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RUBY



I watch Morgan as she sleeps.

She's curled up on her side, her face just a few inches from mine, with my arm currently going numb under her head. There's a hint of a smile on her face, and I hope this means she's having good dreams. She should. She deserves them.

I want this moment to last forever, to stretch it out all the way until it snaps, but I know that soon an alarm will go off on her phone. Morgan will stretch sleepily and then hit snooze like she always does. If I'm lucky, she'll slide back down and burrow against me, grabbing my arms to wrap them around her herself because she never thinks I'm fast enough.

Today, I plan to be fast enough.

Because I know what will happen after that. After that, exactly eight minutes later, her phone alarm will go off again.

This will be the time she pushes herself up to sitting and starts her day. She never hits snooze twice.

I can already picture it: Morgan will stretch and sigh. She'll look at me with her big sad eyes and force a smile, and then . . . she'll climb out of our nice warm bed and begin the business of leaving me behind. It will be the last time I wake up next to her for a long time, a thought that makes me want to scream if I think about it too hard. So I don't. Or at least I try not to.

I try not to think at all—at least not about anything outside of the gentle sound of her breaths or the way her eyes shift under the delicate skin of her eyelids. Oh, it's going to kill me when she leaves.

Sometimes I almost resent her for this.

Not for the going-away-to-school thing—that's important and we both recognize it. Even if it wasn't the ideal school for her (it is), she would have been crazy to give up all the track scholarships. Yeah, her future has always been big and bright, and it starts right now with all the connections she's making and clubs she's already been able to join—who knew there were so many college clubs centered around service and politics? I don't know how she even has time for all of that, but then again, Morgan's never been one to let anything stand in the way of something she wants.

So yeah, I would never, ever resent her for going away to school. I'm proud of her for that. Just like I'm proud of myself for my own schooling and the awards that make this community college here the absolute perfect fit for me. If all goes right, I'll graduate with my associate's degree in occupational studies, specializing in automotive technical sciences, in a

year and a half. Last semester was all about engines and automotive electricity, along with a stupid math class I had to take. But this semester I get to take Passenger Car Chassis 1 *and* an automotive welding class that I'm really excited about.

I have a clear and definite leg up on things from working with Billy for so long, and it's been really nice to suddenly be the respected one for once. Sure, I had to show up a bunch of the guys in the beginning to earn their respect—I'm the only woman in the class—but it was kinda fun. Most of them are actually pretty cool now, and even the ones who aren't still come to me for help sometimes.

No, school is good, for her *and for me*. That's not what I resent at all.

I resent the other stuff. The stuff we have to *lose*, even temporarily. Like the fact that I've spent our winter break re-memorizing the exact weight of her head on my arm and cataloging how long it takes my fingers to go all pins and needles from it. And the fact that I know she's always going to say she doesn't want extra fries at the diner but then steals half of mine when hers are gone. The fact that everybody at the apartment complex began leaving my spot in the parking lot free when they started seeing my car again all the time, and soon someone else will take it over. The fact that tomorrow, when I go get coffee, I'll only have to order one. The ten thousand little things that make life so much better and that I would never, ever have even known about had I not met her.

Morgan shifts closer, sending fresh sparks of electricity careening down my wrist and hand, which have long since gone numb. I flex my fingers and wiggle my hand instinc-

tively, regretting it when the tiny motions accidentally coax my girlfriend awake. She blinks up at me sleepily, breathing in and out deeply as she shimmies closer, grabbing my free arm and tugging it around her as she settles under my chin. I sigh, pressing a smiling kiss to the top of her head.

Too slow again.

“What time is it?” she grumbles into my chest.

“Too early to start the day,” I say, even though I know her alarm will go off any second. It feels like the truth, though, because even if it were eight o’clock at night, it would feel too early to start *this* day.

Morgan huffs out a laugh, snaking her hands under my shirt to rub tiny patterns against my back. I hold her as tight as I can, ignoring the fact that my one arm is still definitely at least semi-offline.

Worth it.

As expected, the alarm on her phone starts blaring a few moments later—obnoxious submarine sonar noises that drive me up a wall. Second to the actual siren setting, it’s *the* most brutal way to wake up. Morgan stretches one of her arms out behind her, nearly knocking over her lamp while trying to find her phone without breaking our hug. I take pity on her, grabbing it myself and hitting snooze. I might squish her a little in the process, but neither of us are complaining.

The second time the alarm goes off, I get the regretful hum and the sitting up that I’ve been dreading since about four a.m.

There she goes, pushing that first domino down.

After that, the morning slides together, a choreographed dance of taking turns showering, eating the bagels from her

favorite shop that her brother surprises us with, and packing up the last few things she needs from her room.

Before I know it, we're loading the car.

"Why do you have to leave?" I whine, helping her carry out the bags of groceries and toiletries her parents got her the day before.

"The sooner I leave, the sooner I get back," she says, her eyes as red-rimmed as mine. "At least that's what I keep telling myself. I just . . . Are you going to be okay here without me again?"

I'm fucking this up, I realize, as fresh tears spill down her cheeks. *I'm making this harder on her*.

I set her bags in the trunk and shut it hard before leaning my hip against the side of the car. I tug her closer, wiping her tears away with the pad of my thumb.

"I'm gonna be fine, just like I was last time, and so are you! All those clubs you joined aren't going to run themselves! And you're right, the sooner you leave, the sooner we get to go to DC," I say, smiling at her with my most natural pageant smile. I pray she can't tell the difference even though I'm sure she can. It doesn't matter. I need her to know I mean it. I need her to understand that I've got her back as much as she's got mine.

Last time she left, I think she was worried that I would go back to how I used to be: shut down, walled off, and all those other words people use when they're trying to avoid admitting they're just scared. But that didn't account for the fact that Morgan had made me realize that sometimes the best

things can come out of being scared but ditching your comfort zone anyway. I really took that lesson to heart, grabbing on to school last semester with both hands and kicking ass, just like her. But still . . . that doesn't mean standing here, knowing she's about to leave, doesn't feel like an ice pick to the heart right about now.

"We'll FaceTime every day," Morgan says, her tears picking up again as her brother steps outside, locking the door behind him.

I can't breathe.

These moments, these last moments, they're the absolute fucking worst, but I also wouldn't trade them for anything. I can take it. I can do this. *I can be strong for her.*

"We'll text constantly too," I remind her, wishing my voice weren't wavering, wishing I were braver, stronger, tougher, more of a rock.

"We'll work out the whole DC itinerary," she says, wiping her nose. "Starting tonight. Every exhibit you want to see, every tour and meeting I want to go on. Everything. It'll be perfect."

I smile again, and this time it's genuine—I'm so fucking full of love for this gremlin standing here in a hoodie she stole from me. So fucking grateful that she burrowed her way into my life when I least expected it.

I lean forward and kiss her lips, chasing the salt from her tears. I don't even care that her brother is right there, getting into the very car I'm leaning against.

Right now, only me and Morgan matter. Only we exist.

“Yeah,” I say, pressing our foreheads together one last time before letting her go. “It’ll be perfect.”