

Snowflakes on Skin

All Olivia wants is to die.

She says the words to herself, as if by doing so, she can project the thought out into the universe and make it come true. *I want to die.*

Around her, snowflakes spiral from the sky in thick, heavy masses, melting against her bare legs, leaving wet splotches on the velvety fabric of her brand-new dress. *I want to die.* Her limbs have already gone numb, but that doesn't stop her from watching the snowflakes' descent and imagining the way they might've burned against her warm skin, had she been able to feel anything but the anguish in her chest, unrelenting. *I want to die.* Olivia glances upwards, to the murky gray sky, even as snowflakes cling to her dark eyelashes, unwilling to let go, until her gaze is obscured, and all she sees is white.

She repeats her mantra in her head, frozen lips moving softly in a broken attempt to speak it, as if that could make her plea any more real. *I want to die, I want to die, I want to die.*

Then louder, more insistent. The only feeling she has left is that of near death, the *need to die* as urgent as the need to breathe air. *I want to die I want to die I want to die I want to die I want to die I want to die—*

“*Jesus—Andy, it’s a girl! A goddamn girl!*” The voice is hysterical, shrill, followed by footsteps crunching against snow. “*For fuck’s sake Andy, get your ass over here!*”

Olivia’s breath constricts. If she still had control over her limbs, she might’ve bat the woman away, but the cold has left her weak and unmoving. Olivia hears rather than feels the shifting snow, hands pushing it desperately away, reaching for Olivia, wiping the snow from her face, lifting her up and away from whatever chance she has of dying. Her eyes flutter, meeting

the gaze of a middle-aged woman, cheeks red, brown eyes wide, her mass of curly brown hair cloaking Olivia's still form like a blanket.

"She's awake, Andy! She's *alive!*"

"Jesus, she looks half-*dead*. Put her in the backseat—not like *that* Raechel goddamn!"

"I-I'm trying! What if she dies, Andy? What do we do then?"

"She's not going to *die*—"

"Maybe we should call an ambulance."

"In the middle of a fucking *blizzard*? Really Raechel?"

"What the fuck else are we supposed to do!"

"Jesus. Just—calm down, alright? Just lay her down—yes, just like that. There's some blankets in the trunk, the ones your mom made us take home. I'll grab 'em."

Olivia is so tired. The energy to live is too much. But she tries to open her eyes anyway. The first thing she sees is the top of the inside of a car, fuzzy and brown. She wonders if it's as soft as her dress—her wretched, ruined dress—and has the urge to reach up and rub her fingertips against it, just to be sure.

Then—the woman's face, brown eyes searching. She smiles hesitantly. "How are ya feeling, honey?" It takes Olivia a moment to realize the woman is rubbing her hands along Olivia's arms. "You still feel cold?" Her voice is warm. It reminds Olivia of her mother.

I don't feel anything. Even the blackhole in her chest—the anguish, the need to die—is gone. All Olivia feels is tired. And suddenly cold.

The man appears. His blue eyes remind her of the color of the sky, the murky gray from which all those snowflakes came spiralling down, sucking the warmth from her body. His brow

is creased, lip pulled between his teeth. He drapes a blanket over her body, and then another, and another, carefully tucking them beneath her, cocooning her in wool.

“Is the heat even on, Raechel?”

“It’s *on*. I turned it on already.”

“Do you have it on all the way?”

“I don’t know *how!*”

“*Jesus*, do I have to do everything myself?”

The man pulls away from Olivia, the car rocking at his movement. The woman reappears shortly thereafter. Olivia feels her head being lifted into the woman’s lap—*warm, so warm*—and looks up into the woman’s soft face.

“Shhh,” the woman says softly. “Everything’ll be alright, honey. I promise.”

Slowly, bit by bit, Olivia feels the numbness slip away, replaced by the sensation of a thousand ice-cold needles piercing her skin, making her bones ache, yearning for warmth. She tries to push the feeling away and urge the numbness back, that sense of near-death, anything but the *cold*. Eventually, the ache dulls, and soon she is shivering violently, curling more deeply against the woman’s body, craving her warmth.

A hand gently strokes her hair.

“She can’t be older than fourteen, Andy.”

“What’s she doing outside, all by herself?”

Olivia squeezes her eyes shut. She doesn’t want to listen. She wishes she was still buried in the snow, forgotten and left to die.

“Honey—can you sit up?”

Olivia wants to do anything but, but the woman jostles her into an upright position, keeping the blankets tucked around her. She rubs melted snow from Olivia's face and smiles tentatively.

“What's your name, honey?”

Sudden panic seizes Olivia's chest. “Heather,” she lies. She doesn't know why she does it, why she lies, but Heather is her sister's name, and it comes easily to her tongue, as lies often do.

The woman's smile grows. “Heather,” she repeats. “I'm Raechel, and this is my husband Andy.” She motions to the man in the front seat.

Andy's eyes are locked on the road, but he glances at her through the rearview mirror. The windshield wipers are at full-speed, brushing away the same snowflakes that had once engulfed Olivia herself. Abruptly, he switches on the radio, and “Winter Wonderland” streams through the car.

Raechel is prodding her again. “Heather, sweetheart. Want to tell us what happened?”

All she can think about is the snowflakes. Consuming her, eating her whole, taking away the past and present, taking *her* away, and leaving nothing behind but the blip of her existence.

Raechel lays a warm hand on her arm. “Did someone...hurt you? Are you in danger?”

Olivia licks her lips. She tries to gather some string of coherent words, tries to say something, but her mouth is dry. She can barely swallow, hardly breathe.

“She's not talking, Andy.”

“Just give her some time. She's almost just *died*, Raechel.”

“I know that.”

Andy sighs. “Listen, can you just grab my phone? Text Jeff that we're close.”

“Okay.”

Raechel leans forward and grabs her husband’s phone from the passenger’s seat. Olivia listens to the sound of her acrylics *click-click-clicking* against the screen. Then Raechel flashes her a reassuring smile, placing a hand on Olivia’s leg.

Olivia impulsively jerks away.

Raechel’s smile falters slightly, before returning in full force. “We’re just going to pick up Andy’s brother, okay Heather? And then we’ll get you some help.” She glances out the window, pointing suddenly. “Look! There he is.”

The car slows next to a parked black sedan, and the passenger door swings open, followed by a buffet of cold air. A man pulls himself into the seat.

“Tonight was definitely the wrong night to forget to fill up,” he jokes. His voice sends shivers down Olivia’s spine. “It was nice of y’all to come get me though.” He turns to flash Raechel a smile, but his eyes catch Olivia’s gaze instead.

Her stomach drops as his brown eyes bore into hers. His face is impassive, but she knows he must see her fear, the way her chest rises and falls rapidly. He must see, and yet he looks away, focusing instead on the open road ahead of them, white with snow.

“Who’s the girl?” he asks.

“We found her on the side of the road, can you believe it?” Raechel casts her a sympathetic look. “God knows what happened to her.”

The words are out before Olivia can even think about it. “He did.”

Raechel’s brows furrow, lips parted slightly, whether in shock or confusion, Olivia doesn’t know. Meanwhile, the man in the front—Jeff—turns back to face her, and this time his cheeks are red with something akin to anger, mouth pressed in a firm line.

wrists held down in snow, cold biting at her bare flesh

Raechel's laugh is high-pitched and squeaky. "I'm sorry?" She turns to Jeff uncertainly.

"Do you...know each other?"

The lie seems to roll off his tongue as easily as if it were her feigned name. "I've never met her before in my life."

unfamiliar hands gliding eagerly over her body

"What were you doing out there?" Raechel's voice trembles slightly. "I mean, while you were waiting for us to come?"

"Sitting in my goddamn car trying not to freeze my ass off! Jesus, what are you saying Raechel?"

"Well the girl seems to know you, Jeff! I mean...how can...Did you—?"

silent tears streaking down her face

"Raechel, the girl's obviously in shock," Andy says from the front seat. He won't meet Olivia's eyes in the rearview mirror.

"Clearly," Jeff agrees smoothly.

"And you *know* Jeff, Raech. He's my *brother*. I mean, after everything he's done for us, how can you even suggest...?" He trails off.

Raechel's lips are pursed. She looks distressed, biting her lip as she gauges Olivia's reaction. Olivia pleads with her eyes, tries to spill every thought she cannot speak into Raechel's mind.

Help me.

"Honey," Raechel says. Her voice is coaxing. "You didn't mean that, did you?" Her own eyes plead back with Olivia's, begging her to speak anything but the truth.

I want to die I want to die I want to die

“No.” The word is strained, pushed out of Olivia’s body as she tries to hold back tears, tries not to puke right there on the car rug, tries to swallow her nausea and pretend to be okay.

Raechel’s smile is empty. “Of course not.” She looks away, focuses on the road. “But we should still bring her to the hospital.”

“I’m sure she’s just shaken up,” Jeff says easily. “We can drop her off at the nearest police station, say that she was lost.”

“But—”

“Raechel.” Andy’s voice is surprisingly gentle. Olivia watches the couple lock eyes in the mirror, Raechel’s lip trembling slightly. Finally Raechel looks away, and Olivia can no longer see her expression.

She imagines a blackhole in her chest, aching, expanding, tearing into her body. She braves one last glance at Jeff, even as bile rises in her throat, even as he avoids her gaze. He turns to say something to Andy, and the light catches his cheek just right, illuminating gray makeup smeared across his skin.

She turns to the window and stares at her reflection in the glass, that same makeup—silvery eyeshadow, eyeshadow she had begged her mother for, that she had applied painstakingly to her eyelids—still clinging to her skin. She looks past her reflection, into the expanse of snow beyond, and longs to be there, buried in snow, waiting for death.