

~ Stay With Me ~

by Fallen

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Emma awoke to find Rachel lying on her side, watching her and smiling. It freaked her out a little. You'd think she'd be used to it by now. Almost the same routine every day for the last eighteen months. All the same, there were some mornings when, groggy from sleep, she forgot that she would be there, expected the queen-sized bed to be empty. Apparently today was going to be one of those days.

Funny really. Before the accident Rachel had been a heavy sleeper, always the last to rise and then usually only after threats, curses, and the sheets being taken away. Things were different now. That was something Emma just couldn't seem to fix.

Accident. It surprised her that she still thought of that way. Not that she tried to think of that often. If she did, it usually meant tears.

"You're up early," Emma said groggily, slipping into the routine conversation as one might slip into a pair of comfortable and worn sweatpants you wore every day. She reached out and her arm fell against the other side of the bed. It was cold.

"I know you don't like that," she said quietly. "But it's not like I can change alone, Emma. I need your help. You know that."

"Yeah, well, that's just one of those things I'm going to have get used to, I suppose."

"You haven't gotten used to it yet."

"Then I'll fix it!" she snapped as she rolled over and sat up. Her shoulders sank as the anger left her almost immediately. She wasn't angry at Rachel, she knew that. She was just an easy target for her temper. She sighed. "I can fix anything, given enough time."

"Not everything," Rachel said quietly.

Rachel shuffled over to sit beside her, very slowly, almost as if she were scared of Emma's temper flaring up again. Emma didn't feel the bed move. Her black hair fell forward over her face and she had to sweep some locks back over her ear, when she turned her head to look at Emma.

The long black tresses looked silky and perfectly straight, as if it had been combed a hundred times that morning. That bothered Emma. She'd have to do something about that. Tomorrow maybe, if she had time. She ran a hand through her own tousled blonde hair. She didn't need to look in a mirror to know it was likely to look like a rat's nest.

"Did you sleep well?" Rachel asked.

"Not really." She smiled weakly at her and shrugged helplessly. It was a familiar gesture that both of them knew by heart by now, saying so much without saying anything.

She was wearing pale blue silk pajamas. They were new; Emma had given them to her a few nights ago. It was a good color on her. The fabric was perfect too. Emma was pleased with those. It had taken her a long time to pick them out.

"Blinds," Emma said. There was a soft beeping sound and the venetian blinds on the far side of the room slid slowly open, flooding the bedroom with bright morning sunlight. She half-closed her eyes until they adjusted.

She stood up, stretched, and then padded over to the window, her bare feet tapping softly on the tiled floor. Far down below, the streets of New Washington were clouded with thick smog, a filthy pea-green in color. The maglev rails still hadn't been fixed, she noted. A crowd of workers were standing around the repair station, doing little or nothing. All of them wore Grade III respiratory masks. Those things were useless.

"I'll get the shower running," Rachel said. She disappeared and barely a second later the sound of running water could be heard coming from the bathroom.

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"You have three messages." Rachel said. Her voice was perfectly clear, even over the loud rush of the shower water.

Emma scrunched some more conditioner into her hair and spluttered as the hot water cascaded down her face. "Sorry I had to work late last night. There was an issue at the lab. Doctor Patel found an error in..."

"You don't have to explain. I trust you."

Yes, she did. She always had. And that had cost her. Emma lowered her head, partly so she could rinse out her hair, but mostly due to shame.

"Play the messages, please," she said quietly.

"Message one begins. Congratulations, Ms. Emma, you have won first..."

"Delete."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Message deleted. Message two begins. Hi, um, hi Emma. I'm Jenny McGill. Sorry, this is going to sound really weird but your mother gave your number and... well, I guess I'm not really one for blind dates but..."

"Delete."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

There was a pause.

"I said delete, Rachel."

She spoke hesitantly. "Perhaps you should reconsider."

"Delete."

"Message deleted. Message three begins. Emma, it's your mother. I met a lovely young girl at the spa yesterday and gave her your number. You spend far too much time working. How my daughter can be so obsessed with lasers, or whatever it is you do, I'll never know. It's time you started dating again, I've told you that before. This isn't healthy for you, you should know that. It's been more than a year since..."

"Delete."

"Message deleted."

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"Do you have time for breakfast?" Rachel asked. She stood behind the countertop in the walk-in kitchen, dressed in casual-looking grey sweatpants and a tight white tee. There was something not quite right about those sweats. They looked wrong on her, which was odd. They never used to.

"Sorry, no. I have a meeting. I have time for a quick cup of coffee though."

"Oh." She looked upset.

The coffee percolator clicked off. Emma sighed as she poured herself a cup. It tasted like hot mud. Damn it, she couldn't even get this right, when she had done so much. Fuck, she was such a

screw-up. Maybe her mother was right.

She wiped at her eyes, conscious that she was ruining her make-up.

"Are you crying?"

"No."

"You are. Are you thinking about the accident?"

"No."

"It wasn't your fault."

"Don't say that, please, Rachel."

"It was raining and..."

"Damn it, Rachel!" She slammed the mug down hard, spilling hot coffee over her hand. "How many times do I have to tell you not to say that?! I've blocked that routine a hundred fucking times." She paused, then swore as the pain from the burnt fingers suddenly hit her. Turning on the cold tap at the sink, she let her hand rest for a moment under the icy water, then looked up at Rachel. "Fuck, that hurts. I swear to God you're doing it on purpose. Just to fucking torture me. Which means I'm doing it on purpose. And how screwed up does that make me?"

Her sympathetic smile didn't falter for a moment. It wasn't designed too. "I know you don't mean that, Emma."

Emma's temper faded away almost as fast as it had flared up. She turned the water off and dried her hands. "You're right, I don't. I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize to me, Emma."

"I know, I know."

Without thinking she reached out and tried to take Rachel's hand. It was no good, of course. Her fingertips fell against the hard formica of the kitchen countertop.

Rachel pointed at one corner of the living room. "There's a problem with emitters 31G through 34B," she said. "The power supply seems to be fluctuating. It could be a faulty connector or possibly an overload in the localized dampeners."

"Hardly. If that were true then the safeties would have cut in."

Rachel considered that for a moment, her brow furrowed. "Not if the dampeners went off-line one at a time."

"And did they?"

"Yes. I'm unable to determine the exact cause."

Emma sighed and walked into the living room. She knelt in the corner Rachel had indicated, felt along the wall until she felt the connectors and popped open the glass plate, which up until then had been a seamless part of the wall. Placing the thin glass square on the carpet beside her, she looked inside the wall at the circuitry.

"Hmm. Looks like you're right. Come and stand over here."

Rachel walked across the living room. As she stepped past the coffee table, she flickered in and out of existence for a moment.

"You... see... problem... trust..." she said. Even her voice was cutting out. "...going to... late..."

"You're right," Emma said. She popped the plate back into place, then rubbed it with sleeve to erase the smudges she'd made. The glass shimmered for a second, then changed color and texture to match the rest of the wall. "I guess I'll take a longer look at it tonight. Shouldn't be too hard to figure out."

Rachel shook her head. She had moved back into the kitchen and so had reassumed solidity. "You have an AA meeting tonight, remember?"

"Damn it. Okay, then it will have to wait until the weekend. I really have to get going."

As she reached the door, Rachel spoke up again. "Don't forget your mask. Pollution levels are still at a record high for June." She was still smiling. "I love you, Emma."

"I love you too," Emma said. And just like every other day, she made sure to switch Rachel off before leaving.