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The Forever Flame

 At 2:23 am, Josephine quietly slid from the bed she shared with her boyfriend. She reached underneath their bed and gently pulled a duffel bag forwards, pushing her dark hair behind her ear when it fell over her shoulder. She hoisted the bag onto her shoulder and headed for the door, but paused, looking back. Her boyfriend, Ben, was snoring quietly, his arm sprawled out where she had just been laying. Josephine smiled softly, biting her lip and swallowing the lump in her throat.

 Her attention shifted to the picture on her boyfriend’s nightstand. It was her favorite picture of the two of them. They were both on a Ferris wheel laughing, and they were so, so happy. That picture was taken on their two-year anniversary, after she had finally started feeling safe. And now, that safety has been ripped away, torn to shreds. *“Our trash is on fire!”* She remembered her boyfriend exclaiming the night before, staring out the window with his eyes wide. She knew that it was no accident.

 Josephine eyed his picture, then decided to creep up and grab it. She carefully placed it at the top of her duffel, zipping the bag as quietly as possible. “Josie? What’re you doin’?” Ben slurred, half-asleep.

 She swallowed, fighting to keep her voice steady. “Nothing, Benny. Go back to sleep.”

 He rolled over, facing his nightstand. He was quiet for a moment, but suddenly burst up. “It’s 2 a.m., you *are* doing something, aren’t you? Turn on the light,” he demanded.

 Josephine sighed, listening to his request. He peered at her bag, his jaw dropping. “Are you leaving me?”

 “No!” She paused. “Well, yes. But not because of you. It’s… complicated.” Josephine set her bag down by the door, sitting next to Ben.

 He appeared wounded. “Uncomplicate it, Josephine. I thought we were happy. Why would you leave?”

 “I *have* to. I don’t have a choice. I’m sorry. We were happy. I wish we could just stay that way. But I can’t stay.”

 “Why?” He reached for her hand, and she pulled away despite it hurting her own heart.

 “I’m… I’m not a good person, Ben. And that seems to have caught up to me. I won’t allow that to catch up to you.” She avoided meeting his eyes.

 “I don’t care. Please, please, stay,” he begged, managing to successfully grab her hand. She allowed it for a moment but pulled him off soon after.

 Josephine stood and grabbed her bag, tears streaming down her cheek. “*I* care. I won’t allow you to die because of me, too.”

 Josephine left the house, flickers of fire, screams, and guilt playing through her mind. She shuddered, gripping her bag tightly as she passed the remnants of her burnt trashcan. She entered her car wearily, not keen on the idea of being traceable. She drove her car to a nearby park before abandoning it for good.

 On foot, she began the two-hour trek to the nearest motel. She kept her head down and her eyes open along the way, concerned that she had been followed. She saw a few people, but none of them seemed to pay her any attention. When she finally arrived at the motel, she paid in cash before going to her room, locking the doors and windows, and practically collapsing on the bed.

 *Josephine sat in the passenger seat of her boyfriend Carver’s truck, feet kicked up on the dashboard. “God, it’s so unfair that you already have your license,” she complained, looking over at him.*

*He smirked, green eyes glittering. “If I didn’t you wouldn’t have anyone to drive you around.”*

*“True.” She leaned over, kissing him on the cheek. He smiled at her briefly before concentrating on the road.*

 *“We’re here,” he announced, pulling onto a dirt path. A dilapidated shed came into view, separated from a church by a few trees.*

 *“Babe, this is the place you were talking about? This is the church my mom goes to.” Josephine stepped out of the truck, eyeing the shed’s distance from the church. “Are you sure this is safe?”*

 *Carver grabbed a canister of gasoline from the bed of his truck, barely glancing at the church. “It’s fine, baby. I’ve burnt sheds much closer to buildings before and the fire’s never spread. It’ll be all right.”*

 *Josephine eyed the church a final time before grabbing the other canister of gasoline. She followed Carver into the unlocked, empty shed. “They built a nicer one on the other side of the building,” he explained.*

 *“So, how do you want to do this?”*

 *“You cover the left side I cover the right?” he suggested. She nodded, screwing off the top of the gasoline canister. She moved to the furthermost left corner and began pouring, working her way back towards the door.*

 *Carver met Josephine by the door, dropping his gas canister and putting his arm over her shoulder. She put her canister down, tossing it next to his. “You ready, babe?” he asked.*

 *She smiled uncertainly, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. “Yeah,” she said finally. “It’ll be nice to be able to actually* burn *something for once. I’ve always had to put my fires out before I got caught.”*

 *He winked. “Then step back.” He pulled a matchbox out of his pocket, striking a match against the side until it lit. He shuffled backwards, stepping outside of the shed. He glanced back at Josephine. “Do you want to do the honors?” She nodded eagerly, taking the match. The heat from the match singed her fingertips, but she didn’t drop it. She took a deep breath and threw the match.*

 *The fire spread instantly, a roaring wave of inferno. The wooden walls of the shed slowly blackened and crumbled. Josephine leaned forwards, awed. Carver stood next to her, staring into the flames. Neither of them spoke for a moment.*

 *“Babe, we have to go before someone notices and calls the cops,” Carver told her, frowning.*

 *“But the fire’s so beautiful! And it’s nowhere near being out!” she argued.*

 *“I know,” he said. “But leaving is better than jail time.”*

 *“Fine,” she groaned. She took one last look at the shed before climbing into the truck. Carver got in the driver’s side and turned the truck around, speeding back all the way to Josephine’s house.*

 *“Dad, I’m home!” she yelled, kicking her sneakers off by the door. They had bits of ash clinging to them, standing out against the yellow material. She looked at Carver’s shoes: his were gray, he’d dressed for the occasion.*

 *Carver and Josephine walked into the kitchen, searching for food. Josephine’s dad was there, reading the newspaper. “Hey, honey. Carver. What are you guys up to?”*

 *“Nothing much. We just went for a drive,” Josephine answered. “Where’s Mom?”*

 *“She has that reading group at her church today, remember?”*

 *Josephine swallowed looking at Carver.* If my mom saw us, we’re screwed, *she thought. “Oh, right.”*

 *“She should be home soon,” her dad said, peering at the clock.*

 *Josephine nodded, saying goodbye to her dad and pulling Carver upstairs and into her room. She turned the TV on to a random channel before leaning forwards and kissing him. “I can’t believe we did that.”*

 *He smirked. “We can keep doing it if you want. Best to wait a month or so before the next one, but if you want we can.”*

 *She smiled, kissing him again. “I’d like that,” she admitted.*

 *“Let’s check the news, see if anyone’s reported it yet,” he suggested a while later. She grabbed her remote, flipping to the local news channel. “*A DOZEN DEAD IN CHURCH FIRE*,” she read.*

 *“Carver, oh my God!” she sobbed. “My mom!”*

 Josephine woke up with a gasp, tears flowing down her cheeks. No matter how many times she was forced to relive that day in her dreams, it never hurt any less. It had been ten years since the fire, but her guilt had never eased.

 She glanced at the alarm clock on the nightstand and realized it was early morning; time for her to go. She pulled a pair of black jeans and a gray hoodie out of her duffel bag, changing quickly before getting ready to leave. She threw her bag over her shoulder and headed to check out, forcing herself not to run when she noticed a black car with tinted windows parked directly in front of her room. She pretended to ignore it as she handed back her room key, leaning casually against the desk. *They couldn’t have found her that fast, could they?* Josephine thought.

 “Are they your ride?” the worker asked, nodding to the black car with a look of concern. “They’ve been there for a while.”

 She swallowed, risking a quick glance over her shoulder. “No, ma’am, they’re not.”

 “Are you in some kind of trouble? Would you like me to call the police? Or would you like me to scare them away myself?” she offered. “I may be getting on in years, but I still know how to shoot a gun.”

 Josephine smiled half-heartedly. “Best not to get them, or you, involved, but I appreciate it.”

 The woman frowned. “Be careful, dear.”

 Josephine nodded in acknowledgement before departing, heading in the opposite direction of the car. Immediately, it began after her, not even bothering to appear normal. She picked up her pace, turning away from the road so it would be harder for the car to follow her.

 “Josie, Josie, it’s just me!” she heard someone yell. She turned around to find the tinted window rolled down, Carver leaning out. She marched up to the car, shoving him in before climbing in the passenger seat.

 “What the fuck is wrong with you?! You should realize that driving by someone like that is terrifying when there are people trying to kill them! And how did you find me?” She yelled.

 Carver started driving, a sheepish grin appearing on his face. “Yeah sorry, that wasn’t one of my best moments. I forgot you hadn’t seen my new car. And this is the motel closest to your house; I figured you’d be stupid enough to come here.”

 “Rude. How’d you even know I ran?”

 “Ben called. 2 am, really? And why the fuck didn’t you tell me?”

 “I figured they’d be less likely to be watching me then. I’ve never ran in the middle of the night before. We’ve never ran separately, either, so I thought that would throw them off,” she explained.

 His face sobered. “No, they were definitely watching you. A few cars drove by the lot when I was there, paused for a minute, then left without anyone getting out.”

 Josephine let her head thud against the back of the seat, closing her eyes. “What are we going to do?”

 He glanced over at her, frowning. “I need to go back to my place for a few things; I wanted to make sure you didn’t leave me so I left without grabbing anything. So I say let’s go there and then let’s get the hell out of town.”

 She bit her lip, contemplating. “I guess it would be ok… make it fast though.”

 He nodded, turning the car around and driving towards his own home. During the drive they were mostly quiet, Josephine busy looking over her shoulder to ensure they hadn’t been followed. When they finally pulled into his driveway, she let out a sigh of relief.

 They got out of his car and began walking up to the door, pausing when they saw a box sitting on his porch. “Did you order anything?” She asked. He shook his head, holding his arm out in front of her as he walked forwards. He bent over the box, looking but not touching.

 “Josephine… it’s addressed to you,” he declared. She was at his side immediately, peering down.

 “How the fuck did they know I’d be here? *I* didn’t even know I’d be here!”

 “I don’t know. Maybe they assumed that if you weren’t I’d still get it to you, or I’d open it myself.”

 She groaned, scratching her head. “Do you think we should open it?”

 “Do you think they’d send a bomb?”

 “No, it’s not their style. They want their revenge on us to be up close and personal.”

 “Then I think we need to,” he admitted. Carver sat down next to the package, and Josephine joined him. He tore open the top of the box, allowing them to peer inside. Inside of the box was photo of a bruised, battered Ben with a note saying: *if you and Carver don’t return to your house by sundown, he dies.*

 “Oh my god!” She cried. She put her head in her hands,

 “Josephine…” he said, his voice low. “What are we going to do?”

 She took a shaky breath, meeting his eyes. Tears slowly fell down her cheeks. “I won’t let anyone else die because of what we’ve done. I won’t force you to come, but I’ll be going.”

 “We’ll be walking into a deathtrap,” he warned.

 “I know. But we have enough blood on our hands, I don’t want to add Ben to the mix.”

 Carver was quiet for a moment. “If you’re going in, you won’t be going in alone. Especially not when burning the shed was my idea. It’s my fault we’re in this situation; it’s my fault all of these people want revenge for those they’ve lost.”

 “Thank you, but it was also my fault. I thought the shed was too close and I didn’t try and stop anything. And I’m the one who dropped the match,” she replied.

 He cleared his throat. “Either way, they said that Ben only survives if both of us go. And I happen to like Ben. Even if you downgraded from me.” Carver winked. Josephine shoved him, laughing.

 “Grab the stuff you need in case we’re able to make a quick getaway,” she ordered. “Then let’s get out of here.”

 Carver nodded, leading her inside. She sat in the living room while he gathered his things, staring at the ceiling and wishing she hadn’t ditched her phone so that she had something to do.

 “Ready?” Carver asked half an hour later.

 “You took forever,” she complained. “Yes, I’m ready.”

 They climbed into his car, heading towards her house. They were both very solemn during the drive, hardly speaking. Carver turned the radio to the Classic Rock station, but Josephine quickly turned it off and shot him a look. She didn’t want to be taken unaware.

 They soon pulled up to her house, stopping directly in her driveway. No other car was there, but that didn’t fool her. Carver turned his car off, but didn’t get out. “Are you sure about this?”

 She looked down, hands clasped in her lap. “Yeah. Are you?”

 He nodded, biting his lip. “I just wanted to make sure we were on the same page, you know? It’s a big deal and all. We might not be able to get out once they have us.”

 “Yeah, I know. But I’m tired of running. I’m tired of them making me feel like I killed those people on purpose. If we left Ben to die, I’d only feel worse.”

 “I’m sorry.”

 She looked at him, leaning over to touch his arm. “Like I said, it was my fault too. Are you sure you’re ok with doing this? You seem a bit hesitant.”

 “I’m sure. It would be nice to do something good for once. You’re my best friend; I just don’t like the idea that this could be the end.”

 She leaned her head against his shoulder. “You’re my best friend, too.” They stayed like that for a moment before slowly separating, moving to get out of the car. They walked side by side, gripping one another tightly. Before they’d even reached the front door, they were unconscious.

 *Josephine sat in the visitation room of the psychiatric hospital, her father across from her. He’d aged to much in such a short time, his dark hair filled with strands of gray. Josephine spotted Carver across the room with his family, his head hung low.*

 *“Hey, Dad,” Josephine greeted.*

 *Her dad glared, his knuckles white. “You killed your mother.”*

 *She flinched. “It was an accident! Only the shed was supposed to burn.”*

 *“It’s your fault that she’s dead!”*

 *“I’m your daughter how the fuck can you say that to me?”*

 *“Because it’s true?” he spit. “The love of my life is dead because of you.”*

 *She looked over at Carver to see he was crying softly. His family all stood, their faces scrunched unpleasantly. They turned their noses up when they saw Josephine, marching out of the room. “If I could change what happened I would.”*

 *He scoffed. “I would too. Did you know I never wanted a child? When your mother was pregnant with you I tried to get her to have an abortion, but she wouldn’t. I stayed with your mother anyways because I loved her. I grew to love you, with time. I don’t anymore.”*

 *Tears flowed down her face. She didn’t bother to wipe them away. “Fuck off. Just go away. Bitching at me isn’t going to bring her back. I fucking wish it would. But it won’t. She’s dead and I’m sorry, ok? I’m sorry.”*

 *“When you get out of here, don’t come home. I’m going to leave you money so you can stay out of my life. You’re not my child anymore.”*

 *“I don’t want your money,” she snarled.*

 *“You can’t afford to get out of town without it, and I want you gone.”*

 *“Just, go. Seriously, go. You’re my dad, and I love you, but if you don’t give a fuck about me anymore then I want you out of my life too. Sooner rather than later.”*

 *“Bye, Josephine. Try not to kill anyone else,” he snarked, standing up.*

 *“Don’t come back,” she ordered. She waited for him to be out of sight, then put her head in her hands. After a moment she felt someone sit next to her, rubbing her back.*

 *“That went well,” Carver quipped.*

 *“Definitely. Did you get disowned, too?” she questioned.*

 *“Definitely,” he repeated.*

 *“Excuse me,” a guard said.*

 *“We know, we know, I shouldn’t be here. I’ll leave,” Carver grumbled.*

 *“Actually, you* both *have a visitor. But please, no inappropriate touching you two,” the guard said, eyeing them. They both raised their hands, feigning innocence.*

 *Their visitor sat down: a man with dark hair and eyes. “Who are you?” Josephine asked, scooting closer to Carver.*

*The man glared at them. “Bryce. Jackson. You two fucking idiots killed. My. Wife!”*

*“Can someone get him out of here?” Carver called, pushing Josephine behind him.*

*“I swear to God you two will pay. And I’m not the only one looking for revenge. You two will die!” he screamed as he was dragged out of the room.*

*Carver and Josephine looked at one another. Josephine took a deep breath, shaking. “Carver, what are we going to do?”*

 Josephine groaned, opening her eyes to find herself tied up in an old church. She looked out the windows; it seemed like it was in the middle of nowhere. She turned, finding Ben and Carver tied up beside her. Ben had a blindfold on, even though her and Carver didn’t. She didn’t see anyone else.

 “You ok?” she asked Ben softly. He flinched, surprised.

 “Mostly,” he replied, wincing. “Josie, is that you? What’s going on?”

 She smiled sadly. “Yeah, it’s me. I’m sorry you got involved in all this, Benny. I thought it would be safe. I’m sorry they hurt you to get to us.”

 “What do they want with you? And who are they?”

 “They’re the family of the people Carver and I accidentally killed. And they want revenge.”

 Ben’s eyes went wide. “Killed? What in the actual fuck, Josephine!”

 Carver woke up, looking around. “’Sup, Ben?”

 “You guys fucking killed people?”

 Carver looked at Josephine. “You told him?”

 “He deserves to know why he’s here. And it was an accident! In a fire when we were young and stupid. Emphasis on the *accident* part!”

 “Why did you never tell me?” he frowned.

 “Because I figured you’d react like this!” She tried to wave her hands around, but forgot she was tied up. “Ow.”

 “You ok?” they both asked.

 She nodded. “Where are they?”

 “I don’t know,” Ben said. “I think they left after bringing you guys in.”

 That sat in silence for a while, listening. Josephine tried to loosen her restraints to no avail. They murmured amongst themselves, glancing back at the door.

 After a while, a group of five people came in. Josephine recognized one of them: Bryce Jackson. She looked over at Carver, who met her eyes.

 “No guard to get him out of here this time,” he whispered. She snorted, nodding. Ben just looked confused.

 “So, we came. You can let go of Ben now. He hasn’t seen any of your faces; no more innocents need to die,” Josephine said, staring at Bryce. He seemed like the ringleader.

 “We’ll let him go after we’re sure you won’t be trying to run away.”

 “How can we run away?” Carver asked. “We’re tied up!”

 “Just let him go, please. He’s an innocent in all of this.”

 “He could call the police,” one of the men argued.

 Josephine paused. “If you drop him off somewhere, he won’t have his phone and he’ll have to walk back home. He won’t be able to call the police in time.”

 “That seems fair,” Bryce replied. “We’re not unreasonable.”

 One of the men moved forwards, roughly grabbing Ben. “Bye, Benny,” she said. “Be careful.”

 “Josie, wait-” He tried to say more, but was dragged out of the building too fast.

 Bryce turned towards Josephine and Carver. “Now, I assume you remember me?”

 They nodded. “Bryce Jackson,” Carver answered.

 “Do you remember my wife? Any of our wives?” he challenged. Carver shook his head slowly.

 “I do,” Josephine declared, chin raised high. “Ruby, right? She came over to my house for coffee a few times.” She surveyed the other men. “Paul Mayer, your wife Rachel was my mother’s best friend. Todd Alans, Susan babysat me when I was little. Henry Johnson, your wife Margot did my hair for homecoming. I don’t recognize the man who left, but I know the names of all of the dead.”

 “My wife adored you and you killed her!” Paul yelled. “Both of you did!”

 “It was an accident! We were young and dumb! We didn’t think the fire would spread to the church. We’re sorry, ok?”

 “If we could change things, we would,” Carver added.

 “You can’t,” Henry said. “You’re murderers.”

 “We’ve changed. We don’t set fires anymore,” Josephine promised.

 Todd ran forwards, kicking her in the face. Her head hit the back of the pew. She saw Carver try and move to help her, but Bryce hit him. “Why couldn’t you have changed before you killed my wife?”

 “We’re sorry!” Carver cried out.

 “Sorry isn’t good enough!” Bryce yelled.

 “What do you want us to do? We can’t fix anything! Killing us won’t fix anything, either. It will just make you all murderers.”

 “You two dying will fix everything. We won’t have to live knowing that the people who killed our wives are still breathing.”

 The person who left with Ben returned, hands covered in blood. Josephine’s heart was in her throat. “He’s dead.”

 “Why?” she sobbed. “He was an innocent! He had nothing to do with this!”

 “Our wives were innocent too! And we didn’t get any closure, we thought they would return home, *safe*, so you should get to experience that with your little boyfriend!” Paul yelled.

 “I’m so sorry, Josephine,” Carver said. She stared at the wall. *I never should’ve gone home*, she thought.

 “Now, for the grand finale!” the man she didn’t recognize announced. He grabbed two canisters of gasoline. Josephine’s blood ran cold. She looked at Carver, eyes wide.

 “The boy first,” Bryce ordered. Josephine screamed, struggling to get free.

 “It’s ok, Josie, it’s ok. Don’t look,” Carver begged, coughing as gasoline got into his mouth.

 “Oh, she’s going to look,” Todd promised, grabbing her face. She tried to kick him, but she was tied too tightly. Todd forced her to stare at Carver, unblinking.

 “I’m sorry,” she cried.

 “Josie, babe, please don’t cry.” She sobbed harder, biting her lip to hold in her gasps.

 “Say ‘adios,’” Bryce said, lighting a match and dropping it onto Carver. Josephine wailed, gagging at the smell of burning flesh. She managed to shove Todd off for a moment, leaning sideways to vomit.

 “Gross.” Todd wrinkled his nose. “Can we kill her now?”

 “Killing me isn’t going to do anything,” she argued weakly.

 “Just shut up. We killed him, we’re obviously going to kill you,” Paul said.

 Josephine swallowed, closing her eyes. “I lost someone, too.”

 “And that’s what makes it worse. You killed your mother. If your own father can’t forgive you, how can you expect us to?” the man she didn’t recognize replied.

 “I’m not asking for forgiveness; I’m asking that you don’t commit murder. Again.”

 “No.” Bryce dumped the gasoline on her. She practically choked on it, spitting some out of her mouth.

 “Any last words?” Todd asked, holding a match above her.

 “Yes,” she swallowed. “You aren’t going to be what kills me.” She knocked her body into him, making him drop the match.

 Josephine shut her eyes, took a breath, and *burned*.