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Among the trees, all stooped in ice and shedding dead bark in papery white strips, they trudged through the snow with their heads down, watching their feet and steadying themselves with gloved hands pressed to trunks and branches. The snow was not fresh and each step roiled up more and more mud and bits of underlying leaves so that as they walked further into the woods they found themselves wading through a pulpy soup of decaying vegetation. Ethan licked his lips and felt the moisture freeze on his upper lip. He wiped it with the back of his hand and stopped. Kim kept moving and he watched her lift a dripping boot out of the snow and reach for a low branch. Her dark hair fell down her back from beneath a purple knit hat. The fuzzy ball on top of it bounced as she walked. She was having trouble gripping the branch with her mittens on and she reached back and pulled one off with her teeth before continuing.

“I didn’t think it would be this bad,” Ethan called.

“It’s fine.”

He started again and felt the ground suck at his boots. The sky above him was cloudless and growing dark. Ahead a streak of orange caught the ice on the trees and glared in his eyes.

“Are you cold?” he asked.

“What do you think?”

A branch snapped in Kim’s hand and nearly sent her tumbling into the snow. She caught herself and tossed the branch aside.

When they were through the brush and into the clearing the landscape spread out before them in shades of gray and white, all of it bathed in orange and purple shadow. Along the edge of the woods gray boulders stood capped in snow. The stones grew smaller as they neared the frozen creek and then larger again where the woods began anew. Ethan stood for a moment

catching his breath and Kim would not look at him. He picked his way to the edge of the creek and touched his toe to the ice. He pressed harder and then stood on it. It was solid. The milky white ice stretched out in either direction as if he were standing in the middle of a road. He jumped to prove its sturdiness and slipped when he landed, barely catching himself on the steep bank. Kim laughed and he smiled at her.

“Look,” she said, pointing to where the jagged face of the mountain stood covered in frozen water. The small waterfall had frozen and it hung suspended like a crystal gown, catching the last of the sunlight and casting it in thin rays over the snow and the trees. Both of them tipped their heads back and looked to the top of the falls where the ice was thickest. The wall of water fell in folded sheets and at the bottom the surface glistened, caught for the winter in an agitated roil, all of it solid and fluid at once, as if at any moment the entire scene would reanimate and echo its splashes deep into the woods.

Ethan turned and held a hand over his eyes to see through the light. He could see a pillar of steam rising out of the woods where the old mine shaft sat abandoned a short walk away. The earth’s hot breath climbed up through the trees and drifted off into the darkening sky. The sun had already fallen behind the line of the mountains, leaving only an orange crescent to flutter on the horizon.

“Dammit,” Ethan muttered. “I wanted to catch the sunset.”

Kim looked off toward the mountains and the light caught her face where her cheeks were pink from the cold.

“It’s too late,” she said.

“I can make a fire.”

“All of a sudden you’re a romantic?”

“Forget it then.”

Kim looked around and shook her head. “The wood’s too wet. It’ll never take.”

“Might as well try.”

Kim shrugged, and Ethan started up out of the creek bed. He began snapping small branches off of the trees and lifting the loose brush from the ground, slapping the snow off on his pant legs. On the other side of the creek Kim dusted the snow from the top of a boulder and sat. She rubbed her stinging hand on her arm and blew hot air into it. Each new twig sent a sharp crack ricocheting through the woods. Ethan filled his arms and slid carefully over the ice and up the other bank. When he was close to Kim he started to clear a spot in the snow with his foot, kicking a muddy circle into the snow.

“It’s too wet,” Kim said.

“I can start it.”

“Just sit down. What did you want to talk about?”

Ethan went on sweeping the snow with the inside of his foot. When the spot was clear, he knelt and began arranging the sticks into a loose teepee. The wood was dark and damp and Kim watched him stand and fumble in his pockets for a match. He found a book and fell again to his knees. The first match hissed and flared but blew out before he could move it to the wood. The second wouldn’t light and so he threw it into the snow. He cupped his hand around the book of matches and struck the third. The flame danced and diminished but held, and Ethan leaned over and held it to the kindling. It wouldn’t take.

“Forget it,” Kim said.

“Just one more try.”

He struck another match and held it under the teepee. No smoke rose. Frustrated, Ethan tossed the match into the snow and held up a finger. "One more," he mumbled. This time, he took a stick from the pile and vigorously dried it off on his jacket, twisting the end between the fabric so that the bark flaked away. He stuck another match and held the flame to the end of the stick. Nothing happened.

"Shit." Ethan stood and threw the stick violently toward the woods. It clattered into the trees and fell somewhere in the growing dark.

"Just sit down and relax," Kim said.

"I wanted to catch the sunset."

Kim shrugged and slid over on the stone. "Too late. Forget about it."

Ethan kicked some of the piled snow back into the hole he had cleared and the sticks tumbled over. He sat down next to her. They sat and listened to the sound of the ice cracking. An icicle fell from the falls and shattered like a wind chime on the surface of the creek.

"I like you without your beard," Kim said. It was the first time she had looked at him.

Ethan looked at her and smirked, rubbing his naked jaw with a chapped, red hand.

"Yeah? Well, my face is freezing."

She laughed. "It looks good."

When she turned her head away silence fell over them. Ethan could hear her short breath and see it trembling from her nostrils. He could hear the wind blowing through the trees, rattling frozen branches together, the weakest of them breaking under the weight and falling to the forest floor.

"Did you tell your Mom that you're leaving?"

Ethan stuffed his hands in his pockets and sighed. He watched his breath float away and tried to make a ring with it. He nodded.

“That bad, huh?”

“Not good.”

Kim ran a finger along a crack in the boulder. “Everyone’s excited for you. Course Hal says to tell you good riddance.”

Ethan smiled to himself. “Guess I deserve that.”

Kim sat up straight and pulled her shoulders up around her neck. She toed the snow, pushing it back and forth until she hit mud. “What time’s your bus leave?”

“Ten. Figure it’ll take me an hour and a half just to get to Burlington though.”

“If it doesn’t snow.”

Ethan laughed. “Knowing my luck we’ll have a blizzard tonight.”

Kim shook her head. “Nah. You’ll get out.”

Ethan looked at her. She sat with her arms pulled inside of her jacket and the empty sleeves hanging limp at her sides. The end of her nose was red and Ethan wanted to reach out and rub it but he didn’t. He followed her gaze to the steam rising out of the woods below them. If he squinted he could see the road through the trees and the curve where the open mouth of the retired mine hid. He wiped his nose and sniffed. The noise grew in the silence and he looked again at Kim’s glowing profile.

“Why did you say no?” he asked.

She blinked and lowered her eyes. He could see her swallow and hear her hands shift beneath her jacket. He tried to meet her eyes but she looked away, gently clearing her throat and adjusting her position.

“Are you excited,” she asked.

Ethan turned away and frowned at the snow. “You’re not going to talk to me?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Why not?”

“I just don’t.”

Ethan bent over and picked a stick from the pile of damp tinder. He scratched at the bark with his thumbnail. “I have to leave.”

“You don’t have to explain yourself to me.”

“I know that, but I wanted to apologize.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Kim spread her fingers out on her thigh and looked at the red on her knuckles go white when she locked her joints. She looked up at the steam rising through the woods below.

“Do you really think that guy fell in there?” she asked.

Ethan shrugged.

“It seems possible.”

Ethan coughed and the noise was sharp and it echoed away from them. “You know that window in my bedroom? I used to have dreams that I would wake up and look out of it and see a skeleton in an orange jumpsuit, all tattered, coming out of the woods. His hands were cuffed together like this,” Ethan held his hands out in front of him, “but they were just bones. His skull was all covered in moss and mud from being down there so long.”

“That’s scary.”

Ethan laughed. “No shit.”

“You think it’s a true story?”

“I’m sure that in all the years that prison’s been out there somebody escaped. I guess if you were running through the woods at night you might not see it and fall in. But it used to be boarded up.” Ethan sat up straight and squinted through the last of the light. “My Dad used to tell me that he thought the guy made it. Got away and went to Brazil to be a bullfighter. Something like that.”

Kim sniffed a laugh and scratched her chin with her shoulder. “I heard it was just some guy that got locked up for something stupid like embezzling or fraud but he just snapped one day and killed a guard.”

Something fell in the woods and made a wet plopping sound when it hit the snow.

“I don’t buy it though,” Kim said, shaking her head and leaning over, hugging herself. “Why would somebody who never committed a serious crime just wake up one day and do something like that?”

Ethan wiped his nose with the back of his hand and blinked his eyes against a cold breeze. “I guess feeling trapped can turn you into a person you wouldn’t normally be.”

“You think it’s true?”

“The story?”

Kim nodded.

“Nah. It’s probably just something they made up to keep kids from playing down there.”

“Never stopped us.”

Ethan smiled and pushed himself closer to her. Kim flinched when his thigh touched hers, but she didn’t move. Ethan dropped the stick into the snow and leaned forward. Kim wouldn’t look at him and he wanted to touch her chin and raise her eyes to his, but he was afraid to do so. He tried to catch her glance but she only leaned forward further.

“Why did you say no?” he asked.

“Do you know where you’re going to stay when you get there?” Kim asked suddenly.

“Come on.”

“Are you excited about it?”

“Yeah.”

Kim nodded and Ethan sat back and sighed up at the dark sky.

“I thought you wanted to come with me,” he said.

Kim didn’t say anything.

“Why won’t you answer me?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I just want to know why you said no. That’s all. You always wanted me to ask you, but when I finally did you shot me down. I don’t get it. I thought that was what you wanted.”

Kim sat upright and looked at him. Her face was hard. “You asked me at three o’clock in the morning, Ethan. You can’t show up at my window, so drunk that you can barely stand, and expect me to believe you.”

“What do you mean *believe* me?”

Kim shook her head and her eyes were wide with disbelief. She looked away from him.

“No,” Ethan said, shifting to meet her eyes again. “Tell me. What do you mean?”

Kim sighed loudly and kicked at the snow beneath her feet. “You’ve done nothing but treat me like...like some sort of an anchor. For as long as I’ve known you. You only ever showed up when you were drunk or depressed, and any time I tried to get close to you, you stopped talking to me for a week. You’re like a god-damned fifth grader.”

Ethan rubbed his jaw and Kim looked at him.

“Do you really expect me to believe that you actually give a shit about me? If I actually thought you did, I would have said yes. *That’s* why I said no.” Kim looked at him and waited for him to respond. He sat and stared at the muddy circle he’d kicked out of the snow. “You happy?” she asked.

They sat in silence for some time and the last sliver of the sun fell behind the mountains and a crown of purple light peaking into the sky was all that remained. Over the falls the moon was risen full and bright and the tapestry of ice shimmered beneath it.

“I don’t know why I did all of that,” Ethan finally muttered. “I’m not really like this.”

Kim looked at him. He sat staring at the ground, unblinking, with his shoulders round over his neck and his hands hanging open between his knees.

“I know,” she said.

Ethan reached over and tried to take her hand and she stood up. She pushed her arms back through the sleeves of her coat and brushed the dirt and the snow off of the backs of her thighs.

“It’s dark,” she said. “I’ve got to go.”

“Stay.”

“I can’t.”

Ethan stood and stepped close to her. He looked at her and she looked away. Then he touched her chin and lifted her mouth to his. He kissed her softly and she let him but pulled away when he tried to embrace her. They stood face to face and she turned her head and looked at him. In the early dark his face looked old and tired and Kim reached a hand up and patted him softly on the cheek.

“You did it,” she said, forcing a smile. “You’re going.”

Ethan nodded and she stepped away from him. She reached into her pockets and pulled out her mittens. They were wet with melted snow but she pulled them on anyway and started back into the woods. She could just see their tracks in the moonlight and she tried to step in the places where they had already been so as not to slip. The ground all around her was muddy and wet.

Ethan stood alone where she had left him and felt the cold air stinging the tips of his ears and his nose. He could hear her every step squishing and crunching through the snow. Branches cracked and popped when she took hold of them and he listened to each sound until they were only echoes and then nothing. He stood in the silence and felt the first bits of moisture seeping through his socks and stinging his toes. The only sound was the cracking of the shifting ice, melting and reforming in the night air. In the woods below where the mountain face dropped and leveled off, the air flickered and danced where the steam from the mine rose invisible in the darkness. He stood and watched the trees twitching mirage-like through the steam and he thought of the road where he had parked and the muddy path back to it.