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TO MAGNOLIA

By Meagan Elixabeth

Claudia checked her phone. 6:35. If the bus arrived by 6:40, she would make it to the restaurant on time. "Should've gone to the mechanic. Like I'm too busy not to."

She tightened the belt around her coat and watched a breeze gather a clump of dead leaves. For a few moments, the breeze gifted those fallen leaves with the power of flight. Claudia wished to be one of those leaves; to be colorful and weightless. She wished to be held by the breeze.

Claudia scrolled through her short list of contacts. She paused at her date's number. "I should probably call him. In case the bus is late..."

She noticed the unopened text message from an old friend, sent a few days prior. *Wanna grab a bite to eat?* How many of those texts had been sent, left unanswered?

Claudia checked the time: 6:41.

I have enough time, she thought. Enough time to play a quick game.

A woolly bear caterpillar inched away from her.

She didn't notice the red Honda, parked only a few feet away. She didn't notice the driver roll down their window.

"Claudia?"

She flinched and almost lost the grip on her phone.

The driver leaned out. "It is you!"

Claudia set her phone down. "Sam."

Sam showed her pearly white teeth. "Since when did you ride the bus?"

"I've ridden before."

"Well, I hate to break the news." Sam tapped her wrist. "Buses stop running at six."

"What? Oh, no!" Claudia jumped to her feet. "Sorry, Sam, I have to go." She started to walk.

"Hey, hold on!"

If she ran, would she make it on time?

"Claudia!" Sam drove the Honda slowly alongside the sidewalk.

Claudia glanced over. "Sam, I would love to catch up, but I'm late."

"I can give you a ride."

She paused and looked at the car as if noticing it for the first time. "You can? You would?"

Would she really be so willing, after being ignored for so long?

Sam jerked her head towards the passenger's seat. "Hop in."

Tears burned behind Claudia's eyes. It's been a long time since she let her tears grow beyond that burn. "You're sure?"

"Better hurry. You're running out of time." Sam showed her pearly whites again.

Claudia buckled her seatbelt. "Thank you. I really owe you one."

"Do you love me or what?" Sam merged onto the one-way street. "Where to?"

"Um, the sushi restaurant on fifth street."

“Magnolia? Their food’s great.” For an instant, Sam’s eyes left the road. “I texted you.”

Claudia fidgets with the seatbelt in her lap. “I’ve been busy.”

“So.” Sam’s eyes dart from Claudia to the road. “You have a date.”

She looked at Sam, eyes wide. “How did you guess?”

“Prom; the only time I remember you wearing a dress.”

Claudia lowered her gaze to the plain flats on her feet. Her mom said she was too tall to ever wear heels for any guy. “Is it weird?”

“No. It’s nice.”

“Oh. Thank you.” A smile tugged the corners of her lips. “I like your hair. You’ve never had it that color before.”

Sam grinned. She ran her fingers through bright red locks. “Did he ask you out?”

“No. It’s a blind date. Kind of. I’ve met him once before.”

“A setup? Your mom’s doing?”

“Well, I am in my thirties now. I need to find--”

“A husband.”

Sam slammed on her brakes and swerved to the side of the road as sirens roared behind them. Police cars, an ambulance, and firetrucks sped by. They weaved through a line of traffic.

“Shit. Looks like there’s an accident. We might be stuck for a minute.”

“I hope they’re okay. I should call him and let him know, though.” Claudia groped around in her coat pocket. Dred ran through her bones. “Oh, no.”

The clock on the radio shined 6:55 in red LEDs.

“What’s wrong?”

“My phone. I must’ve left it behind.” Claudia’s eyes burned. “I need to let him know I’ll be late. Mom will be so angry. I really should’ve called earlier.”

“Here.” Sam held out her phone. “I have the number in my contacts, for Magnolia.”

Claudia scrolled through Sam’s list of contacts to locate the number for Magnolia. “Um, yes... I have a reservation... I’m running late, could you please let my date know? Thank you so much.”

“I’ll drop you off and check the bus stop.”

“You would do that for me?”

“Of course.”

Tears threatened to spill onto her cheeks. “What if it’s gone, though? What if someone picked it up? You’ll just be wasting your time.”

“Well. That’s not how I see it.” Sam leaned back into her seat. “What if it’s not there? What if you need a new number? How will I message you? At least now, I’m pretty sure my texts go through.”

“Sam, I’m sorry I’ve ignored you.”

“Nah, don’t be. I get it. You’ve been busy.”

“Well, that’s not really true.”

Sam stared ahead, into the night of flickering taillights. “Listen. It doesn’t matter if I don’t get a response. Really. I just want you to know I think about you. Maybe it’s creepy, desperate. You haven’t blocked me, that means something. And you got into my car tonight.”

The radio played “Cocoon,” by Milky Chance; *“I see your heart is bleeding too / let me bleed instead of you...”*

Tears spilled onto her cheeks; she could no longer contain them.

Sam reached into her glove box for a napkin. She gave Claudia a gentle pat on the head.

Claudia sobbed into the napkin. "Now my makeup's ruined."

Sam laughed. "You don't need it anyway. If your date thinks you do, then he's not a good fit for you." Traffic around them rolled into movement. Sam shifted her parked car into drive. "First, we have to get you there."

Claudia wiped away her running mascara.

The clock read 7:15 when Sam pulled off the road.

"I'm really late." Her heart almost pumped out of her chest as she stared at the glaring white neon sign: Magnolia. Three couples entered the restaurant while she remained in the car.

Sam touched her shoulder. "I'll go look for your phone. Enjoy your date."

Claudia took in a deep breath and unbuckled her seatbelt. She watched Sam drive away.

She squinted in the restaurant's dim lighting, her eyes adjusting from the headlights on the road. Magnolia held twenty tables and long bar in the back. Most of the tables were occupied.

"Can I help you?" A young hostess approached her.

Claudia tightened the belt around her coat and fiddled with her hands. "Um, yes. I had a reservation at seven. I called--"

"Name?"

"Lavigne. Claudia Lavigne."

"Right this way."

Claudia followed the hostess to a small table in the middle of the room, unoccupied. She sat without taking off her jacket.

“What can I get you to drink?” She dropped a menu on the table.

“Um, I called earlier and--”

“Oh, the guy that was here left. Said he couldn’t wait.” She shrugged. “Are you going to order?”

“Could I use your phone?”

She thought she saw the hostess roll her eyes before walking away.

Claudia’s cheeks burned. She felt all the eyes in the room on her.

The only number she had memorized was her mother’s.

Three rings passed before an answer. “Hello?”

“Mom.”

“Claudia! Where are you calling from?”

“The restaurant.”

“Oh, so you did make it.” A heavy breath caused static. “David messaged me. Said you were late. He couldn’t get through to you. I couldn’t get through to you. Where is your phone?”

“At the bus stop. Hopefully.”

“Bus stop?”

“My car wouldn’t start.”

“I’ve been telling you to get it looked at for weeks! You really need to be more responsible!”

“Yes, Mother.” Claudia stared through the restaurant to the exit.

“Anyway, David is willing to reschedule. We’ll set up a date. This time I’ll drive you to make sure you don’t mess up.”

“Yes, Mother.”

The hostess loomed over her table. “Excuse me, but we can’t have our line tied up.”

“I have to go.”

“Wait, how are you--”

Claudia pressed the red button on the phone.

The hostess grabbed the phone from her. “So, are you going to order?”

“Sorry, I don’t have cash on me.” Her credit cards were stored in the case on her phone. Claudia left the restaurant, eyes burning holes in the back of her coat.

She opened the doors and inhaled a breeze as it gusted over her. Now what, she thought. The buses don’t run this late, and the credit cards are in the wallet. What if Sam doesn’t find the phone?

A red Honda pulled into an alley beside the building. Claudia twisted the belt around her coat as she walked around the corner, waving her phone.

“Guess what I found!”

Claudia couldn’t help but laugh. “You really have perfect timing.”

“Your date over that quick?”

“He left.”

“Oh, well. Since we’re here, wanna grab a bite to eat?”

Claudia glanced over the numerous missed calls and text messages from David and her Mother. Before turning her phone to silent she sent one text message:

Don't reschedule.

“Yes. I’m starving.” Claudia looked back at the white neon sign. This time, she noticed the butterflies etched in the windows of Magnolia.

END