

The Karma Car

"Little further! Just keep pushing!" Amy grunted, throwing all ninety-six pounds of her body against the ancient car.

"I *am* pushing, Ames," snapped Morgan. Her dirty-blond hair was plastered to her forehead as the Texas heat pounded down on them.

"Okay, okay," muttered Amy. "You know what, I need another break."

The two freshmen slumped against the scalding trunk grateful for the support and oblivious to the heat radiating from the metal. Amy tugged the ponytail holder out of her own long, silvery hair and retied it so no hair touched her sweaty neck.

"You guys doin' alright?" called a Spanish-accented voice from inside the car.

"No thanks to you!" called Morgan. She'd obviously had enough of this. "Come out and help me. Let Amy drive."

"*Que?*" asked Juan in Spanish as if he didn't understand her. "*No comprende.*"

"Juan, let one of us steer. Please!" Amy pleaded.

Byebrows raised, Juan poked his head out the window. "It's my car. And you don't even have your permits yet," he argued.

"Morgan and I can drive well enough," Amy countered Juan in a level voice, "We are in the middle of nowhere, we're exhausted, it's a hundred and two out here, and; yes, it's your car. Which is why you should be doing the work to make up for the fact that you can't fix your car's engine to save your life."

"Or our lives," added Morgan.

“Besides, it’s not like there’s anything for us to hit,” Amy said, gesturing around at the vast nothingness of West Texas.

Juan contemplated this.

There wasn’t any form of life or vegetation aside from the sparse and scruffy bits of brush. Besides, Amy thought, *the ‘88 Cutlass with paint peeled down to the primer wouldn’t look much different wrapped around itself.* The windshield was already smashed as if a kamikaze bird had smashed headlong into it, one door caved in on itself and was missing a handle, and the rearview mirror was clinging to the ceiling for dear life at an odd angle. Amy didn’t even want to think about what was all over the seats.

“Either you voluntarily exit the vehicle or I drag you out and leave you in a ditch,” threatened Morgan.

“No, you won’t. If you beat me up, I can’t push,” Juan pointed out cheekily.

“Oh, well,” growled Morgan, crossing her toned arms.

Morgan was tall, taller than Juan at six feet and one inch, *and* was the best hitter on the varsity volleyball team, farthest thrower—over boys—in shot-put, and undisputed champion in any arm wrestling match she had ever participated in.

As if suddenly realizing this, Juan reached around and tugged his keys out of the ignition, threw the smashed door open, and hopped out. He bowed nice and low to Morgan, motioning toward the driver’s seat and rattled off something in Spanish. All Amy caught was “*senoritas*” and something about cookies. Or maybe he was telling them to shut up.

Either way, Morgan marched over and climbed in the car.

“C’mon, Ames!” she shouted to Amy.

Amy looked at Juan. "Let's all take a break first," she said.

Shrugging, Juan reached in his pocket and started toying with his phone's battery, which had conveniently died at the same time as the car.

"Any luck?" Amy tried to be friendly, yet a desperate edge crept into her voice.

"Nope," Juan answered curtly, not looking at her.

"Bummer," said Amy. She shaded her eyes and gazed around at the brown expanse.

With an egotistic smile, Juan snorted. "Yeah, no kidding," he said and began admiring a particularly large hill of dirt.

Amy smirked at her understatement and laughed as well, blowing off his conceited tone. "I've got some water in my bag if you need it," she offered.

His face suddenly unreadable, Juan cocked his head like a long, gangly bird and stared at her for a second longer than necessary. Then he whipped his head around and cleared his throat noisily.

"Uh-uh. Snippy over there needs it more than me," he said.

"I have ears!" snarled Morgan.

Shaking with silent laughter, Juan tossed his battery up in the air and caught it a few times. He shook his head and muttered to himself in Spanish. Though Amy didn't understand much, it was probably something along the lines of, "Case and point."

Even though the shade of the car's interior was calling to her, Amy leaned against the car with Juan as he pushed the battery back in his phone and tried to turn it on again. For the umpteenth time, Amy wished her big sister was nice and would stop changing the lock code on her own phone. Morgan didn't have a phone, so the three kids were stuck on a rarely used road with a clunker of a car during the West Texas summer.

The worst part was, Amy and Morgan didn't get along with Juan even when they weren't hot and grumpy. On top of being profoundly socially unacceptable—even by high school's standards—Juan was an obnoxious, swollen-headed junior, but was also their only ride to church camp. The church's only bus had left the three of them waiting back home after a slight misunderstanding, and it was only after Morgan had waved a twenty under his nose that Juan agreed to take her and Amy with him in the unreliable hunk of metal he called a car.

"I'll expect at least ten more bucks when we get there," Juan said as he opened the trunk so the girls could heave their bags in. "You know, to compensate for gas."

Amy wanted to be pleasant with Juan, but he was already making things extremely difficult. Shifting her weight back to her right foot, Amy casually oriented herself in between Morgan and Juan.

"That is for gas," Morgan replied in a clipped voice.

"Yeah, but the car will be weighed down more than it's used to," said Juan, looking Morgan up and down pointedly.

To Amy's surprise, Morgan hadn't taken her suitcase and used it to smack him on his head or pummel him into a pulp on the pavement. Instead Morgan said, "Get us there, then I'll pay you twenty more. But that's it."

And with that, Juan turned away and Morgan turned to Amy, clasping her hands.

"Got everything?" Morgan asked.

"Uh-huh. Even..." Amy patted her pocket, which held a tiny blue blood sugar meter.

"Awesome. Go ahead and hop in, I've got this," said Morgan, hefting their bags in the trunk. Then she followed Amy around the side of the car. Before Amy put her hand on the door

handle, she turned to Morgan.

"I'll cover half of the 'driving fee'," Amy promised.

Morgan grinned and waved her off. "Nope, chick. I've got it. But there's one thing." Quickly, she glanced up at Juan, who was checking his reflection in the Oldsmobile's window, "How is it I'm paying this guy to drive us to church camp—when he's already headed that way?" she moaned under her breath.

All Amy could do was shrug. How anyone could be so calloused was beyond her.

After two minutes of staring around, Amy left Juan to fiddle with his phone and was soon sinking down in the squashy passenger seat, sighing. It wasn't much better than outside, but at least there was shade and she could get off her feet.

"I can't believe I accepted a ride from this bozo," Morgan scolded herself. Using the flimsy rearview mirror, she was combing her damp hair away from her face with her fingers.

"Morgan, it's not much farther to the next town. Why don't you and I walk ahead?" Amy asked.

Shaking her head, Morgan glanced back at Juan, who was sitting on the trunk. "I'm not having you walk anywhere in this heat."

"Oh, please," Amy scoffed, "I just pushed this car with you and I'm fine. Not even a little dizzy or hungry. I'm gonna help Juan push here in a sec."

"No, you are not!" exclaimed Morgan, wide-eyed.

"I'm fine, Mom," insisted Amy, trying humor.

Morgan rolled her eyes, far from amused.

"Okay, why don't you walk yourself, Miss Muscles?" asked Amy.

"Because I'm not leaving you alone with him," said Morgan with distaste, jerking her head toward Juan. He seemed to be having fun kicking rocks.

Accepting the futility of arguing with Morgan, Amy slumped in her seat. There was no point in asking Juan to walk. To him, a man never left his car, especially with two freshmen girls.

So all there was to do was sit back and relax for a while. Snuggling deeper into the spongy seat, Amy closed her eyes. She had just started day dreaming about an iced, sweet tea when her mind suddenly registered that Morgan was turned all the way around, her right leg dangerously close to knocking down the pathetically crippled rearview mirror, and digging frantically around in the backseat.

"What in the *world* are you—?"

But Morgan shushed her quickly. Her hands flailed around a few more times, tossing up napkins, mid-term papers, soccer cleats, and straw wrappers until Amy heard a muffled *clunk*. "Gotcha!" Morgan muttered triumphantly. To Amy she said, "Break's over. Tell him to rock the car." She scrambled back around as Amy leaned out the window.

"I think we should start moving," Amy called to Juan.

"You think?" clarified Juan skeptically.

Morgan hissed under her breath.

"Try rocking the car to start," Amy advised, ignoring both of them.

"Alright."

Even after Morgan had expressed her disapproval, Amy shifted to open the door.

"No!" ordered Morgan.

Confused by her tone, Amy looked at her friend as the car began to shake, forward and back.

Then she saw the light-green handle of-

"Come on, baby," Morgan coaxed. She petted the dash as she jammed the screwdriver into the ignition and gave it a twist.

To Amy's utter surprise, a clanking roar met her ears as the dirty old car's engine turned over and started chugging away. The car was alive! Beaming, Amy turned to Juan, bug-eyed and dumbfounded behind them, his keys hanging limply in his hand. She lifted her hand to motion him over when Morgan stomped on the gas.

"*Comprende* this!" Morgan shouted.

"What are you doing?" squealed Amy as the tires peeled out. There was no way Juan hadn't been pelted with rocks and sand.

"What does it look like?" asked Morgan calmly. Out the window she yelled, "Good-bye, jerk!"

"It looks like you're stealing Juan's car," Amy squeaked.

"Then I'm stealing Juan's car," agreed Morgan.

Amy was speechless.

"Ames, he made us-you-push. He deserves it. I might send someone back for him," Morgan reassured her.

"But he could get mugged or run over by some psycho or--"

"We could have been, too," said Morgan. "Juan's a tough guy-kinda stringy and scrawny, easy to crush-but he'll be fine. All he has to do is walk. It's not like he ever pushed or anything," she grumbled.

Still worried, Amy scooted around in her seat to look back at a distant figure waving his arms

and jumping around, no doubt shouting unseemly things in Spanish as well.

“Good-bye, Juan Gonzales. Good-bye, twisted male chauvinist pig. Good-bye, grimy, dusty, dirty desert,” ranted Morgan. “Good-bye, slave labor. Good-bye to *all* that!”

Intrigued, Amy watched Morgan as she enunciated her words with a few punches to the horn.

“And he can say ‘*Adios*’ to his extra twenty dollars!”

The stuffy car became completely still, aside from the motor’s jostling, as Morgan fell silent. A tiny, lonely wisp of a cloud scuttled across the sky and was dwarfed by a vicious-looking vulture that swooped down menacingly. The seat squeaking as she did, Amy turned around and plopped down facing forward. After another moment of silence Amy turned to Morgan and asked, “So we’re going back for him now?”

“Yeah.” And with a jerk on the wheel, Morgan turned the car around.

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