto the highway and pushed the truck over seventy. Guilt chewed on him during the two-hour drive. When he had left for school, the situation at home was like a pot over a burning stove. Tension simmered hotter every day his father stumbled around drunk, and every time he passed out on the ratty basement couch. It rose with each bottle his mom poured down the drain, again and again, until it was a rolling boil.

He should have been there when it spilled over.

Headlights glinted off familiar blue siding as Cole pulled into the driveway, and Lucas sprung from the doorway. "She's around back." The panic in his eyes scared the shit out of Cole.

Thick July air hung between them as they trampled through overgrown grass to the back deck, where they could spot the beach below. Cole had a million memories of perfect blue skies, salt air, and the peaceful roar of waves. How many sandcastles had he and Lucas built? How many days of sunshine and swimming and laughter had they all shared?

Now monstrous clouds of smoke blotted out the stars as fire gorged on a towering stack of wood. Silhouetted by the white-hot blaze was his mother. The salty wind ripped through her graying blonde hair, and embers settled on the edge of her clothes.

A chill rippled up his spine.

“She’s been standing there for hours,” Lucas whispered. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Cole couldn’t tear his eyes from her frail frame, engulfed by the flames and billowing smoke; she seemed almost on fire herself. “Go back inside. It’ll be fine.”

Lucas hesitated for only a moment, and then Cole was alone, reaching for something within himself strong enough to take care of this, to take care of *her*.

He descended the concrete steps, approaching her like she was a wild animal. “Mom?”

She didn’t seem to hear him.

“Mom?” He crept closer, grazing her elbow with his fingertip. Heat licked up his bare legs, and he didn’t know how she could stand the suffocating blaze.

She faced him then, grinning from ear to ear, and he could see the remnants of the ratty basement couch, scorched and distorted, falling to pieces in the fire and sending up flurries of ash. “I feel great.” Fire danced in her wide, feral eyes. “In fact, I don’t know if I’ve ever felt better.”

“What’s going on?” Cole asked. “Where’s dad?”

“I’m done suggesting.” She nodded to herself and turned back to the bonfire. “Yes. There will be new rules around here from now on.”