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Amber King

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UGLY SNOW

Amber King



WE HAD TO TRAVEL THROUGH UGLY SNOW, the kind that's slushy and not at all attractive. Unfortunately, that's the kind of snow you usually find. You have to get to a good snow soon if you want to have some real fun with it.

It snowed fourteen inches the night before, and heated up considerably when the morning sun invaded. Made the snow crunch. Roger brought me on this trip for apparently no reason. He had a way of telling me without telling me.

"Sweetcakes, will you hold this axe for your old man?" He handed it over to me without even so much as a grunt. I had to tell him it was too heavy, as when I held it, the weight of the axe made me too heavy to move. At first I thought that this made me a weakling, but to be honest, I would never want to hold the burden that he bears.

Now Roger? He was the kind of guy to spit in your face and then ask for the kiss. That was what he's been doing to me for the past fourteen years of my life, and smiling it away every time.

"Oh, sweetcakes, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked you to do that."

He probably came alive during the night when I would sleep, at bars and clubs. Hanging out with the guys, drinking beer, and cracking blonde jokes. I'm blonde. Mom was blonde too, before it finally got to her and she died of cancer. She used to stick up for herself. But then he stomped out her spirit. Devoured her soul. He doesn't mean nothing by it, though'.

Roger took back the axe with a smile on his face. Funny. I wondered what he thought he was going to do with it. He really knew how to kill without getting in trouble for it. He'll tell you all about it, too.

"I think that's the first time in my whole life that I've ever seen you carry an axe." I kick at the crunchy snow.

"Should have seen me in my golden days." He rubbed his nose with his free hand. I cringed. His walk proved uneven with the weight of the axe. I imagined that we might be on our way to kill a creature. He loves to do it because it's harder to get away with killing people. He went into a story about how he was a master lumberjack in his teenage years, helping his dad make furniture. Well, that's wonderful Roger. Just like you're a master mechanic, lover, fisher, and father. My hands are tucked deep into my pockets. Searching for nothing, and getting it.

"We should go home. That's what I would like."



TREES AND SHADOWS Donna Gors

Roger gives me a look like he's confused as to why I'm not excited about our lumberjacking experience. He kept on changing shoulders that the axe would rest on. I was developing a tic just watching it.

"What makes you say that, sweetcakes?"

I said nothing. He did nothing to probe me further.

We came upon this one tree that Roger seemed to like anyway. Yule tree. Feeling it up, Roger smiled. Almost like he just found a dumb, drunk blonde at a club. 'Only go for blondes' he would say when he got home. 'Stupid as bricks and good looking too'.

"I want to watch TV." I said.

"Faith, who's going to help me cut down this Christmas tree? I don't got a son, so why not bring you?" Roger didn't really need me there, he just wanted someone to brag to.

"Isn't it illegal to cut down trees here? I mean, we're on city property."

"Doing the right thing isn't always right," he replied.

I know I was right. We're on this plot of land that's behind our house. He insisted on making the walk, too. Saying that we'll make snowmen on the way. The snow is hard, Roger. The warmth has a tendency to do that.

He picks up the axe, and positions himself to cut down the tree like a golfer at the tee. Only the tee is up off the ground. A couple of pseudo puts and then the real thing. I could hear his leather jacket rip when contact was made. Then an expletive came. He really doesn't mean it though.

You know, my father's never cut down a tree before. He just makes up stories. Just like he did earlier. But that's okay.

We don't have a fence behind our house, but then again most people didn't in this area. Roger started blabbing on about this one time that he went hunting. I've heard the story at least thirteen times. Took to the gun like a natural, he did. Shot more animals than his grandfather did, even though he hadn't been hunting before. Wanted to take me hunting someday, too. Had to wait a little longer for me because I'm a girl. I feel like a deer each time he tells me the story. At least I'm a smart deer. Only the stupid ones get shot. I rubbed my nose. Rubbed my ears. No earmuffs. "...And we've been hunting every year since. I always get the biggest kill." Roger finished. Same way he's finished the last ten times. He hasn't taken another swing at that tree since he started talking. So typical. Doesn't finish the things he starts.

"You haven't said much," he said, aiming his next swing. His form was totally off. At least off from the lumberjacks I've seen in the fairy tale movies, the ones he would pop in for us when he wanted 'him' time. Which was all the time, especially since Mom died. Which was a long time ago.

"Well, Roger, I don't have much to say I guess." A little snippy. But since it fell short of a real answer, he prodded further.

"You know, Faith." He swung at the tree again. A crack upon impact. Missed the first mark. Another expletive.

"You know what?" I replied, leaning against a tree behind me, yawning. Still rubbing my ears, I can't help but having found a small sense of success in the fact that Roger's system was thrown from that last swing.

"What?"

"You said 'You know Faith?'"

"Oh right, right." He said. "You know, Faith." Want to hit him every time he does that too. Repeating himself, that is. He calls this 'quality time'. I shovel my hands into my armpits as he gathers his spilled marbles. "Sometimes you just have to say what you mean." He pulled back his axe, in an attempt to remedy the mistake he made with the second swing. "That's my policy, anyway. Thought I might pass it on to you."

"Oh, right, your 'policy'."

"What do you mean by that?" Instead of taking another hack at the curvy tree, he turned himself toward me. He had a hard face, one that you wouldn't look at and say to yourself 'Daddy!'. I can't stop looking at the snow at my feet.

"You know, I don't think that's your policy."

Dad put down his axe on a nearby stump, his back to me. I kicked some snow in his direction. Well, I have to admit that I looked at the axe, then I looked at the stump. It wasn't a pretty stump. So I guess it wasn't a pretty tree either in its day. I can kind of relate with that stump. Having your life hacked away when there was probably a lot of life left, even if it wasn't a pretty life.

"Are you saying I'm not an honest man?"

"Well, you're a father, but you're no daddy."

I picked up my gaze and looked him in the eye. I can't say much about how he looked right then. Red-faced and prickly along the chin, his hair very well could have been mistaken for dark with that hood on. It's like I was looking at him for the first time. Or not. His whole frame stiffened and I can tell he's biting his tongue.

"I've done everything right by you, Faith. The least you could do is believe in your old man."

"Right. The least." I switched the feet that I was leaning my weight on. I pulled my face out of my tightened hoodie, my mouth anyway. "I've always been an underachiever."

Now his face was turning colors. "Now I know that isn't true. You make great grades."

"You missed my point." I turned away.

He picked up the axe. I almost expected him to throw the death bringer, but he didn't. Mustering his frustration, he hacked away at the tree. CLAK...CLAK...CLAK... Missing the first spot each time. I could have mistaken him for someone with real determination.

"You know. You've never been this real with me." I said. He tore his jacket away in the pause of demolishing the tree, the molested one. CLAK... CLAK... That time he hit the spot. I smiled. "Oh, you're getting there." CLAK... another miss. My interest waned. Roger doesn't know this, but this was one of many times that I laughed at him. I would rather be a smart deer than a stupid hunter. CLAK... He'll cut down that tree just like he can fish, just like he takes care of his family. CLAK...

I took a step away, looking at what lay behind me. Most of these trees would never be cut down, not legally anyway. Evergreen hiding under emotionless white. The smell I'll never forget. As if grapes could sweat, if flowers could defecate, if perfume could be made from skunk. CLAK...

"Faith, where are you going?" Roger wiped the sweat away just like he tries to wipe the years away.

"Nowhere, I guess."

Thinking that I'm talking about the here and now, he seemed confused when I kept walking.

"Faith? Faith! You've got to help your old man cut down this tree. I'm serious, you hear? Faith!"

Roger. Dad. Father. I don't care what Mom called him, what my little sister called him, or what his friends call him.

"Loser." I said under my breath. CLAK...

I smile into the winter chill. My stride is confident. Our family house has been on fire ever since I screamed my first breath. Roger was a man of his own spirit, never to be intertwined with others. It's why Mom died, and it's why I'm walking away. I'm leaving the burning house. My sister will too.

Unfortunately, we have Roger's same spirit. Only I will never burden others with it. Not with friends, not with marriage, not with children. And because of this prideful, arrogant and sleeping nature, he doesn't follow me.

Within ten minutes, I was standing out front of the house with a bag in my hand, waiting with Roger's money. I didn't really know the guy that was picking me up; he was just a guy from school that happened to be madly in love with me, who was willing to make this trip. It had cooled down, and a light powder came down from the sky. Dark before three.

It only took the guy a few minutes to get to my house, that's how bad he'd had it for me.

"Hi Boyd." I sighed as I got into the car. It was a little purple pick-up. He flashed me his 'It's alright because I'm here' smile. He wasn't exactly handsome, but I was okay with that.

"Where to, sweetcakes?" he asked me. I almost jumped out of the car, but then I saw something that would keep me going for the rest of my life.

As Boyd pulled the gear shift, I spotted my father leaning against our house. I didn't get a chance to look him in the eyes, but he knew I was not coming home this time. For some weird reason, for the first time since Mom died, I felt my tear ducts acting up. Something must have gotten into my eyes. Dad had a fallen tree behind him, axe slung over his shoulder.

And he waved.