



Nothing
BEFORE HER

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Sometimes, we have to give up our principles
to live our dreams.

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Start.

I'm waiting. Call me when you're close, and I'll pick you up somewhere.

"Pick me up"? Sounds good...

Hm.

I toss my phone onto the passenger seat and start the car. It's just over an hour's drive, but it stretches out like an eternity. I can't wait to see her again. There's no plan—despite our sleepless-night correspondence, I honestly have no idea what will happen. But for once, the uncertainty doesn't bother me. I usually hate being on unfamiliar ground, but now... it feels exciting. Electric. A kind of charged waiting that makes the road blur beneath me.

I try to focus on driving, but only certain fragments stick—like when a pickup speeds past me with a canoe strapped to the roof. The dashboard says it's terribly cold outside. I wonder when the canoe guy must have left home.

The phone rings. I switch to speaker. Only three people in the world know where I'm headed right now—and the third is on the line.

"What's up, idiot? On the road already?"

"Hey there, crazy chick. About halfway. But it feels like I'll never get there."

"Traffic?"

"More like nerves."

"I'm rooting for you. Be good."

"Don't teasing, or I'll throw a brick at you."

"I'm not teasing." Her voice suddenly drops the sarcasm. It's warm. Honest. "I mean it."

"I know." Mine softens, too. "Thanks. Talk soon."

The miles melt away. I hit the city limits. I don't know why my hand trembles as I reach for the phone. In just minutes, I'll see her again—watch her as she listens, hear her as she tells her stories. The whole thing feels unreal, and thrilling. I dial.

"My lady, the fox is in the henhouse. Where should I find you?"

"Just stepped out of city hall. Stuck my nose in something again. When will you be here?"

"Five minutes. Then I'll... pick you up."

„Hm. Okay.“

Five minutes and thirty-seven seconds that stretch like hours. I pull up, brake, open the door. She climbs in, smiling, glowing—and clearly a little flustered. But she recovers quickly, leans into the joke with wide-eyed mock surprise.

"What on earth are you doing here?"

I look at her, dead serious. "You once wrote that you couldn't remember how I smelled. So I brought it with me."

I pull her close, feel her body tremble just like mine. Her cheek brushes mine—light, hesitant, deliberate. She closes her eyes, inhales deeply, drawing in the bitter edge of my cologne.

"Thank you..." She leans back into the seat, avoiding my gaze, breathing slow and steady again.

"There's a tea shop nearby. Want to start the morning there?"

We settle into the tea shop. No coffee. Rules are rules.

For long minutes, we say nothing—just look at each other. I wonder what she sees in me, and I try to guess what *this* might turn into. She's studying me, as if decoding my thoughts—or like she already has.

She breaks the silence. "How was the drive?"

"Slow. Got stuck behind a truck full of rabbit cages. I'll never understand why it was so urgent for 350 cages to reach the city by nine a.m."

She laughs, open and easy, then suddenly switches gears. Her expression turns mock-official. She pulls out her phone.

"I made a list of questions..."

"Is this an interview?" I can't help but grin.

"Interrogation."

"Then let me just say, miss—reading from paper is *highly* unprofessional."

"It's not paper, it's a screen." Her face doesn't change. "Didn't have time to memorize them. Next time, maybe."

I play along, lean back, let her lead. She asks about work, childhood, the two years she was my student. I answer, occasionally turn the questions back at her, but she stays in control—smooth

and unshakable. It's easy. Fun. I watch her vibrancy, the sparkle in her eyes, the flawless skin, the reddish-brown hair brushing across her cheek.

I like her. As she is. A lot.

A message pings. She murmurs an apology—"Work"—and starts typing at lightning speed. Then she tucks the phone away and leans back again. The interrogation is on hold.

"You type ridiculously fast."

"If only I could think that fast, too. Occupational hazard. You get it, right? I've even developed a texting muscle."

She points to a little bump beside her thumb, then holds out her hand for me to see. I lean forward, run my finger slowly across the back of her hand, then down her long, slender fingers. A shiver runs through her. I feel it in my own skin, too, in the flash of brightness in her eyes.

The silence grows thick again. This time, I break it—voice rougher than I meant it to be. "I think we should get out of here."

We don't say a word in the car. I'm focused on driving, and she stares straight ahead, her hands tightly clasped in her lap. She doesn't ask where we're going—and truthfully, I'm not sure myself. I just know we need to get out of the city. Somewhere with more air. Somewhere we can breathe.

Before long, we're walking through a sparse forest, a place of summer festivals and quiet autumns and winters. For a while, we just walk side by side in silence. It feels good. Just being next to her.

"Do you like hiking?" I ask, watching her carefully step around roots and uneven ground. She doesn't seem like a seasoned hiker.

She steps over a large branch. "Let's say I *can* hike. My boyfriend's parents are hiking fanatics—they dragged me along a few times. Mostly last winter. I couldn't even tell you where we went. I only remember certain things."

"Like what?"

"The mulled wine." She shoots me a grin and ducks just in time to avoid a playful swat. Then she bolts ahead, but not so fast that I can't catch up. "What about you? Big hiker?"

"I used to be. But now that I drive for work all the time, I realized I haven't walked more than seven hundred meters at once in ten years."

"You don't look it."

"Yeah, well, I make a point of eating very unhealthily. It balances out." I glance at her. "How are you holding up with no cell service?"

"Hm. Honestly? I hadn't even noticed. So I guess I'm doing fine. Though I'm sure there'll come a moment when my fingers start itching for my phone." Her smile widens, easy and unguarded. "But I'm not that addicted. It's actually nice, getting away from the world for a bit."

We stop at the edge of the woods.

"And does it work?" I ask. "Getting away?"

She looks at me, her eyes clear, open. Her voice is soft. It takes her a moment to answer.

"This morning. When you pulled me close."

We both look down at the sparse grass, studying it like it's the answer to something important. Maybe it is. At least, there are more than a few questions spinning around inside me right now.

We walk slowly back toward the car. The doors close with a quiet thud. She looks at me, long and searching, and I swear—her bright green eyes shift into a deep hazel right in front of me. I've never seen anything like it.

"Can I ask you something?" she says, her voice still quiet.

"Of course."

"Why did you come today?"

"Because..." It's unlike me to hesitate. I don't know what to say. I don't even know exactly what I feel, or whether I *should* feel it. But somehow, almost involuntarily, I say it anyway:

"Because I can't fall in love with a screen."

She leans in, her face close to mine. My hand finds hers. I can hear the quickening of our breath—hers and mine both. Then suddenly, she leans back and snaps on her seatbelt with just a bit too much force. I start the car.

She sits with her arms crossed, her lips tight. When she speaks, her voice is oddly formal.

"In my view, before making any irreversible decisions, it's best to take a step back and assess the situation objectively." I can't help but smile—she sounds like she's reading from a textbook on moral conduct, and we both know exactly what she's referring to. "Maybe the smart thing to do right now is to wait three minutes and then

consider whether we really would've made the right call. Why are we stopping?"

I pull the car over. Two soft clicks: our seatbelts unbuckling.

"Because three minutes just passed."

She turns toward me. Her fingers find mine, light as air. And then I see only her eyes—wide and wonder-filled, glowing green in the soft light. Everything else fades.

I brush my hand across her cheek. She leans in, and slowly, gently, we find each other—unrushed, dissolving into the moment. And I know, without a shred of doubt, that I would give anything for this kiss. This soft, warm, sweet-tasting kiss...

It takes a long time for us to pull away.

She looks at me. I look at her. The silence is thick and warm and tastes like that kiss.

I shift slightly, drawing her closer.

"Do you hate me?"

"So much..."

Her head rests on my shoulder as I drive—slowly, so it lasts. But everything ends. We reach the city. Our stolen time is up. Here, signal bars blink back into existence.

She opens the door, leans toward me, and there's one more second—warm, close, breath to breath. I hold her hand a moment longer than I should, but we both know: we have to let go.

I call after her, hopefully with a smile. "Can I ask you something?"

She turns. "Sure."

"You do know I'm forty, right?"

That sly grin again. "It's just a number."

And then she disappears down the sidewalk—light, gleaming, like a young falcon catching the wind. I watch her go, already aching to text her, to see her again. And deep in my chest, I know with perfect clarity:

I would have given everything for that kiss.

Even if I'd known what was coming next.

Even then.