

“Stay warm out there!” I called as a hunched, wrinkled lady hobbled out the front door, inviting a draft of arctic air into the bakery. She turned and smiled back at me before tugging her scarf tighter around her neck and stepping out onto the icy ground.

“I hope she gets to her car alright,” I mumbled to Ashley, who was folding boxes to my right.

“She’ll be fine,” she replied without looking up.

I set my chin in my palms and sighed, staring out into the white and black darkness and shivering at the cold wind still sweeping around the store. The heavy snow obscured everything more than a few feet from the front windows and the old woman was little more than a gray blur in the distance. Adrianna, my manager, emerged quivering from the kitchen behind and shuffled to the front door, flipping the locks and securing us from the snowy air.

“Time to start cleaning,” she announced and lumbered back to the heat of the kitchen ovens, but turned back before closing the door. “Oh, and when you guys leave, don’t forget to clean off the exhaust pipe outside. With this weather, it’s going to be buried in snow.”

Ashley and I groaned as we got out the mops, vacuum, and counter rags. Cleaning wasn’t usually that bad, except for in the late winter when the heat shut off at six as we closed our doors and it got gradually colder as the night wore on. Even worse, it was my first day back to work since I left for college, so by tradition it was my responsibility to dig the exhaust pipe out a probable two feet of snow. I mopped as fast as I could, dreaming of warm bread and the almond paste cookies I had set aside earlier to take home for a midnight snack. I scrubbed the last patch of dirt ground into the tile and my work was done, giving me the freedom to clock out and put on my third coat.

“Ready to go?” asked Allison.

Ashley and I nodded and braced ourselves against the cold, calling our goodbyes to Adrianna and the few remaining bakers, and trooped out the side door. I started to head towards the pipe when I saw a tiny figure huddled in the middle of the sidewalk outside the neighboring day care, wearing a coat that was far too big and holding what looked like a lunchbox.

“Wait!” I called to my coworkers, jogging to catch up. “I think there’s a little girl over there!”

“Oh, s-s-she’s there every day,” chattered Ashley, clutching her fashionably thin jacket.

“Yeah, she waits for her mom to pick her up. I think she goes to the daycare,” added Allison.

“But they closed fifteen minutes ago!” I exclaimed, glancing back at the shadow bundled against the snow.

“Adrianna says that she’s always gone by the time she leaves. Don’t worry, she’ll be fine. I’ll see you tomorrow!” Allison turned on her heel and scuffled to her yellow beetle in the lot across the street.

“Bye S-S-Selene!” called Ashley and jogged away to hop in Allison’s passenger seat.

“Alright then,” I mumbled to myself and grabbed the shovel next to the exhaust pipe. It was completely buried and the shovel was fairly small so it was slow work, but after a few minutes I started to see some smoke rise make its way up through the snow. I kept one eye on the little girl, but she remained motionless aside from occasionally rubbing her hands across her arms to keep warm. Finally the pipe was free, and I set down the shovel and carefully began walking towards my car on the street about forty feet past the girl. As I got closer, I saw her jerk her head towards me slightly in a watchful, almost fearful way.

“Hi there!” I called out. I could just make out her lips forming one syllable, but heard no

sound. “Is someone coming to pick you up?” I asked when I was only a few feet away.

She tilted her head down and again I saw that she was speaking but could not hear what she said. “I’m sorry, what was that?” I said.

She shivered slightly and lifted her head just enough for me to see two big brown eyes through thick eyelashes. Her hands, hidden in her sleeves, wrapped around her oversized coat in a feeble attempt to keep warm, which I now saw was far too thin and had several holes. From her small size, she looked no older than seven, if even. I barely heard her squeaky, trembling reply: “My momma’s coming to get me.”

“Okay. Are you warm enough here by yourself?” She jolted her head up and down twice in a quick nod, and kept her eyes trained on the ground.

“Alright,” I said uncertainly. I stood next to her, half-poised to leave, unsure of what to do. Allison had assured me that her mom came to pick her up, but it was no more than twenty degrees out, and she was so small. She glanced up at me again, and my presence was obviously making her uncomfortable.

“My name’s Selene. If you ever get too cold out here, just knock at that door and tell whoever answers that Selene said you could wait there.” I pointed to the side door, knowing that if this little girl ever did as I just suggested there was a chance I could lose my job. Adrianna was very strict and made her dislike of children known, but the girl shivering in front of me looked so abandoned. She nodded haltingly once more, and I began the slippery walk to my car.

“Goodbye!” I called.

She waved quickly, her sleeve falling back to reveal a dark, tiny hand balled in a fist. My back was completely turned when I heard soft thumps behind me, and I didn’t even have time to turn around before I felt a tug at my coat.

“My name’s Summer,” she blurted out, making eye contact for only a second before returning to her pose staring at the ground.

“Nice to meet you, Summer,” I replied, smiling warmly at her downcast face.

“Bye,” she muttered, and ran back to her post in front of the daycare. I finished the cold walk to my car, looking back over my shoulder with every other step, but Summer kept her eyes on the road.

With a sigh of relief, I climbed into my car and immediately cranked up the heat. I hesitated turning on the engine and after a moment’s hesitation turned the key but flicked off the headlights. The seat below me turned on and warmed up within seconds, and I resigned myself to waiting to see when someone would arrive for Summer. At six thirty-five, five minutes after talking to Summer and twenty minutes after the daycare closed, a banged-up Chevy careened around the corner and pulled into the side street of Spinelli’s and Peaches Day Care. The horn honked in a five second blast as it skidded to a halt mere feet from the curb where Summer waited, but the shadows inside obscured the driver. The little girl climbed into the front seat and tried to close the door quickly, but the car sped up and spun into a tight U-turn before the door was all the way shut. As fast as it had arrived, the car was gone.

Robotically I turned the headlights back on and inched my way out of the side street, reluctant to emerge if there was even a remote chance of being on the same road as the death trap that picked up Summer. I did my best to put the whole experience out of my mind for the rest of the night, distracting myself with mediocre frozen dinner, a romance novel, and finally some delicious almond paste cookies. But there was a kindergarten child in the book that was far too similar to Summer, so I resigned myself to an early bedtime and music until I fell asleep.

The next morning, I dug out a pair of snow gloves from my old ski gear. They would be

far too big on Summer and were a hideous shade of crimson red, but they had kept me warm in zero degree weather and hopefully they could do the same for her.

Work was slow, even for a Tuesday. Coat-laden customer tramped in after coat-laden customer, bringing with them endless slush, cold air, and irritability. Adrianna stayed comfortably warm in her office adjacent to the kitchen and felt no need to adjust the temperature anywhere else, making Ashley and Allison all the more anxious to go home. Finally at six thirty the floors were cleaned and pastry cases spotless, and we ambled out the door like the bundled-up penguins we appeared to be.

I called my goodbyes to Ashley and Allison, who again were at peace with the little girl waiting in the distance, and hastily shoveled out the exhaust pipe despite by sore back from the day before. “Hi, Summer,” I greeted as I walked up.

She broke her gaze from the icy street for just a moment to smile up at me “Hi, Selene.”

“You know, I was thinking about how cold it is out here, and I thought you might like these,” I said, pulling the gloves out of my backpack.

Summer took a step back and held up her hands, the sleeves of her jacket falling back to expose her bare arms. “Oh, no thank you, miss,” she stammered.

“It’s fine!” I insisted, “You see, these gloves have a story behind them.”

Summer stared at me apprehensively, the smallest hint of curiosity showing in her brow.

“I found them in the middle of a forest hidden inside a hollowed out tree. Nobody ever came to get them, so I brought them home, and they’ve always kept me warm. I think they’d be perfect for a little girl like you with cold hands.” I held the gloves out to her. She seemed torn, rocking forwards and backwards slightly as if she was continuously changing her mind, but after a few teetering moments reached out and grabbed them. Her fingers were so stiff she could

barely pull them on and they were huge for her tiny hands, but as soon as her palms were safe inside relief crept across her face.

“Thank you so much!” she exclaimed, the loudest I had ever heard her speak. “Did you really find them in a forest?”

I really did; I told her the story of how I went snowshoeing a few years ago and found a huge tree containing gloves, some frozen sunflowers, a journal, and a necklace and bracelet set with a songbird pendant among other things. After months no one came to claim them and I cleaned out the hollow, refreezing the flowers in my freezer and keeping the necklace and pendant as a memory in my car. Summer was fascinated by the story, asking me if I had ever found anything else in the forest, if I had gone there with anyone, if the forest was close to where we were.

I answered her questions eagerly. “Hold on,” I said. “I’ll show you the necklace- just a minute.”

I jogged over to my car but as soon as I opened the door I heard a familiar screech. Once again the beat-up Chevy rocketed around the corner at an incredible speed, slamming to a halt right in front of Summer. She glanced over at my car and I tried to wave goodbye, but almost immediately after looking she flinched and snapped her head back towards the car, scrambling in to make up for lost time. The car reeled off and once again the snowy silence made it seem as if the little girl and screeching car had never existed.

I fell into a pattern over the next few weeks. I stopped to talk to Summer every day after work and discovered she was remarkably intelligent for her age, speaking as if she was in fourth grade and not the seven year old she was. With every passing night she opened up more and more, in part because she realized I didn’t want anything from her, perhaps because she did not

talk much anywhere else, and mostly because her mom arrived later and later. After two weeks, her mom was more than twenty-five minutes late, and a few days after that half an hour. I think she knew I waited with her daughter because I would always begin walking to my car when I heard hers approach and her eyes always flashed in my direction, but I could never make out more than two leering bulbs in the darkness.

I showed Summer the songbird necklace the day after I described it to her, and she loved it so much I decided to let her keep it. I eventually brought her a new coat too, once more from my old ski gear and once more far too big, but it was far more effective at protecting her from frostbite than the holey jacket she used before. She brought me things now and again too, like crayon drawings they drew in day care and once even a little flower made out of pipe cleaners.

It was late in February when Summer and I were waiting that the weather was especially unfriendly. The temperature was dropping for a storm predicted to hit within the next week, and I suggested jumping jacks to keep warm. They were kept out blood pumping for a few minutes until our sweat got cold and we had to stop. Six forty-five rolled around and then seven, and by that time even with our heavy coats it was too cold to be exposed to the wind.

“Do you want to wait in my car?” I asked Summer. She froze mid-shiver and didn’t reply. “I can bring it up to the curb over here so your mom can see.”

She thought for a few moments and then nodded her assent. We trudged through the blocked sidewalk with difficulty, lunging towards my car and the warmth it promised. I let her sit in the passenger seat if only for the sake of the seat warmers, and I told her stories of Disney World and Los Angeles and other warmer places I’d been while we waited in the heat. She was always eager to hear stories, real or made-up, and listened intently until I paused to let her ask questions.

After a while the clock showed eight and then nine, and our conversation had dwindled into silent waiting. By then we were both hungry, and poor Summer's stomach was growling louder than she could talk.

"Do you want to drive somewhere?" I asked reluctantly. There was fast food close by, but the risk of Summer's mom showing up was greater than the temptation of food.

"No," replied Summer hesitantly. "Let's wait."

Time slowed down, and I began to worry. What if her mom didn't show up? I didn't know the woman, but Summer had mentioned siblings, so she probably had other family to care for too. Minutes turned into hours, and the boredom and uncertainty of waiting was stretched even further by the emptiness of our stomachs. I turned on the radio after a few minutes of silent worrying, but the uplifting pop songs jarred with the quiet darkness so I turned it back off quickly.

By the time it was nearing ten o'clock I started to consider the possibility that Summer's mom wouldn't show up at all. Summer looked ready to pass out and the growling of her stomach reached new levels of volume but rejected the idea of driving anywhere for food whenever I brought it up.

At eleven o'clock I made up my mind. "I don't think your mom's coming tonight, Summer."

She was stiff in her seat and stared straight ahead, saying nothing.

I shifted the car into drive and pulled out onto the main street. "Let's go get some food."

I took the silence as consent, and drove to the nearest McDonald's. We went through the drive through and I ordered us a feast—chicken sandwiches, fries, and chocolate milkshakes. We ate in the car in the parking lot, too hungry to drive back to the day care. The food brought color



back to our faces, and when Summer slurped her milkshake so loud I jumped and spilled mine, we started laughing and couldn't stop. The sheer absurdity of our situation went from depressing to funny instantaneously, and we giggled like preschoolers until all the food was gone.

Choking down a few final laughs and fries, I pitched my idea to Summer. "It's really late, and we both need some sleep. Why don't we go back to my house, pick up some blankets, and sleep in the car?"

Smiling again, Summer giggled her approval. We played eye-spy on the drive, even though the landscape was black save a few shining buildings. My final riddle was "I spy a warm house with lots of blankets" as I pulled into the driveway, and Summer cheered. We dashed inside and I directed Summer to the pantry where she picked out some snacks to satisfy our bottomless stomachs. I grabbed fluffy comforters and pillows from my closet and as fast as came in we were back on the road.

The side-street outside bakery and day care was unchanged, relieving me of my half-formed vision of a furious mother waiting in the shadows to assault me. We reclined our seats all the way back and snuggled up against the warm blankets.

"Tell me a story, Selene," Summer said, yawning.

"What do you want it to be about?" I asked.

She thought for a minute. "Tell me about your family."

I started with my dad, a boy born to a poor, single, struggling mother. He graduated at the top of his class and got a job at a financial firm, where he met my mom. I told her how my mom had lived in ten different states as a child, never staying in one town for more than six months to accommodate her business-driven father. They married after only three months of knowing each other, then travelled the world, visiting every continent and finally stopping in Rochester, where

I was born. I told her how they retired early and still travelled the world, going on safaris and climbing mountains. I didn't tell her how they had been in Europe for three years and hadn't so much as called in months.

By the time I finished describing how they saved a small town from a treacherous yeti, she was asleep, and within minutes I was succumbed too.

The next morning, I woke up to the blare of a car horn. I jerked up in my seat and saw an extremely dirty and dinged little car on the other end of the street, and for the first time the passenger inside. A wild woman with tight black curls flying out in every direction and streaks of gold and pink dispersed in the front was thrusting her lips out in the mirror. She had what appeared to be a smoky eye look on a third of her face, giving her more of a raccoon-like mask. Each ear was pierced with at least ten huge studs of various metals that matched the twenty or so bangles on both her wrists. As soon as she saw me she her eyes widened and stared right into me. I froze, locked in the gaze, until I heard a door open next to me. "Bye Selene!" called Summer in an eerily high-pitched voice, and before I could say anything or even move, Summer leaped into the front seat and the car spun away.

The clock read a little after six in the morning, way too early for work. I drove home in a daze, and fell back asleep as soon as I hit the couch. I woke up a little over two hours later, and quickly changed into new clothes and brushed my teeth.

I didn't see Summer at all for the next week. That is to say, I didn't see her personally, but I always saw the Chevy spiraling past the front windows at promptly six fifteen. It was always too dark to see the passengers, but I thought I felt eyes on me every time it drove by.

Exactly eight days after Summer and I spent the night in my car, I woke up with a rhythmic thumping inside my head. I groaned and rolled over, but the movement only amplified

the pounding. With lead feet I dragged myself into the bathroom to my thermometer. Its reading confirmed my suspicions—I definitely had a fever, which meant I wasn't allowed within ten feet of the bakery and had to call in sick.

The shrill melody of the ringing phone as I waited for Adrianna to answer sounded like a swarm of bees to my sensitive ears. "Hello?" she answered.

"Hey Adrianna, it's Selene. I have a fever, and I can't—"

"Stay home!" yelled Adrianna. "Ashley and Allison can cover you. Drink water, feel better, and I'll see you tomorrow!" The sound of a dial tone informed me that she'd hung up.

Alright, I thought, that's settled. I spent the rest of the day alternating flipping through channels and trying to sleep. At six fifteen, I instinctively looked out the window but all that greeted me was the lonely street lamp next to my mailbox.

To my surprise, when I woke up the next day my brain felt as if it hadn't spent the last twenty-four hours trying to break free of my skull. I reluctantly threw on jeans and a sweatshirt and got ready for a mind-numbing day of work.

"It was really busy yesterday," clipped Ashley as soon as I stepped through the door. "Allison and I had to do your chores."

"I'm sorry," I apologized, "I was really sick."

"Well, you're better now," she muttered, glaring at her boxes.

Customers drifted in and out all day, some only browsing, others making small purchases of a few cannolis here or there. By closing time at six the shop was still fairly clean, which gave Ashley and Allison the opportunity to catch up on their phones while I mopped up the front. I didn't see Summer's car drive by, but I could have missed it when I went to get some more water from the back.

The last thing I wanted to do was dig out the exhaust pipe yet again, but my coworkers were already at the other end of the street seconds after leaving for the night. Rochester was still recovering from the snow storm a few days before, and a bitter wind sliced through the air as a constant reminder that summer was far, far away. The pile of snow around the pipe was almost three times as large as usual, leading me to believe that it had been neglected in my absence yesterday.

Reluctantly I picked up the shovel, the cold metal cutting straight through my woolly gloves. I slowly began tunneling to the center but midway through the pile I hit something hard, most likely a chunk of ice frozen within the slush. Tapping it again, I realized it felt too soft and rustled a bit more than ice should. I squatted down on my heels and pawed through the freezing snow with gloves. There was definitely something inside.

After a few more jabs, the pile shifted and collapsed in on itself. From the mountain emerged a large red glove and the sleeve of a coat, a necklace with a songbird pendant dangling between the frozen fingers.