

## *Come Pick Me Up*

by Clementine MacLeod

He told me 1:00 am, but it's only eleven by the time he calls. I'm sitting on Della's couch, her head on my arm as we watch TV, but I pick up anyway.

"Hey, Mari, can you come now?" I can hear the party behind him, all-girls screaming and baselines, but his voice still sounds quiet. Tired.

"Yeah, ok." I sigh. Della pauses the show and looks up at me.

*Everything ok?* She mouths. Reflexively, I nod. Though, I guess I still don't know.

"What happened?" I ask Jacob.

He swallows at the end of the line. "Angie threw up." I wait, hoping for more details, but my brother just breathes and stays silent. "Maria, just come, okay?"

"I will. Send me the address."

He does, and Della watches me as I gather my things and leave. She doesn't move from the couch. I almost walk over, maybe kiss her goodbye or something, but I don't.

"My brother," I explain, "I need to pick him up."

"Okay," she sighs, "Yeah, okay, see you."

I smile tightly, already feeling like shit. Why am I leaving? I think suddenly. Jacob could get a cab, like any normal person, and I could stay curled up with the Della (miles out of my league and stunning). Still, I grab my keys and force myself out of her room.

I won't tell Jake about this, but I want to.

The address he gave me is twenty minutes away.

Crap.

I keep the radio low as I drive, considering what shape they'll be in when I arrive. I think of all the times I've picked Jacob and Angie up since getting my license, how it must outnumber the number of times I've driven myself to any kind of function. Even before I could drive, it would be me Jacob would call. Whether he was drunk or high or just in trouble. It was me.

I could pretend to be confused. Why would a person call their twin sister instead of a friend? Someone who surely wouldn't rat them out to their parents? I know the answer. He calls me because he knows I'll come.

I smooth down my hair as I pull into the long, country driveway. I don't know whose house this is, but they've got those tacky, rent-a-sign letters posted up on the lawn. *CONGRATS GRADS!* Complete with a cartoon hat and diploma.

Of course, it's a grad party. Of course, they're all celebrating. Of course, Jacob's leaving for Michigan next month. Of course, it was him, of the two of us, to get a scholarship and go away to school. Of course.

Still, there's no room in my heart for resentment as Jacob and Angela stumble out of the party arm-in-arm. I almost laugh at the sight of them. He opens the car door.

"We gotta drop Angie off first," he slurs. He is drunk, but I know from a single glance that Angie's much worse.

She collapses into the seat and he steadies her with an arm. I watch my brother smooth down his girlfriend's hair and whisper something in her ear. They've been dating forever, but it still surprises me to see him like this. So gentle, so caring. I love Angie, but she's always been like this. Wild, spontaneous, and peroxide blonde – as if plucked out of a crappy 2000s movie, not rural Arizona.

I don't know much about how relationships work, but I know that, for them, Jacob is the responsible one. The thought alone is laughable. Unimaginable, if I hadn't seen it firsthand. The number of times Jacob has single-handedly made a good decision is just about equal to the number of steady girlfriends I've had.

Absolutely zero.

Still, as I drift into Angela's parking lot and watch him carry her into the house, I know that whatever sense that boy has, he uses it with her. The thought pushes on the side of my brain that knows their move to Michigan will be a disaster, telling me that their survival, both physically and as a couple, is more than just luck. I don't know if this small bit of hope will ever win out, but it is there.

Jacob climbs into the passenger seat and groans. I don't blame him. When we pull into our driveway and tiptoe into the house, it's me who tells Mom we're back. It's not that Jacob would be too obviously drunk – he's always had a knack for sobering up around adults – just that I'm always the one to do it. She nods and says goodnight, already back in bed by the time the words leave her mouth.

I go back downstairs to find Jacob in the kitchen, nursing a bowl of cereal. I pour myself a glass of water and get him one, too. He takes it but doesn't drink. I sit down next to him and we begin our night-out ritual. The debrief. He tells me about the party. Angie was the drunkest one there, and they had to leave before it got good. I listen to him intently, watching his eyes for non-verbal cues and to judge his sobriety. He finally takes a sip of water before asking me about my night. About Della.

"I'm surprised you remembered," I say truthfully.

Jacob shrugs, "It's not like you get that many girls." He smirks into his cereal and I shove him lightly.

"Just you wait," I joke, "I'll have to fight the college girls off with a bat."

My brother laughs at first, but something sobers him halfway through the action. He looks me in the eye.

"Maria, thanks for picking us up," he tells me.

I swallow and look away, "Yeah, no worries. Anytime."

I stand up to leave when he catches my arm. “It’s gonna be weird without you next year.”

For a split second, he looks really young.

“Don’t worry,” I tell him, “We’re gonna be fine.”

And I think I actually believe it.

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